

Understanding experiences of discrimination among individuals with mental health challenges: An online qualitative inquiry

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Statement of the Problem: Mental health stigma and discrimination are global issues requiring urgent attention. Stigma refers to negative attitudes and beliefs about individuals with mental health conditions, while discrimination is unfair treatment based on those characteristics. Addressing these issues can improve citizenship and rights.

Methodology and Theoretical Orientation: People with lived experience (PWLEs) can provide unique insights, enhance mental health research validity, and act as active change agents for stigma reduction and rights claims. This qualitative study delves into the nuanced experiences of discrimination encountered by individuals grappling with mental health challenges. 183 Portuguese adults aged 18 to 64 ($M = 35.7$, $DP = 13.4$), self-identified with mental health challenges, were invited to reflect on instances where they perceived discrimination, elucidating the perpetrators and illuminating the underlying motivations and forms of discrimination.

Findings: The results from the content analysis evidenced multifaceted encounters with discrimination across various domains of life, such as social stigma, employment barriers, interpersonal prejudices and harassment, and educational and institutional injustices, among other forms of discrimination. The most prevalent example of discrimination was the minimisation and denial of their mental health problems and their severity by others, especially by family members and peers.

Conclusion and Significance: The study unveiled a spectrum of perpetrators, from peers to community and healthcare providers. Furthermore, participants elucidated the reasons underpinning discriminatory behaviours, ranging from misconceptions and fear to systemic biases and power differentials. Findings reveal the impact of discrimination on individuals' sense of self-worth, social relationships, employment opportunities, access to respectful healthcare, and overall well-being. Despite the prevalence of discriminatory experiences, participants also share resilience strategies and coping mechanisms. Implications for practice and policy underscore the urgent need for targeted interventions to address discrimination against individuals with mental health challenges at interpersonal, institutional, and societal levels.

Biography

Ana Filipa Gordino Beato has a PhD in Psychology from the University of Lisbon, specializing in Clinical and Health Psychology, an advanced degree in clinical sexology, and a master's degree in psychology, especially in Stress and Well-being. She is co-director of the master's degree in Sexology at the School of Psychology and Life Sciences. She is an integrated member of the HEI-Lab Research Unit: Digital Human-Environment Interaction Lab at Lusófona University. She collaborates as a researcher in various funded projects in psychology, particularly in mental health.