

The labeling effect in prosocial behavior toward out-group members on the example of people diagnosed with depression

Imagine you meet a person who tells you that recently she has been feeling low, she is not able to focus on anything, and she would rather stay at home and was sleeping the whole day than do anything. Would you offer her help? Would you do groceries for her, would you offer her a home-cooked meal or would you offer her a lift to work? Maybe you would offer to lend her some money or make a phone call for her if she forgot her phone?

What would happen if it turns out that this person suffers from depression? Would you still offer help to her? And finally, do you think your intentions to help her would lead to the actual help?

So far studies have demonstrated, that declarations of one's behavior may differ from the actual behavior – people declare they would behave in a certain way, but sometimes at the end of the day, they behave in a totally different way. Different studies demonstrated that people are much more willing to help those people who come from similar social group and who are somehow similar to them than those who are perceived as strangers or as so called out-groups. To perceive someone as stranger or an outgroup people need so called minimal social clue. Even a minimal difference between us and the other person such as for example skin color, nationality or even the fact that this person favors different artist than we do starts the process of social categorization. In this project we want to verify whether a single label is enough to initiate this process. Studies showed that people tend to use certain labels in order to describe members of the out-groups and these labels are based on stereotypes about certain social group. Very often these labels are related to those who suffer from mental illness, especially to those who suffer from schizophrenia. In one of the studies on the “schizophrenia” label it turns out that when people read a description of a person's behavior they tend to perceive this person in a more positive way than in a situation when this same description has additional information that this particular person suffers from schizophrenia. Despite the diagnosis however, the label always leads to more negative view of a certain person.

The aim of the present project is the investigation, whether the use of the label “depression” will trigger the process of social categorization and whether, in turn, it affects laypeople's declared behavior towards depressed individuals in different social situations requiring pro-sociality. In the second and third study we will investigate whether the labeling effect occur in participants' altruistic behavior towards depressed individuals in the Dictator Game and non-altruistic behavior towards depressed individuals in the Reversed Dictator Game, both declared and actual. In each of these games the task of a participant is to split certain amount of money between herself and the other person – in the first game the participant decides how much of the starting endowment send to the other person, in the other game – how much of the starting endowment take away of this person. The larger amount in the first case and the smaller amount in the second case the higher level of altruistic behavior. And finally, in the last experiment we want to investigate whether the labeling effect occurs in participants helping behavior towards depressed individuals in the laboratory experiment.

As depression is one of the most common mental disorders and as according do World Health Organization the number of people diagnosed with depression worldwide has exceeded 300,000, we considered this topic as important and decided to focus on it in the present project.