

Attitudes of Polish and British high school students towards the mentally ill and their beliefs on the causes of mental illness

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The aim of this work was to examine the attitudes of Polish and British adolescents towards the mentally ill, and their beliefs about the causes of mental illness. Using a questionnaire constructed for the purpose of this work, 130 seventeen year old high school students were examined: 66 from Lublin, Poland and 64 from Wales, Great Britain. Analysis of the data from the first part of the questionnaire shows similarity between attitudes of the examined youth towards the mentally ill - the majority of respondents showed positive attitudes. Besides this, the students' beliefs on the causes of mental illness were examined. Among the students from Great Britain, the largest percentage thought that the most important causes of mental illness were brain dysfunction (28.1%), head trauma (23.4%) and vulnerability to mental illness (14.1%), where the Polish group felt that the most important were vulnerability to mental illness (22.7%), dysfunction of the brain (18.2%) and stress and work or school (12.1%).

Key words, attitudes, adolescents, causes of mental illnesses

Due to its dynamic nature, research on the attitudes towards the mentally ill and on the society's beliefs concerning the etiology and pathogenesis of mental illness remains a current and open topic [5, 10, 15, 18].

The pioneering observations of Star in the 1950's inspired the beginning of in-depth research in this field [16, 17]. Based on the answers of 3500 American respondents, people with mental problems were classified into two groups: those with "nervous condition", who were liberally treated by society, and the "insane", perceived negatively. An "insane" person was perceived in the categories of changes in intellect, self-control mechanisms and behavior, which is often inadequate and grossly irrational [16]. Researchers who continued these studies unanimously acknowledged that the reasons for the rejecting attitudes towards the mentally ill were the lack of reliable information, and the society's lack of basic knowledge about mental disorders and illnesses. Research on the influence of education and instructive learning programs on the attitudes towards the mentally ill of students was the subject of numerous publications [5, 6, 8, 12, 19]. Mall and Shaw showed that training of nursing school students in

the field of psychiatry developed greater abilities to evaluate the presence and severity of mental illnesses, though beliefs about the etiology, treatment and prognosis were only minimally influenced. In this group of students, the tendency to seek the causes of mental illness in psychosocial factors, especially those linked to stress, dominated both before and after training. This would suggest a humanistic, positive attitude of the examined population towards the mentally ill. Dohrenwend, Ching-Song [4] and Wolff et al. [20] stress the existence of a tight correlation between the lack of basic psychiatric knowledge and social attitudes of rejection towards the mentally ill. In their opinion, education should be targeted at groups with a low socio-economic status, especially ethnic minorities.

Skepticism about the effectiveness of social education in the field of mental disorders and illnesses was expressed, among others, in the works of sociologists Sarbin and Mancuso [13] and Rabkin [11]. All were in agreement that psychiatric knowledge could not change much in terms of the components that are linked to stable personality traits or the stereotypic “labeling” of the mentally ill. The power of the “label” may weaken, as the conviction that the mentally ill and their oppressors acknowledge similar systems of beliefs grows stronger. Continuing the authors’ considerations, the reduction of the society’s negative attitudes towards the mentally ill would become possible through an increase of environmental forms of psychiatric care, which would make it possible for the ill to spend as much time as possible outside the hospital.

Goal

The aim of this work was to:

- I. examine a) the attitudes of Polish and British high school students towards the mentally ill and b) their beliefs about the causes of mental illness;
- II. perform a comparative analysis of the evaluated variables in the Polish and British groups of respondents.

The examined group

The examined group consisted of students from high schools with high levels of teaching: 66 students from Lublin and 64 students from Wallesy, Great Britain. Among the British respondents there were 39 girls (60.9%) and 25 boys (39.1%); the Polish group comprised 30 girls (45.4%) and 36 boys (54.6%). The average age of the respondents was 17 years. The place of residence of most of the examined was a big city or the suburbs of a big city (85% and 15% respectively in the Polish group; 40% and 60% respectively in the British group).

