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Culturally-Constructed Beliefs About Physical and Mental Illness

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Abstract

We explored Asian- and Caucasian-American adults beliefs about illness, investigating whether conceptions of mental and physical illness reflect the Western biomedical framework and an energy-healing practice grounded in traditional Chinese medicine. For physical illnesses (i.e., cold/flu and cancer), White young adults primarily cited biomedical causes, while Asian young adults and older energy believers often cited alternative causes, $X^2(4, N=27)=19.06, p<.01$. When asked about treatment and prevention, the energy believers continued to endorse alternative approaches, but both white and Asian young adults focused on biomedical approaches, $X^2(4, N=27)=22.99, p<.0001$. For mental illnesses (i.e., depression and anxiety), the energy believers continued to endorse the alternative framework, while White and Asian young adults responses were more distributed between biomedical and alternative methods. These results suggest that mental models of illness are shaped by cultural beliefs, and conflicting beliefs may coexist within young adults who are being enculturated in a new framework.