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Students' Estimates of Others' Mental Health Demonstrate a Cognitive Bias

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ABSTRACT

Students of five USA-campuses were surveyed concerning their use of prescription drugs to improve mental health. They were asked whether they had ever been prescribed medicines to treat various disorders and if they were currently taking the prescribed medicines and to estimate the percent of the students on their campus responding similarly. The incidence of being prescribed and currently taking medicines for the disorders was not markedly different than what might be expected from knowing published incidence rates. The students' estimates of their fellow students' rates of being prescribed and currently taking the medicines was considerably, sometimes dramatically, larger than the actual rates. Further testing rejected some potential explanations of the tendency to make overestimations. The conclusion was eventually drawn that the tendency to overestimate the mental distress of fellow students was a special case of superiority bias and had features of an implicit social cognition enhancing their own self-esteem.

KEYWORDS

College Students, Prescription Drugs, Illusory Superiority, Depression, Implicit Social Cognition

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