Belief in Illness as Punishment and Health Behaviors in a National Sample of African Americans

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INTRODUCTION

- Religion and health behaviors are positively correlated. African Americans show more religious involvement than their White counterparts. 1,2
- Phillips & Stein (2007) suggest that the use of benevolent religious review had positive implications for persons coping with serious mental illness.
- Greater reliance on punishing God review or review of God’s power had more negative mental health implications. 3
- Young adults who viewed their serious mental illness as a punishment from God or questioned God’s power were also more likely to report concurrent and longer-term negative adjustment to stressors. 4
- To summarize, 1) religious involvement can be positively or negatively associated with health outcomes; 2) little has been done to investigate the role of belief in illness as punishment for sin; 3) the present study intended to begin to fill this gap.

PURPOSE

This project aims to examine the relationship between belief in illness as punishment from a higher power and depression, religious involvement, sense of meaning, self-esteem, religious social support, tobacco use, and screening for prostate, colorectal, and cervical cancer.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants:
- N=2,370 individuals completed the telephone interview (1,464 women; 906 men)
- Eligibility criteria:
  - Age 21+
  - African American
  - No history of cancer

Measures:
- Depression, religious involvement, sense of meaning, self-esteem, religious social support, tobacco use, and screening for prostate, colorectal, and cervical cancer

Procedure:
- Professional interviewers recruited participants by telephone
- Interviewers contacted names from a purchased list
- When the interviewer was put into contact with an adult who lived at that address, they introduced the project
- If interested, individuals were screened for eligibility criteria
- If interested and eligible, participants were read the informed consent script and provided their assent to participate
- Each participant received a $25 gift card

RESULTS

- Some significant correlations between study variables (Tables 1, 6).
- Belief in illness as a punishment was negatively associated with sense of meaning and self-esteem.
- Depression and religious social support were positively associated with belief in illness as punishment.
- Religious social support was positively correlated with illness as punishment due to the correlation with the negative interaction subscale (e.g., others making too many demands or being critical).
- After controlling for age and education self-esteem was significantly predictive of the belief in illness as a punishment.
- Religious support (negative interaction) was positively correlated with the belief of illness as a punishment.
- Also, we found sense of meaning was no longer significantly associated with belief in illness as punishment after age and education were controlled.
- Prostate and colonoscopy screening were negatively associated with belief in illness as punishment.
- After controlling for age and education both prostate and colonoscopy screening were no longer significant.

DISCUSSION

There is a consensus among researchers that religion and health behaviors/outcomes are associated. As expected this study found that depression and religious social support were positively associated with illness as punishment. Also, sense of meaning and self-esteem were negatively associated with belief in illness as punishment.

Limitation

This study relied on self-report data. Sampling bias: To participate in this study, participants had to have a home phone, which excludes people that do not have a phone, and people who only use cell phones.

Future Studies

Future studies should compare different religious affiliations. For example, examine Christian, Muslim and Atheist faiths to see if there are any differences among these groups.

REFERENCES


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