

Analysis finds discrimination impairs mental health directly and indirectly

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Up to now, there was some indication that discrimination negatively affects a person's mental health and well-being. With a meta study, female researchers of the University of Mannheim show the clear

negative effects of discrimination for the first time.

The systematic meta study by Christine Emmer, Julia Dorn, and Professor Dr. Jutta Mata, holder of the chair of Health Psychology at the University of Mannheim, has been [published](#) in the *Psychological Bulletin*. The results show that [discrimination](#) directly and indirectly impairs mental health.

Discrimination has the greatest effect on aspects like rage and hostility—reactions that target other people. The work on the current state of research includes 73 experimental studies with more than 12,000 participants.

"Until now, there were individual studies that pointed out that discrimination impairs mental health and well-being. The current meta study combines all research and shows this effect very clearly," says Emmer, the first author of the study. Numerous experiments confirm the results of the study. By analyzing many different experiments—with all their advantages and disadvantages—researchers are able to make the best estimate of the actual effect.

Surprisingly, the greatest effect could be observed when participants remembered actual events or were witnesses when others were discriminated against—and not when participants were discriminated against in the laboratory. It was not the derogatory comments made by the investigator in the laboratory that impaired mental health, but the personal memory of a situation or the observation of other people's experiences of discrimination. This shows that discrimination not only leaves a strong impression on the memory, but also on people's well-being.

Discrimination is understood as the unfair treatment of people on the basis of their actual or perceived membership of social groups. Sexism

towards women or racism towards ethnic minorities considerably impaired their mental health. In contrast, discrimination against people who are rarely marginalized in everyday life and experience it primarily as [unfair treatment](#) in individual cases—for example, artificially in the laboratory—has no measurable effect on mental health. Examples of this are sexism towards men or racism towards privileged ethnic majorities.

The strongest direct negative impact on [mental health](#) had discrimination based on sexual orientation. There are too few studies for a systematic analyses of other forms of discrimination, such as for example, religion or disability, says Mata. "There is simply still a lot of research to be done here."

More information: Christine Emmer et al, The immediate effect of discrimination on mental health: A meta-analytic review of the causal evidence, *Psychological Bulletin* (2024). [DOI: 10.1037/bul0000419](https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000419)

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