Chapter 51
Fighting Stigma in the Community:
Bridging Ties Through Social Innovation Interventions

Nicolina Bosco
University of Florence, Italy

Fausto Petrini
University of Florence, Italy

Susanna Giaccherini
Public Mental Health Service of Tuscany, Italy

Stefano Castagnoli
Public Mental Health Service of Tuscany, Italy

Patrizia Meringolo
University of Florence, Italy

ABSTRACT

This chapter will discuss action research conducted in Tuscany to fight stigma surrounding mental illness. Public mental health services (PMHS) in Italy are perceived as ascribing a mentally ill label to individuals who utilize these programs. Local associations, especially sports associations, can be used to fight this stigma. This chapter will present key aspects and results of a community social innovation intervention jointly performed by a PMHS and the University of Florence. The research will explore perceptions surrounding the role and value of the community sports association, participants' perceived improvements, effects of sports participation, and the role of the sports association as an instrument to promote mental health. Results will show that the sports association is perceived as an agent of social capital to reduce social barriers emerging from mental illness. In addition, stigma is deconstructed through improvements to individual and social wellbeing.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter will describe the role of the *La Rugiada* sports association as a powerful instrument to deconstruct stigma in mental health. First, the chapter will summarize the theoretical background. Next, the context of the intervention and its main features will be presented. The chapter will share study results related to a local community's strategies to prevent stigma surrounding mental illness.

Stigma consists of a social dimension (or public stigma) and an individual dimension (or self-stigma). Both dimensions are capable of affecting an individual's recovery from mental illness and isolation (Andrews, Issakidis, & Carter, 2001). Through individual participation, sports and teams can create a sense of community (Soundy et al., 2015).

By exploring a sports association's role in well-being, services can be identified to fight the effects of stigma and promote community mental health. This chapter will describe the role of *La Rugiada* in rural Tuscany, Italy. It will consider interventions realized through a sports association's role as a social innovation strategy.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Stigma: Threat to Others and to Self

Although it has been 50 years since Goffman's opera (1963), its contributions continue to be widely used (Bos, Pryor, Reeder, & Stutterheim, 2013). "Stigma" identifies negative characteristics attributed to others. In addition, it devalues stigmatized people. The rise of social problems causes limited citizenship and social segregation, including disqualification from daily community life (Montero, 2010). Participation in community life increases emotional connections in the community. However, a lack of participation, which is associated with disadvantaged social groups, can cause disempowerment (Christens, Speer, & Peterson, 2011; Gaebel et al., 2014; Bosco et al., 2016).

Stigma is a relational process because it is realized in social groups (Hebl, Tickle, & Heatherton, 2000). Through an individual's aversions and discredit toward others, it induces dehumanization and depersonalization for the out-group member (Dovidio, Major, & Crocker, 2000; Tajfel, 1981).

Negative social stereotypes surrounding a social group can be associated with both positive and negative value responses, which can cause different responses of power. As reported by Link and Phelan (2001), the interconnectedness of stigma and power is due to stigma's allowance of the balance of a prevarication relationship. In a psychosocial perspective, stigma's prevarication function is recognized between people who are and who are not stigmatized (Phelan, Link, & Dovidio, 2008). This function favors an imbalance between the powerful and the powerless groups (Major & O'Brien, 2005; Lukes, 2005).

Negative impacts of stigma generate several consequences in people who are stigmatized, including social discrimination and a system of low expectations (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003; Kurzban & Leary, 2001). Moreover, membership in a low-status group can negatively affect the individual level because it can lead to the perception that one's social identity may be threatened (Steele & Aronson, 1995).

The social identity theory (SIT) recognizes cognitive, social, and emotional aspects related to a sense of belonging to a social group as identified by society (Tajfel, 1981). This process involves both individual and social levels (Anderson & Lowen, 2010; Walton & Cohen, 2003). Belonging to a social group establishes significant emotional bonds and impacts positive self-image (Haslam, Jetten, Postmes,

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