

Ethics of Diagnosis Research: Rosenhan

Aim: To investigate the experience of being labeled mentally ill, and the ethical issues that are raised by psychiatric diagnosis

Procedure:

- 8 healthy adults were recruited to take part in the experiment. They all checked themselves into mental hospitals, claiming (falsely) that they heard voices saying words like "empty", "dull", and "thud"
- After being admitted, the "pseudo-patients" acted normally, and reported that the voices had stopped. During therapy sessions, the patients answered truthfully about their life

Results:

- All participants were diagnosed with schizophrenia, admitted to hospital, and forced to take psychiatric medication
- Patients were kept in the mental hospital in average of 19 days (in one case, 52 days) despite showing no symptoms of mental disorders after being admitted
- At no point did doctors or nurses suspect that the patients did not, in fact, suffer from a mental disorder. In fact, hospital staff interpreted many examples of normal behavior as signs of mental illness, demonstrating confirmation bias. For example, when patients came to the cafeteria early for lunch (there was nothing else to do), hospital staff labeled this as "oral-acquisitive symptoms", or when a patient took notes in a diary, this was labeled as "writing behavior"
- When participants were released, they were diagnosed with "schizophrenia in remission" rather than being considered as cured

Conclusion:

- Once a person is diagnosed with a mental disorder, others tend to dehumanize you, misinterpret your behavior, and forever label you as mentally ill

Evaluation:

- This study took place in real mental health hospitals, involving actual psychiatric doctors and hospital staff, so ecological validity is high
- The study raised ethical concerns of its own, as participants lied to doctors and hospital staff. Furthermore, the "pseudo-patients" used doctors' time and medical resources that might have better been used to treat actual patients
- Some have criticized Rosenhan's interpretation of the study. Psychiatry relies heavily on self-report of symptoms, and psychiatrists don't expect people to fake symptoms, therefore perhaps this study is not a fair critique of psychiatry. According to Rosenhan, however, if psychiatrists can't tell the difference between real and fake patients after several weeks of observation, this suggests there is something wrong with psychiatry

Ethics of Diagnosis Research: Langer & Abelson

Aim: Investigate how stigma, labels and confirmation bias affects perceptions of the mentally ill

Procedure:

- The participants in this study were two groups of clinical psychologists. The first group were **analytic psychologists**, who tend to view mental illness as a consequence of internal conflicts and childhood trauma. The second group were **behavioral psychologists**, who tend to focus more on identifying and changing negative patterns of behavior, in the here and now
- Participants watched a video of a man being interviewed about his feeling and experiences concerning his past work
- Half of the participants were told that the man was a "job applicant", while the other half were told that the man was a "patient". The label given to the man was the independent variable in this study
- Participants then rated the man according to how "disturbed" or "well-adjusted" he was. The rating of the man's mental health was the dependent variable in this study

Results:

- The behavioral psychologists tended to rate the man as fairly normal, regardless of the label
- The analytic psychologists, on the other hand, rated the man as significantly more disturbed when they were told that he was a "patient"
- Same man who was described as "realistic", "unassertive", "attractive", "innovative" became "tight, defensive", "dependent, passive aggressive" and had a "conflict over homosexuality" when labeled a patient

Conclusion:

- In some cases, being labeled as "mentally ill" can cause psychologists to perceive evidence of mental illness where none exists, showing the power of labels and confirmation bias
- Analytic psychologists may be more likely to be influenced by labels, since they regard mental illness as an internal struggle which may be difficult to see, whereas behavioral psychologists focus more on obvious signs of abnormal behavior

Evaluation:

- This study is a well-designed experiment demonstrating a clear causal relationship between the label assigned to the man and how psychologists described him
- Since the study involved real psychologists using their clinical judgment, ecological validity is high. The study has relevance for understanding how psychologists may perceive patients in the real world of treatment
- This study, like Rosenhan's, took place in the 1970's, and so the results may be different today. In particular, analytic psychology has become much less common nowadays, as it has come under a great deal of criticism for its unreliability and lack of evidence