Methods

A 3-part questionnaire constructed for the purpose of this study was used. The first part concerned social and demographical characteristics, where the respondents were asked their age, sex, education, occupation, marital status, place of residence. It also comprised questions about their contact with the mentally ill, whether a family member had ever been stricken with a mental illness and if so, what their relation was and if they were presently being treated in a psychiatric hospital.

The second part of the questionnaire served to examine the attitudes of the respondents towards people with a psychiatric problem. With this in mind, the students were asked about their reactions in situations when they came into contact with someone who was mentally ill and what they felt when they observed or heard about someone who was mentally ill. The remainder of the questions concerned how the mentally ill should be treated and their place in the modern world resulting from the need for constant isolation or reintegration with society.

The third part of the questionnaire served to examine the respondents' beliefs about the causes of mental illness. In order to do this, 18 possible causes were analyzed covering biological, psychosocial, intrapsychological and supernatural categories. Those surveyed could voice their opinion about each particular item of the questionnaire by marking which of them, in their opinion, were the most important causes, sure causes or not causes at all. All respondents were assured of their anonymity.

The obtained results were then statistically analyzed using Pearson's Chi² test, where the co-factor $MEF > 1$.

Results

The results of research on the attitudes of high-school students from Poland and Great Britain towards the mentally ill are presented in the form of bar graphs (Fig. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6).

Comparing the data presented in the bar graph (Fig. 1), it is clear that the majority of those surveyed feel sympathy (63% of the British and 47% of the Polish students) and sadness (27% of the British and 26% of the Polish students) when they hear that someone is mentally ill. The respondents from Poland felt nothing or relief that they were not stricken with a mental illness twice as often in the above situation. Out of

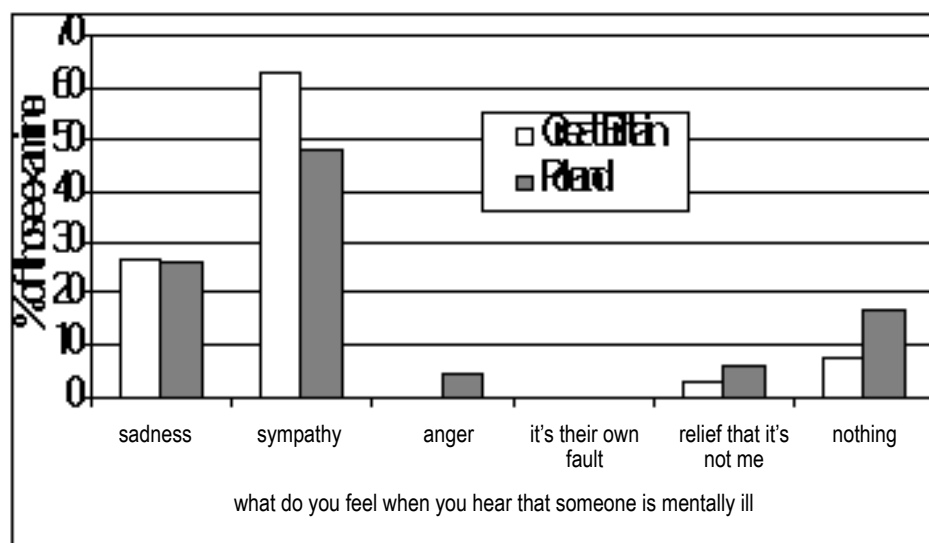


Fig. 1. Differences in the feelings of respondents from Great Britain and Poland when hearing about someone being mentally ill

