

MENTAL ILLNESS STIGMA IN A JUST WORLD: IMPLICIT AND EXPLICIT FINDINGS

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Objective: Meritocratic worldviews that stress personal responsibility, such as the Protestant ethic or general beliefs in a just world ("People get what they deserve"), are typically associated with stigmatizing attitudes and could explain the persistence of mental illness stigma. Beliefs in a just world for oneself ("I get what I deserve"), however, are often related to well-being and can be a coping resource for stigmatized individuals. Despite these findings in other stigmatized groups, the link between worldviews and mental illness stigma is unknown.

Methods: We measured just world beliefs for self and others as well as endorsement of the Protestant ethic in 85 people with affective, schizoaffective, or psychotic disorders and 50 members of the general public. Stigmatizing attitudes toward people with mental illness were assessed by self-report. Using a Brief Implicit Association Test, we also examined guilt-related implicit negative stereotypes about mental illness.

Results: We found a consistent link between endorsing the Protestant ethic and more stigmatizing self-reported attitudes in both groups. Protestant ethic was associated with negative implicit stereotypes only among members of the public. Among people with mental illness, stronger just world beliefs for self were related to reduced self-stigma, but also to more implicit blame of persons with mental illness.

Conclusions: Meritocratic worldviews are associated with mental illness stigma. Just world beliefs for self among stigmatized individuals may reduce self-stigma, but could increase implicit blame among people with mental illness. This should be taken into account in interventions meant to reduce self-stigma.