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## Original article

# Changes in the perception of mental illness stigma in Germany over the last two decades



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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** To examine the evolution of the perception of the stigma attached to mental illness in Germany since 1990 up to the present.

**Subjects and methods:** Population surveys were conducted in the old German States (former Federal Republic of Germany) in 1990, 2001, and 2011. The perception of stigma attached to people with mental illness was assessed with the help of Link's perceived discrimination and devaluation scale.

**Results:** In the 2011 survey, less mental illness stigma was perceived by respondents than in the previous surveys. In the eyes of the German public, the devaluation and rejection of people with mental illness has substantially decreased since 1990.

**Discussion:** The perception of a decline of the stigmatization is in contrast to the development of the German public's attitudes towards persons with mental disorders, which remained unchanged or even worsened.

**Conclusion:** Perceived and personal attitudes towards persons with mental illness have developed differently, and it remains to be seen whether perceptions of less public stigma will ultimately be followed by improved personal attitudes.

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## 1. Introduction

Studies on the development of public attitudes towards people with mental illness indicate that they have not changed for the better over the last decades. In a systematic review and meta-analysis of population studies conducted since 1990 we found that, although there were insignificant trends towards reduced blame in schizophrenia and depression, notions of dangerousness did not change. Most strikingly, social acceptance of mentally ill persons did not increase since 1990, instead, acceptance of persons with schizophrenia in various social relationships diminished [28].

While the evolution of public attitudes towards people with mental illness has been studied in various western countries (e.g., Austria [13], Germany [3,4], Netherlands [16], Poland [37], U.K. [22], U.S. [23]) hardly anything is known about how the public's

perception of the stigma surrounding mental illness has developed in recent years. So far, only two studies have dealt with this question, coming up with inconsistent results. In Germany, we had found that former mental patients were perceived by the public in 2001 as being slightly less devalued and discriminated against than 11 years before [5]. In a more recent study in Australia, covering the time period between 2002/2003 and 2011, no changes were observed as regards depression with and without suicidal thoughts and early schizophrenia; only in case of chronic schizophrenia there was an increase in the perception that others believe in the dangerousness of such a person [25].

As the perception of the stigma surrounding mental disorders may influence how the public reacts to people suffering from these illnesses as well as how individuals deal with their illness it is important to learn more about how public views on mental illness stigma have developed over time. The empathy-altruism theory [7] posits that the perception of someone being in need elicits empathic concern, which in turn produces altruistic motivation; with the possible behavioral consequence that one might help or

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may have someone other help this person. In a series of social-psychological experiments, it has been shown that inducing empathetic concern for a member of a stigmatized group improved attitudes towards the group as a whole [8]. According to this theory, the more the public perceives people with mental disorders as being devalued and discriminated against, and therefore in need, the more it may develop empathetic concern and be ready to engage in or support efforts to reduce stigma and discrimination because of mental illness. Vice versa, the perception of decreasing stigmatization may let people become less enthusiastic about anti-stigma initiatives. Moreover, following attribution theory [38], the perception of reduced stigma may have an ironic effect by actually increasing stigmatizing attitudes as psychosocial impairments of mental illness seem more self-caused rather than societally imposed.

Apart from influencing the public's reaction to people with mental illness, the perception of the stigma prevalent in society may also have an impact on those suffering from mental illness. According to the modified labeling theory [18], expectations as to what extent most people in a given culture stigmatize and discriminate against persons with mental illness are particularly relevant for those who themselves develop a mental disorder. If one believes that others will reject people with mental disorders one must fear that this rejection applies personally. This anticipated discrimination may have serious personal consequences for the afflicted person such as demoralization [18], loss of self-esteem [40] and reduced quality of life [21].

In view of the importance of this issue and the scarcity of empirical findings, we set out to examine the evolution of the perception of the stigma attached to mental illness in Germany over the last two decades.

## 2. Subjects and methods

### 2.1. Surveys

The study is based on data from three population surveys among German citizens aged 18 years and over. The first survey was carried out in 1990 in the former Federal Republic of Germany before reunification (3067 participants, response rate 70.0%) while the surveys in 2001 and 2011 were carried out in the whole of Germany (2001: 5025 participants, response rate 65.1%; 2011: 3642 participants, response rate 64.0%). To make comparison possible, from the latter two surveys only interviews conducted in

the “old” German States (= former Federal Republic) were included into the analysis. In all three surveys, the samples were drawn using a random sampling procedure with three stages: (1) sample points, (2) households, and (3) individuals within the target households. Target households within the sample points were determined according to the random route procedure, that is, a street was selected randomly as the starting point from where the interviewers followed a set route through the area. Target persons were selected using random digits. Fieldwork was done in 1990 by GETAS (Hamburg), in 2001 and 2011 by USUMA (Berlin), both companies specialized in market and social research. Informed consent was considered to have been given when individuals agreed to complete the interview. The study has been approved by the ethics committee of the Universities of Heidelberg, Leipzig and Greifswald.

Due to time constraints, randomly drawn sub-samples were presented with different sets of questions. In 1990, a sub-sample of 2044 individuals, in 2001 of 1943 individuals, and in 2011 of 965 individuals, all originating from the former Federal Republic or the “old” German States, respectively, were asked about their views on mental illness stigma. Socio-demographic characteristics of the study samples are reported in Table 1.

### 2.2. Interview

In all three surveys, face-to-face interviews were conducted by trained interviewers who registered the answers of the interviewees using pencil and paper. On all three occasions, the interview was identical as concerns wording and sequence of questions and consisted of two parts. In the first part, respondents were presented an unlabeled case-vignette depicting a person displaying symptoms of either schizophrenia or major depression. They were then asked about their beliefs and attitudes concerning the person described in the vignette. In the second part of the interview, respondents answered questions of a more general nature, not referring to the vignette. Among other things, respondents' perception of stigma attached to persons with mental illness was assessed with the help of the German version of Link's perceived discrimination and devaluation scale [18]. This self-administered questionnaire has been used in population surveys [18,27] as well as in studies involving patients suffering from mental illness [11,19]. As the original, the authorized German version demonstrated adequate reliability [20]. The instrument asks about the extent of agreement with statements indicating that most people devalue former psychiatric patients by perceiving

**Table 1**  
Socio-demographic characteristics of study samples.

	1990		2001		2011	
	Survey (n = 2,044) %	Total Population <sup>a</sup> %	Survey (n = 1,943) %	Total Population <sup>a</sup> %	Survey (n = 965) %	Total Population <sup>a</sup> %
Gender						
Male	44.1	48.5	43.3	48.3	44.7	48.6
Female	55.9	51.5	56.7	51.7	55.3	51.4
Age, years						
18–25	10.1	12.3	11.4	9.8	8.5	11.3
26–45	35.6	38.0	40.9	37.8	33.9	31.9
46–60	26.6	24.2	23.7	23.8	25.4	26.9
61+	27.6	25.5	23.9	29.1	32.1	29.9
Educational attainment						
Still student	1.9	0.4	3.2	0.2	0.8	1.0
No schooling completed	3.6	2.5	2.1	2.1	2.6	4.0
8/9 years of schooling	53.9	55.8	47.5	49.1	44.7	38.5
10 years of schooling	24.0	25.8	29.3	27.5	33.3	29.3
12/13 years of schooling	16.5	15.5	17.9	21.1	18.7	27.1

<sup>a</sup> Data from the Federal Statistical Office of Germany.

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