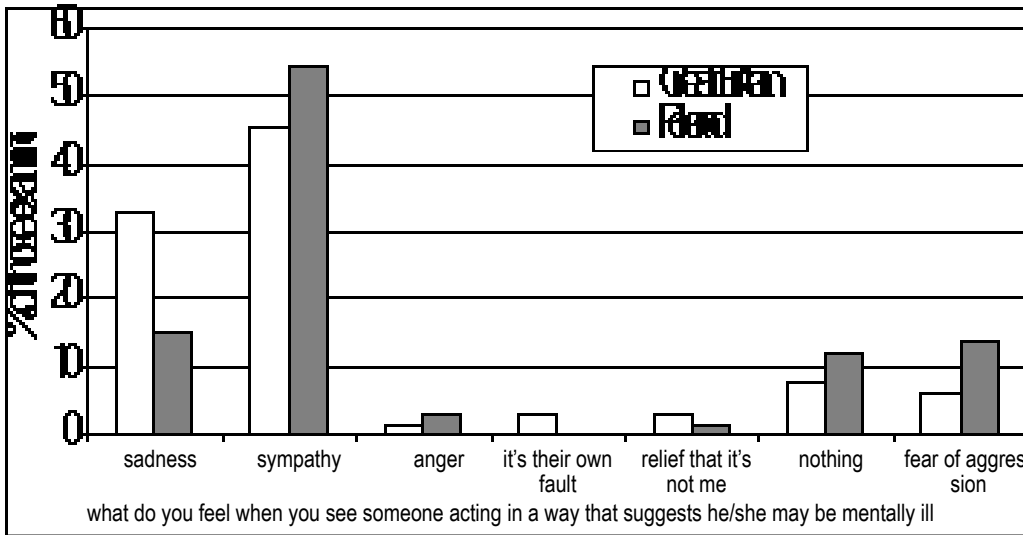


Fig. 2. Differences in the feelings of respondents from Great Britain and Poland in situations when they see a person behaving in a manner that suggests they may be mentally ill

the whole examined group, 4.5% of the Polish students also felt anger towards the mentally ill.

As seen in figure 2, most of those surveyed feel sympathy (45% of the British and 54.5% of the Polish students) or sadness (33% and 15.5%, respectively) when observing a person acting the way a mentally ill person might act. Compared to the British youth, the Polish students were twice as likely to feel fear of the possibility

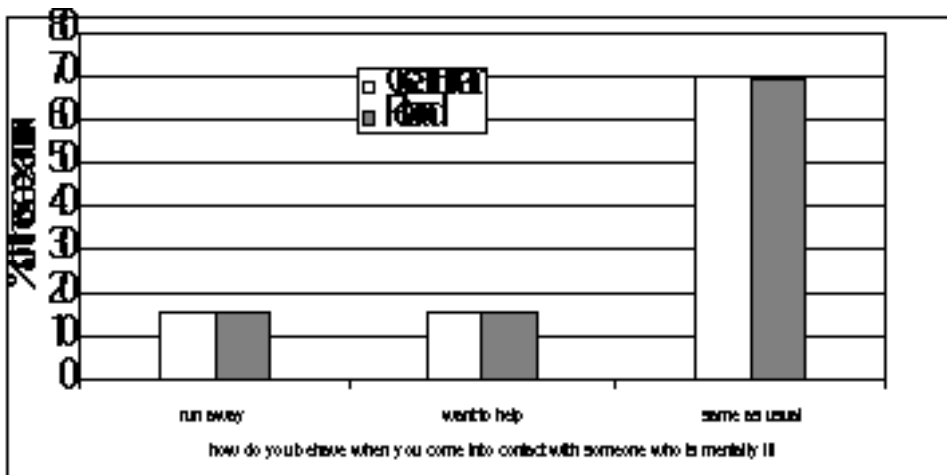


Fig. 3. Comparison of the behavior of British and Polish youths when coming into contact with someone who is mentally ill

of aggressive behavior of the mentally ill; they also manifested more often a neutral attitude towards those whose behavior suggested a mental illness.

Based on the data in figure 3, the majority of those surveyed (69.8% of the British and 69.2% of the Polish students) behave the same way around a mentally ill person as they do around a healthy individual. The fact that 15.6% of the British students and 15.4% of the Polish students want to run away from or help someone who is mentally

