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PERCEPTIONS ABOUT MENTAL ILLNESS IN A SAMPLE OF PORTUGUESE POLYTECHNIC STUDENTS

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Introduction: People with mental illness are frequently perceived as dangerous, suffering social stigma and exclusion. Deinstitutionalization movement implies a closer contact between citizen and individuals with mental illness. However, social perceptions can be a barrier to social inclusion, provoking unfavorable attitudes. Some studies found that social rejection is different according the pathology. Vogel and Boysen (2008) found that different mental illnesses provoke different attitudes of social distance. Norman and colleagues (2008) found that social distance was associated with the diagnosis, provoking schizophrenia greater social distance than depression.

Aims: Compare the perceptions about mental illness (in general), depression, bipolar disorder and schizophrenia.

Methods: Data were collected using a translation of Mental Illness Stigma Scale (Day, 2007), fulfill on-line and in an anonym way by 315 Portuguese polytechnic students, studying in brief technological courses. The sample was composed by 69% male and 31% female; mean age 26.5 years.

Results: Students have little contact with people with mental illness (mean=1.5 in a Likert scale 1-5 points) but they fell comfortable when they contact a friend or a neighbor with mental illness (respectively, mean=3.2 and mean=2.7). They present some anxiety when they interact with people with mental illness and they avoid this contact, revealing attitudes of social exclusion. Schizophrenia and bipolar disorder was perceived more negatively than depression.

Conclusions: Deinstitutionalization movement provokes more contact between citizens and individuals with mental illness, but social stigma still exist. Students can learn how to interact with those persons without anxiety and help to do better social inclusion.