

**CRAZY, SAD OR JUST DIFFERENT:
EVOLVING REPRESENTATIONS OF MENTAL ILLNESS AND THE
MENTALLY ILL DURING PSYCHOLOGY EDUCATION.**

Helen Correia

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School of Psychology, Murdoch University
Western Australia

Declaration

I declare that this thesis contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution and, to the best of my knowledge or belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except when due reference is made in the text.

Helen Correia

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Table of Contents

List of Tables.....	viii
List of Figures.....	x
List of Appendices.....	xi
Acknowledgments.....	xii
Abstract	xiii
CHAPTER 1.....	1
Introduction.....	1
1.1. The nature of 'mental illness'.....	3
1.1.1 Definitions of mental illness	3
1.1.2 Perspectives and models of mental illness.....	6
1.1.3 The social context of perspectives on mental illness.....	10
1.2. Social representations.....	10
1.2.1 Key concepts in social representations	11
1.2.2 Social representations and other orientations.....	16
1.3. Social representations of mental illness.....	19
1.3.1 Representations in the general community	19
1.3.2 Representations in student populations.....	22
1.3.3 Representations in the mental health profession	24
1.3.4 The portrayal of mental illness.....	26
1.4 The diffusion and infusion of representations of mental illness.....	29
1.5 The psychologist and the profession of psychology.....	32
1.5.1 Representations of the psychologist	32
1.5.2 The model of psychology and its influence on practice.....	34
1.6 Levels of investigation.....	36
1.7 Social representations and psychology education.....	39
CHAPTER 2.....	41
Present Study and Overview.....	41
2.1 Target terms and themes.....	41
2.2 Target groups	43
2.2.1 Levels of education and experience: National and regional influences.....	43
2.2.2 Levels of education and experience: Program and employment influences	47
2.3. Levels of investigation.....	51
2.3.1. Intra-individual methods of investigation.....	52
2.3.2. Inter-individual methods of investigation.....	53
2.4. Aims	54

2.5. General methodological overview.....	55
2.5.1. Design.....	56
2.5.2. Participants.....	56
2.5.3. Materials.....	58
2.5.4. Procedure.....	59
 CHAPTER 3.....	 60
Awareness of mental disorders and categorisation of mental illness.....	60
3.1 Differentiation and classification of "mental illnesses".....	60
3.2. Method.....	61
3.2.1. Participants.....	61
3.2.2. Materials.....	62
3.2.3. Procedure.....	62
3.3. General analysis.....	63
3.3.1. Awareness of mental disorders and conditions.....	63
3.3.2. Classification of mental disorders and conditions as a "mental illness".....	66
3.4. Conclusions.....	71
 CHAPTER 4.....	 74
Social representations of the mentally ill and other individuals: Difference and sameness in repertory grid responses.....	74
4.1. Repertory grids and social representations.....	75
4.2. Aims and research questions.....	77
4.3. Development of the repertory grid.....	78
4.3.1. Elements.....	79
4.3.2. Constructs.....	79
4.3.3. Constructs and elements: pilot study.....	85
4.4. Method.....	85
4.4.1. Participants.....	85
4.4.2. Materials.....	86
4.4.3. Procedure.....	88
4.5. Analysis and Discussion.....	89
4.5.1. Analysis overview and considerations.....	89
4.5.2. Representations of the mentally ill person and others.....	94
4.5.3. Clustering and differentiation of elements.....	114
4.6. General Conclusions and Summary.....	117
4.6.1. Social representations of the mentally ill and other individuals.....	117
4.6.2. Differences and similarities through education and contact.....	122
4.6.3. Methodological considerations.....	124
4.6.4. Implications and concluding comments.....	125

CHAPTER 5.....	127
Social representations of the mentally ill and other individuals in word associations	127
5.1. Social representations in verbal descriptions	127
5.2. Aims and research questions.....	131
5.3. Method.....	133
5.3.1 Stimulus words.....	133
5.3.2 Pilot study	134
5.3.2.1 Participants.....	134
5.3.2.2 Materials.....	134
5.3.2.3 Procedure.....	135
5.3.2.4 Questionnaire changes	136
5.3.3 Participants.....	136
5.3.4 Materials	137
5.3.5 Procedure	139
5.4. Analysis and discussion.....	140
5.4.1 Analysis overview	140
5.4.2 Semantic portrayals of the mentally ill and other individuals	141
5.4.2.1 Representational content: themes and terms	144
5.4.2.2 Representational content: first impressions.....	154
5.4.3 Representational structure: similarities and differences between lexicons	162
5.5. General conclusions and summary.....	173
5.5.1 Consistent themes and changing notions	173
5.5.2 Methodological considerations.....	177
5.5.3 Implications and concluding comments.....	178
 Chapter 6	 180
Social representations of mental disorder in group discussion of a case vignette	180
6.1 Mental disorder and social anxiety: group responses to a case vignette.....	181
6.2. Aims and research questions.....	182
6.3. Method.....	184
6.3.1 Participants.....	184
6.3.2 Materials	184
6.3.2.1 Case vignette development.....	184
6.3.2.2 Case vignette description.....	186
6.3.3 Procedure	187
6.4. Analysis and Discussion.....	188
6.4.1 Analysis Overview	188
6.4.2 Central themes.....	190
6.4.2.1. Identifying salient issues: Negative emotion, avoidant behaviour, and impairment	190

