

Americans show little tolerance for mental illness despite growing belief in genetic cause

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A new study by University of Pennsylvania sociology professor Jason Schnittker shows that, while more Americans believe that mental illness has genetic causes, the nation is no more tolerant of the mentally ill than it was 10 years ago.

The study published online in the journal *Social Science and Medicine* uses a 2006 replication of the 1996 General Social Survey Mental Health Module to explore trends in public beliefs about mental illness in America, focusing in particular on public support for genetic arguments.

Prior medical-sociology studies reveal that public beliefs about mental illness reflect the dominant mental-illness treatment, the changing nature of media portrayals of the mentally ill and the prevailing wisdom of science and medicine.

Schnittker's study, "An Uncertain Revolution: Why the Rise of a Genetic Model of Mental Illness Has Not Increased Tolerance," attempts to address why tolerance of the mentally ill hasn't increased along with the rising popularity of a biomedical view of its causes. His study finds that different genetic arguments have, in fact, become more popular but have very different associations depending on the mental illness being considered. "

In the case of schizophrenia, genetic arguments are associated with fears regarding violence," Schnittker said. "In fact, attributing schizophrenia to genes is no different from attributing it to bad character — either way

Americans see those with schizophrenia as 'damaged' in some essential way and, therefore, likely to be violent. However, when applied to depression, genetic arguments have very different connotations: they are associated with social acceptance. If you imagine that someone's depression is a genetic problem, the condition seems more real and less blameworthy: it's in their genes, they're not weak, so I should accept them for who they are."

Schnittker's study also shows that genetic arguments are associated with recommending medical treatment but are not associated with the perceived likelihood of improvement.

"While the stigma surrounding mental illness has not diminished, the rate of treatment for psychiatric disorders has increased," Schnittker wrote. "The culture surrounding mental illness has become more treatment-focused with direct-to-consumer advertising of psychiatric medications now a mainstay of popular media."

According to Schnittker's research, genetic arguments have, in fact, increased public support for medical treatment but at the same time aren't clearly associated with improvements in overall tolerance levels. The study explores tolerance in terms of social distancing: unwillingness to live next door to a mentally ill person, have a group home for the mentally ill in the neighborhood, spend an evening socializing with a mentally ill person, work closely with such a person on the job, make friends with someone with a mental illness or have a mentally ill person marry into the family.

Source: University of Pennsylvania

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