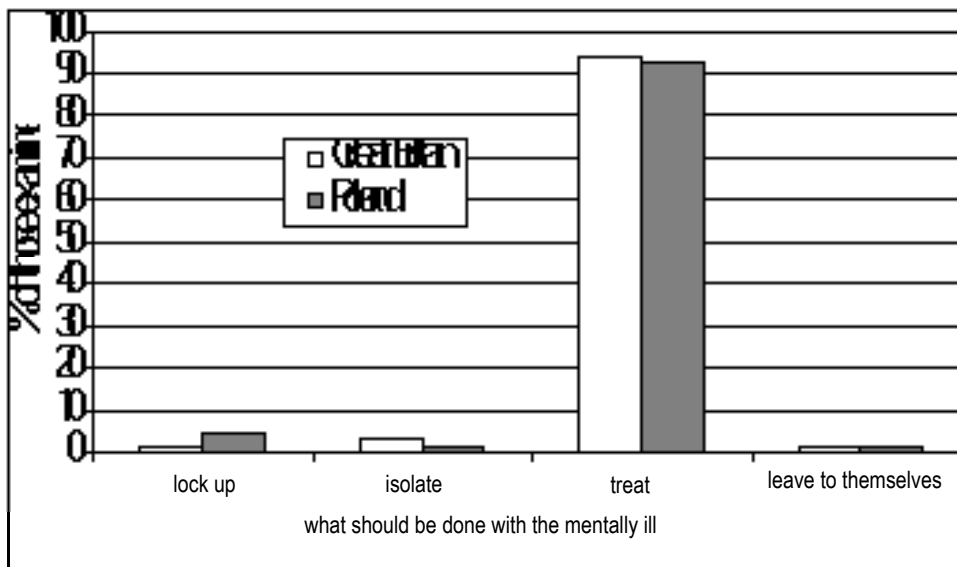


Fig. 4. Comparison of beliefs of the British and Polish respondents about the way that the mentally ill should be treated

ill stands out.

As can be seen in figure 4, those surveyed agreed about the need for therapy of the mentally ill (93.8% of the British and 92.4% of the Polish students).

When analyzing the data presented in figure 5, statistically significant differences in the opinions of the respondents in both countries can be noticed. A vast majority of those surveyed in Poland (86.5%) deemed the mentally ill as sometimes posing a threat to their surroundings, whereas only 12.5% of the British students shared this belief. It should be stressed that 53% of the British students saw the mentally ill as a threat to their environment. This belief was supported by 12% of the Polish respondents.

The vast majority of those surveyed (90.5% of the British and 86.5% of the Polish students) were for the hospitalization of a mentally ill person who committed a crime. 9.5% of the British respondents and 12% of the Polish respondents suggested that they be jailed (Fig. 6).

The British respondents thought that dysfunction of the brain, drug abuse and alcohol abuse were the most common sure causes of mental illness. The Polish group saw brain dysfunction, stress at work and stress within the marriage as sure causes (Fig. 7).

Most of the British respondents believed that brain dysfunction, head trauma and vulnerability to mental illness were the most important causes of mental illness, while

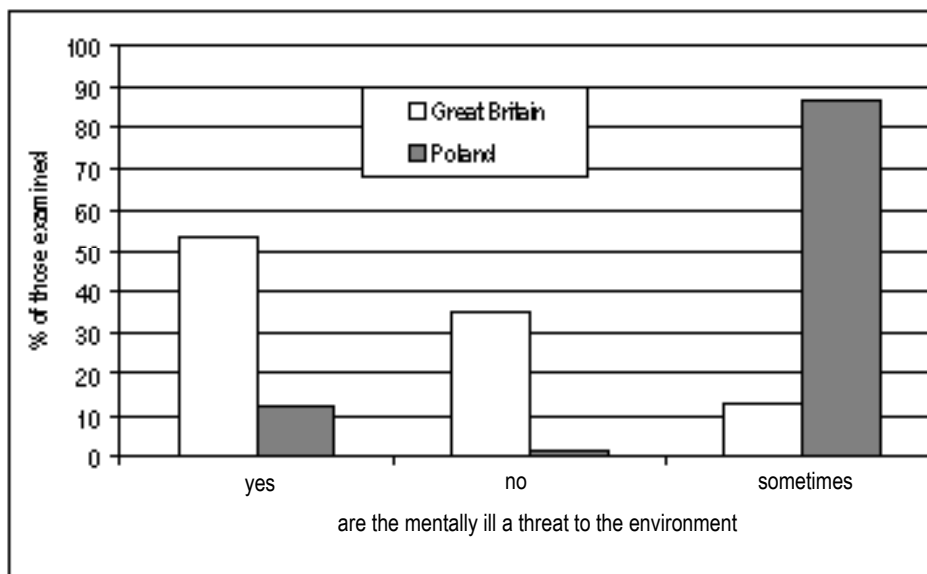


Fig. 5. Differences in the beliefs of the British and Polish respondents concerning the threat that the mentally ill pose to their environment