6.4.2.2.	Explaining behaviour: Models of mental disorder and other contributing factors...	193
6.4.2.3.	Suggestions and interventions.....	196
6.4.2.4.	Enabling change.....	198
6.4.3	Common processes.....	200
6.4.3.1	Negotiating responsibility.....	200
6.4.3.2	Negotiating normality.....	203
6.4.3.3	Negotiating distance between self and other	205
6.4.3.4	Personal experiences as validation.....	208
6.4.4	Differences between levels of education.....	212
6.4.4.1	Scientific and professional knowledge.....	212
6.4.4.2	The social context of social anxiety	216
6.4.4.3	Personal experience: identifying, differentiating and problem analysis.....	218
6.4.4.4	Problems with solutions	220
6.4.4.5	Negotiating validity and severity	221
6.5.	General Conclusions and Summary	225
6.5.1	Central themes and processes.....	225
6.5.1.1	Mental illness, mental disorder, or just difference?	227
6.5.1.2.	Personal experience.....	228
6.5.2	Differences between levels of psychology education.....	230
6.5.3	Methodological considerations.....	232
6.5.4	Implications and concluding comments.....	233
Chapter 7	.....	234
Mental health and mental illness in educational discussion	.....	234
7.1	Aims and research questions.....	236
7.2	Method.....	238
7.2.1	Participants.....	238
7.2.2	Discussion topics.....	239
7.2.3	Procedure	240
7.3	Analysis and Discussion.....	241
7.3.1	Analysis Overview	241
7.3.2	Context and general outline of discussion	242
7.3.3	Common themes and issues	243
7.3.3.1	Negative emotion	244
7.3.3.2	Negotiating the importance of internal and external factors.....	245
7.3.3.3	Responsibility, agency and control	248
7.3.3.4	The importance of others: Social and Societal influences	250
7.3.4	The influence of education and scientific knowledge.....	253
7.3.4.1	Experience and example: Personal, scientific, and professional.....	253
7.3.4.2	Psychological terminology: from the general to the technical.....	257

7.3.4.3	Therapy and professional practice: from "counselling" to "CBT"	260
7.3.4.4	Assessment as professional jurisdiction	264
7.4	General Summary	265
7.4.1	From first year to Masters: Common themes and educational differences	265
7.4.2	Methodological considerations	268
7.4.3	Implications and concluding comments	270
Chapter 8	.....	272
General Discussion	.....	272
8.1	Representations of mental illness and the mentally ill	272
8.1.1.	Negative emotion, impaired functioning and the need for assistance.....	272
8.1.2.	Distance and difference.....	273
8.1.3.	Processes involved in social representations of the mentally ill and others	275
8.2.	Social representations and scientific knowledge of the mentally ill.....	277
8.2.1.	Transition in representations: differences between levels of education.....	278
8.2.2.	Scientific knowledge and psychology education.....	282
8.2.3.	The consensual and the reified world of mental illness	284
8.3.	Self: The individual in the social.....	285
8.4.	Social representations of difference	289
8.5.	Multimethodological approach	291
8.6.	Methodological considerations	292
8.7.	Concluding comments	294
References	.....	296
Appendices	.....	306

List of Tables

Table 2.1	<i>National, Regional, Program and employment sector influences on target groups at different levels of education.</i>	46
Table 2.2.	<i>Procedures used to assess social representations in each group</i>	59
Table 3.1	<i>Percentage of individuals, within each group, who had heard of a given mental disorder.</i>	64
Table 3.2.	<i>Percentage of individuals, within each group, who classified the mental disorder as a "mental illness".</i>	67
Table 4.1.	<i>Steps involved in construct elicitation</i>	80
Table 4.2.	<i>Selected triad combinations used for eliciting constructs</i>	81
Table 4.3.	<i>Words selected from Zani's (1993) study as descriptions of target stimuli</i>	84
Table 4.4.	<i>Presentation order of target word stimuli in repertory grid questionnaires</i>	87
Table 4.5.	<i>Criteria for determining consistency in repertory grid responses within levels of education</i>	91
Table 4.6.	<i>Criteria for determining inconsistency in repertory grid responses within levels of education</i>	92
Table 4.7.	<i>Percentage frequencies and means of similarly rated constructs about the "mentally ill person"</i>	96
Table 4.8.	<i>Percentage frequencies and means of similarly rated constructs about the "sick person"</i>	98
Table 4.9.	<i>Percentage frequencies and means of similarly rated constructs about the "normal person"</i>	100
Table 4.10	<i>Percentage frequencies and means of similarly rated constructs about "yourself"</i>	102
Table 4.11	<i>Percentage frequencies and means of similarly rated constructs about the "psychologist"</i>	104
Table 4.12.	<i>Percentage frequencies and means of similarly rated constructs about the "psychiatrist"</i>	106
Table 4.13.	<i>Percentage frequencies and means of similarly rated constructs about the "doctor"</i>	107
Table 5.1.	<i>Total number of words generated and lexicon size (as percentage of total number of words) for representations at each year level.</i>	142
Table 5.2.	<i>Categories of first words expressed in word associations of the "mentally ill person"</i>	155
Table 5.3.	<i>Categories of first words expressed in word associations of the "sick person"</i>	156
Table 5.4.	<i>Categories of first words expressed in word associations of the "normal person"</i>	157
Table 5.5.	<i>Categories of first words expressed in word associations of the "psychologist"</i>	158

