

## Demonic Attributions in Nondelusional Disorders

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### Abstract

**Objective:** Belief in demonic influence has repeatedly been described as a delusion in schizophrenic patients. The goal of this explorative study was to examine the frequency, as well as the psychodynamic and social functions of such beliefs in a sample of nondelusional patients. **Method:** The sample consisted of 343 psychiatric outpatients who described themselves as religious. In semistructured interviews they were asked to give their view of demonic causality of their illness. **Results:** A high prevalence of such beliefs was not only found in schizophrenic patients (56%) but also in the following groups of nondelusional patients: affective disorders (29%), anxiety disorders (48%), personality disorders (37%) and adjustment disorders (23%). Belief in demonic oppression tended to be associated with lower educational level and rural origin, and was significantly influenced by church affiliation. **Conclusions:** Beliefs in possession or demonic influence are not confined to delusional disorders and should not be qualified as a mere delusion. Rather they have to be interpreted against the cultural and religious background which is shaping causal models of mental distress in the individual.

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### Introduction

Recent literature on psychopathology and possession has shown that the belief in demonic influence is still very common in many cultures around the world [1]. The publications reflect a broad spectrum between two positions: whereas the anthropological literature describes traditional beliefs within a *culture* and their relation to mental health, there seems to be a trend towards an emphasis on *pathology* in the context of the Western medical model [2]. A review of the literature shows four main interpretations:

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