A comparative study of the structural stigmatization of ADHD and autism spectrum disorder in Flemish newspapers

Baeyens D, Moniquet A, Danckaerts M, van der Oord S.


Abstract

BACKGROUND:
Children and adults with ADHD and autism spectrum disorder (ASD) often find themselves being stigmatized. There is ample evidence of public stigma, but much less is known about negative coverage in the media, a phenomenon that can be regarded as a form of structural stigma.

AIM:
To explore the different types of structural stigma that characterize the coverage of ADHD and ASD in Flemish newspapers.

METHOD:
We used the online databases of seven Flemish newspapers in order to select articles on ADHD (n=772) and ASD (n=1940) published between 2010 and 2014. We divided these articles into separate categories relating to the domain of coverage (e.g. symptomatology, epidemiology, medical treatment) and valence (i.e. positive, neutral and negative).

RESULTS:
We found significantly more negative than neutral/positive coverage of ADHD than of ASD (or 2.1). This finding was most striking in the domains of symptomatology (or 8.42), diagnostics (or 2.28) and medical treatment (or 9.40). Furthermore, with respect to articles specifically on ADHD, the title of the article was significantly more negative than the actual message in the main article itself ($\chi^2(2) = 22.454$, p < 0.001).

CONCLUSION:
These findings show that Flemish newspapers need to adjust and correct their negative and inaccurate portrayal of symptomatology, diagnostics and treatment of ADHD and, to a lesser extent, of ASD. Readers of these newspapers also need to be given a less negative impression of ADHD and ASD.