Table 5.6.	<i>Categories of first words expressed in word associations of the "psychiatrist"</i>	159
Table 5.7.	<i>Categories of first words expressed in word associations of the "doctor"</i>	161
Table 5.8.	<i>Similarity indices between lexicons for first-year students not enrolled in psychology.</i>	166
Table 5.9.	<i>Similarity indices between lexicons for first-year students enrolled in psychology.</i>	167
Table 5.10.	<i>Similarity indices between lexicons generated by fourth-year psychology students.</i>	169
Table 5.11.	<i>Similarity indices between lexicons generated by Masters in clinical psychology students.</i>	170
Table 5.12.	<i>Similarity indices between lexicons generated by clinical psychologists.</i>	171

List of Figures

Figure 1.1.	The transmission of knowledge between the consensual and reified world.	31
Figure 1.2.	Levels of analysis involved in investigating social representations of mental illness and the mentally ill.	37
Figures 4.1 - 4.5.	FOCUS clusters of repertory grid responses by individuals from different levels of education and amount of contact with a person with a mental illness.	115
Figures 5.1 - 5.3.	MDS position of target words in two-dimensional space (non-psychology students; first-year psychology students; fourth-year psychology students)	163
Figures 5.4 - 5.5.	MDS position of target words in two-dimensional space (Masters students, clinical psychologists).	164
Figure 8.1.	Relationship between elements with self as central	286

List of Appendices

Chapter 3

APPENDIX A Mental disorders checklist

Chapter 4

APPENDIX B Repertory Grid: Possible

APPENDIX C Repertory Grid Pilot Task: Construct Elicitation

APPENDIX D Repertory Grid Pilot Task: Elicited Constructs

APPENDIX E Repertory Grid Task: Construct List

APPENDIX F Repertory Grid Task

APPENDIX G General Questions

APPENDIX H Repertory Grid: Element Matches

Chapter 5

APPENDIX I Word Association Task

APPENDIX J Word Association Analysis: Association index formula

APPENDIX K Word Association Analysis: First word responses

Chapter 6

APPENDIX L Case Vignette Discussion: Diagnostic criteria for social phobia

APPENDIX M Case Vignette Discussion: Case vignette script

APPENDIX N Case Vignette Discussion: Prompt questions

APPENDIX O Case Vignette Discussion: Information sheet/Consent form

Chapter 7

APPENDIX P Tutorial Discussion: Information sheet/Consent form

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Abstract

Mental illness is an issue of concern to the general community, and is a major focus of professions such as psychology. Such professions demand extensive education and training, with the aim to develop a scientific understanding of mental illness that is portrayed in contrast to socially shared knowledge, or *social representations*. However, some aspects of these social representations may persist in conjunction with the development of scientific knowledge. The current study used a multimethodological approach to elucidate how such social representations may be transformed or modified by relevant education in psychology.

Psychology students, non-psychology students and clinical psychologists participated in the current study to assess groups at different levels of psychology education and training. Four forms of data collection were used as part of a multimethodological approach. Intra-individual methods focused on the use of repertory grids and word associations to explore responses to the mentally ill as well as other relevant individuals such as the physically ill and mental health professionals. Inter-individual methods focused on social interaction in response to a case vignette of an individual with a mental disorder and group discussion within the educational setting.

Several core themes described in previous research were identified consistently across different groups and different methodologies. Negative emotion, such as distress and sadness, impaired functioning, and the need for assistance were commonly used as indicators of mental health problems. One of the most prominent themes, however, was the notion of difference and distance. The mentally ill person was consistently differentiated, particularly from the self, even when the label of "mentally ill" was not imposed. The importance of the self was especially evident, acting as a means to define normality and difference.

Several differences were also noticeable between different levels of education. A changing representation was evident from understandings of the mentally ill as "crazy", viewed in a more stereotypical, negative and critical light, to representations of the mentally ill as "sad", typified by greater sympathy. Social representations may therefore influence the social response to the mentally ill. Increasing education associated with scientific understandings was also characterised by exclusive technical discourse, a feature that may distance the psychologist from the general community.

These findings are particularly relevant to how education affects social representations of mental illness and the mentally ill, as public campaigns seek to change community attitudes and understandings. In addition, there are particular implications for psychologists, in training or at work. While a primary goal for the psychologist is to empathise and connect with the individuals they are intending to assist, the emphasis on difference, in both social and scientific understandings of the mentally ill, may act as a barrier. The education and professional development of psychologists should incorporate an understanding of how such representations may influence professional practice.