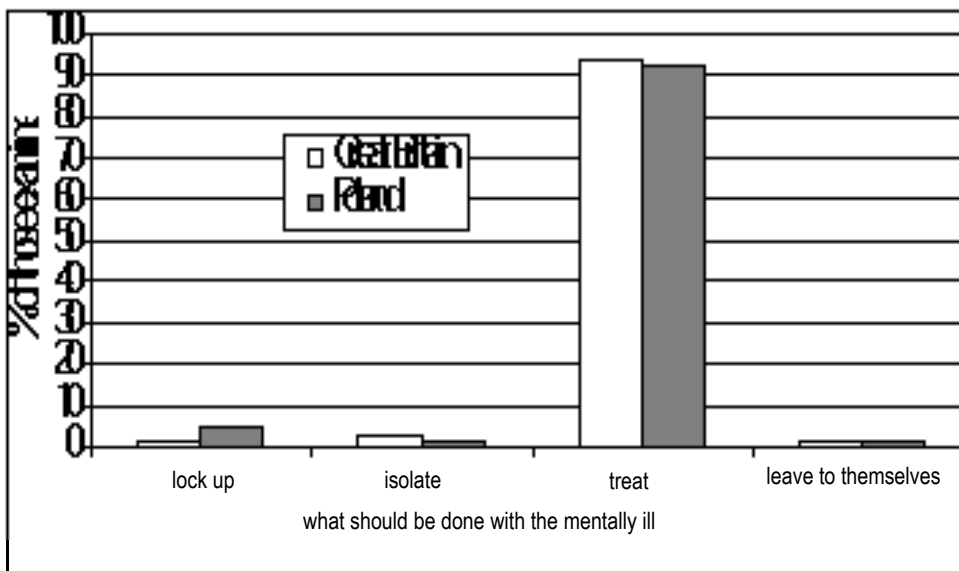


Fig. 6. Differences in the beliefs of the British and Polish respondents concerning what action should be taken when someone who is mentally ill commits a crime

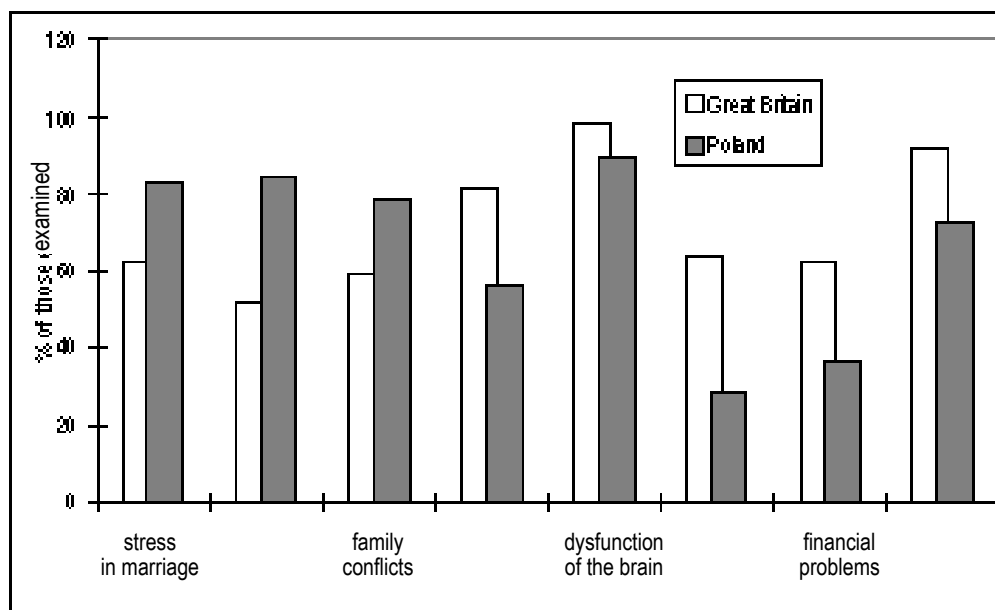


Fig. 7. Statistically significant differences between British and Polish high school students about sure causes of mental illness

their Polish counterparts indicated vulnerability to mental illness, brain dysfunction, stress at work and head trauma as the most important.

