

Public Perceptions of Schizophrenia Across Borders

Schizophrenia is a [mental illness](#) characterized by [hallucinations](#), [delusions](#) and [disorganized thinking](#). Other symptoms include [social withdrawal](#), [decreased emotional expression](#), and [lack of motivation](#). Social problems such as long-term unemployment, poverty, homelessness, exploitation, and victimization are common consequences. The root cause behind these problems is largely related to stigmatization of schizophrenic patients. Stigma is a broad and multi-directional concept which has been receiving increasing attention in psychiatric research and policymaking. It was first described by Goffman as any physical, or social attribute or sign that devalues an actor's social identity such that it disqualifies him or her from social acceptance (Goffman, 1968). The stigmatization of mental illnesses has been on the public agenda for a long time since stigmatization negatively influences mental health, making recovery and social integration more difficult. This survey, sponsored by XSIGHTS and Toluna on behalf of ESOMAR Foundation, addressed public perception of Schizophrenia, stigmatization and social distance in six different countries across four continents. The fieldwork was carried out in the USA, UK, South Africa, France, India and Brazil between 7 May and 16 May 2021, with a representative sample of 1500 adults in each country. Quotas were set on age, gender, and socio-economic status in order to achieve a representative sample of public opinion. For the details of the sample and a presentation of the full results please contact Serap Koydemir at XSIGHTS at serap@xsights.co.uk.



Our research revealed that different countries have different level of awareness about mental health problems. For instance, the number of mental health problems that respondents were aware of varied between four and six depending on the country (6.4 in Brazil; 3.9 in France;

3.9 in India; 5.4 in South Africa; 6.8 in the UK and 5.5 in the USA). Brazilians were more familiar with mental health related problems than participants in any other country, while French and Indian respondents were less likely to have heard of mental health related problems. On the other hand, depression and anxiety are the two top mental health problems, regardless of which country respondents were from. Nearly half of the respondents in the surveyed countries reported having a mental health problem at one point in their lives (48% in Brazil, 42% in India; 44% in South Africa; 51% in the UK and 47% in the USA), except for French respondents, who were the least likely to share that they had ever experienced a mental health problem (26%).

This survey focused specifically on the level of awareness about schizophrenia. The awareness level varied significantly between countries, with Brazil having the highest level of awareness (77%) and India with the lowest level of awareness (35%). Over half of French respondents (55%) and half of South Africans (50%) reported having heard of schizophrenia. Nearly two thirds of the general public was familiar with this condition in the UK (65%) and the USA (62%).

The main sources of information about schizophrenia were digital (web and social media) across each of the six surveyed countries. The health workers (physicians, nurses) were the second source of information, while books and articles were the third. Those who have had a relative or a friend diagnosed with the condition were more likely to seek information than the rest of the sample in all of the six countries.

One way measuring stigmatization is through understanding the personal distance respondents would like to keep between themselves and persons with schizophrenia. The measures of personal distance used in this survey were: "I would not want a person with schizophrenia to be my close friend"; "I would not want a person with schizophrenia to sit next to me in class or during a trip"; "Having a person with schizophrenia as a neighbor would upset me"; and "I would not allow a person with schizophrenia to look after my children". India is the country with the highest personal distance to persons with schizophrenia (31%) followed by France (28%) and the USA (22%). The personal distance is less prevalent in Brazil (18%), South Africa (17%) and the UK (15%).

Another way of measuring stigmatization is through understanding the economic and public distance respondents would like to keep from persons with schizophrenia. The measures of economic and public distance used in this survey were: "I would not want a person with schizophrenia to be a teacher"; "If I were an employer, I would not want a person with schizophrenia to work for me" and "I would not want a person with schizophrenia to be a medical doctor". India scored highest in public distance with 38%, followed by France (35%) and the USA (29%). The public distance was less pronounced in South Africa (28%), Brazil (23%) and the UK (21%).

The respondents' motive for distancing themselves from persons with schizophrenia is surely grounded in its public image. The findings of the survey confirmed the extent of negative perceptions of this particular mental health problem. This study focused on the level of knowledge about the causes of schizophrenia and found that less than half of the public agree that schizophrenia is caused by a combination of hereditary and environmental factors (49% in Brazil; 31% in France; 45% in India, 41% in South Africa; 33% in the UK and 44% in the USA). The misconceptions were also common across borders; 20% of the public in India believed that schizophrenia is caused by evil spirits and witchcraft and that it is contagious, while 35% in France believed that schizophrenia is caused by usage of substances like cannabis, ecstasy and bonzai.

Our survey revealed that both positive and negative perceptions related to persons with schizophrenia co-exist in the public imagination. Persons with schizophrenia are considered highly intelligent (28% in Brazil; 16% in France; 27% in India, 20% in South Africa; 18% in the UK and 27% in the USA) and creative (34% in Brazil; 18% in France; 30% in India, 23% in South Africa; 15% in the UK and 23% in the USA) while there is also an image of persons with schizophrenia as being dangerous and aggressive (28% in Brazil; 36% in France; 35% in India, 24% in South Africa; 13% in the UK and 20% in the USA).

There are still members of the public who believe that persons with schizophrenia can never work (13% in Brazil; 15% in France; 21% in India, 9% in South Africa; 6% in the UK and 10% in the USA) or live outside of a mental hospital (9% in Brazil; 12% in France; 22% in India, 8% in South Africa; 6% in the UK and 13% in the USA).

These misperceptions are making the social integration for the persons with schizophrenia very complicated. The isolation caused by personal and public distancing affects persons with schizophrenia negatively, creating a negative spiral in which a lack of social contact and employment opportunities hinders the chance of leading a normal and balanced life. The survey reveals that a great deal of awareness raising about schizophrenia and other mental health problems is needed in order to promote more inclusive societies in which everyone has an equal chance to pursue a healthy and happy life without exclusion or stigmatization.

Luckily there is always hope; our survey revealed that 73 % of Brazilians, 70 % of Indians, 61% of South Africans, 45% of Americans, 31% of British and 26% of French reported that they would be willing to support persons with schizophrenia in one way or another.

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XSIGHTS is an independent research agency, founded in 2004, XSIGHTS has been delivering robust research internationally. XSIGHTS was awarded Making a Difference Award in 2020 by ESOMAR Association, with its work on Public Perceptions of Schizophrenia in Turkey and collaborated with Toluna, a global research company on scaling the award-winning research in six countries.