Discussion

The first part of this work served to examine the attitudes of Polish and British high-school students towards mental problems. Comparing the types of behavior in the British and Polish respondents in a situation where they come into contact with a mentally ill person, it turned out that about 70% of those surveyed in each group act the same way as they do towards a healthy person. When asked what should be done with someone who is mentally ill, ca. 93% of the students replied that he/she should be treated. In both examined groups the majority felt sympathy or sadness when they heard about someone being mentally ill or saw someone behaving in a way that is characteristic for the mentally ill. The results attained indicate the similarity of attitudes of the examined youth and the positive attitude towards people with a psychiatric problem. According to Mall and Shaw (1987), the friendly attitude of the students towards the mentally ill may result from the tendency to perceive them as victims of life circumstances. The authors explain the students' optimism about the prognosis and treatment of mental illnesses as stemming from their superficial knowledge about psychiatry. Rabkin presented different arguments [11]. In her opinion, the humanitarian attitudes of the high-school students towards the mentally ill resulted from their indoctrination by the content of the questionnaire and the fact that they wanted to fulfil

the expectations of the authors.

A comparative analysis of the data showed statistically significant differences in the responses from both countries about the potential threat to the environment that mentally ill people may pose. 86.5% of the Polish students and 12% of the British students felt that the mentally ill may at times be a threat to those around them. Most of those surveyed in the British group assumed extreme positions, replying that the mentally ill were a threat to the environment (53% of those surveyed) or were not (34% of those surveyed). These results also found support in the reports of Rabkin

Table 1

Differences in the beliefs of the most important causes of mental illness between the Polish and British groups of high-school students.

Nr	The most important cause	British high school students n = 64	Polish high school students n = 66
1	Dysfunction of the brain	28.1%	18.2%
2	Head trauma	23.4%	10.6%
3	Vulnerability to mental illnesses	14.1%	22.7%
4	Sexual abuse during childhood	6.3%	4.5%
5	Internal problems (subconscious conflicts)	4.7%	9.1%
6	Heredity	4.7%	4.5%
7	God's will or fate	4.7%	3.0%
8	Drug use	4.7%	0%
9	Stress within the marriage	3.1%	0%
10	Radiation	3.1%	0%
11	Unemployment	1.6%	0%
12	Family conflicts	1.6%	3.1%
13	Stress at work or school	0%	12.1%
14	Modern lifestyle	0%	3.0%
15	Financial problems	0%	1.5%
16	Separation from loved ones (loneliness)	0%	1.5%
17	Alcohol abuse	0%	0%
18	Perinatal complications	0%	0%

(1974) and Segal (1976) who stated that the increased contact with the mentally ill due to psychiatric care in the environment did not always go hand in hand with the increase of positive perception by society. In the authors' opinion, only selectively planned contacts of the ill with the healthy supported by education can bring about the realization of this goal.

In the next stage of the study, the respondents' beliefs about the causes of mental illness were examined. A comparative analysis of the data showed statistically significant differences between the Polish and British students concerning their beliefs about sure causes of mental illness. The British respondents thought that dysfunction of the brain, drug abuse and alcohol abuse were the most common sure causes of mental illnesses. The Polish group saw brain dysfunction, stress at work and stress within the marriage as sure causes. Most of the British respondents believed that brain dysfunction was the most important cause of mental illnesses, while their Polish counterparts indicated vulnerability to mental illnesses as the most important. The fact that both groups saw biological factors to be the cause of mental illness most often seems interesting. In the research of Angermeyer and Matschinger [1, 3] done on groups of Germans, the causes of mental illness mentioned most often were psychosocial factors, mainly related to stress [1, 2, 3].

Conclusions

1. Most of the respondents showed positive attitudes towards the mentally ill.

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