



I33 Mistaken Identity: Cultural, Religious, and Ideological Beliefs in Forensic Evaluation

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Learning Overview: The goal of this presentation is to educate attendees about various religious, cultural, and ideological beliefs that have the potential to be misidentified by forensic evaluators as being psychological in nature. This presentation also seeks to help evaluators recognize these beliefs in their practice and discuss implications for forensic examinees and the legal system.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by improving understanding of the ideas or concepts held by subgroups of the population that may be mistaken for psychosis in forensic evaluations. Appropriate identification of these beliefs will in turn increase the accuracy of diagnosis in a forensic context and thus provide more accurate and valid information for the referring court system.

This presentation will focus on cultural and religious considerations in forensic evaluation. Further, this presentation will discuss ideas or concepts held by sub-groups of the population that may be mistaken for psychosis.^{1,2} Although it is clear that culture, religion, and ideology must be considered in clinical and forensic evaluation, several cultural, religious, and ideological beliefs may be mistaken for symptoms of mental illness (e.g., delusional beliefs or perceptual disturbances).³

For instance, individuals who identify as sovereign citizens believe the United States government does not have authority over them.⁴ They express beliefs in a Uniform Commercial Code, Admiralty Court, note copyrights are placed on names, and discuss having beliefs related to individuals who identify as a corporation. Further, they derive meaning from the use of capital letters when writing names, cite the importance of the Fourteenth Amendment, and speak of Redemption. Similarly, individuals who identify as Christian may describe experiences in which God is communicating with them and speaking audibly at times.¹ They may assert that God is responsible for providing them with direction, consolation, and empowerment, and/or reference the existence of prophecy. While the above-described beliefs may be accurately identified as delusional at times, they are not innately pathological in and of themselves and require a knowledgeable and skilled evaluator with understanding of cultural and religious considerations in the context of forensic assessment.

Mistaken identification of these beliefs as psychotic in nature may have a significant negative impact on individuals who hold these beliefs as well as on the legal system. This presentation will briefly outline several different cultural and religious beliefs and discuss the ways in which they may be falsely identified as psychotic in nature. Specifically, beliefs held by those who identify, practice, or believe in ideology who identify as Christian, Muslim, Sovereign Citizens, Moorish-Americans, Voodoo, Freemasons, those who believe in reptilians, or those who hold culturally based attitudes regarding trust. Additionally, the implications of misidentifying symptoms of mental illness for legally involved individuals and the legal system as a whole will be discussed.

Reference(s):

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2. Pytyck, J., Chaimowitz, G.A. The Sovereign Citizen Movement and Fitness to Stand Trial. *International Journal of Forensic Mental Health*, 2013, 12, 149-153.
3. Shepherd, S., Lewis-Fernandez, R. Forensic Risk Assessment and Cultural Diversity: Contemporary Challenges and Future Directions. *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law*, 2016, 22 (4), 427-438.
4. Parker, G.F. Competence to Stand Trial Evaluations of Sovereign Citizens: A Case Series and Primer of Odd Political and Legal Beliefs. *The Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law*, 2014, 42 (3), 338-n 349.

Cultural Considerations, Religious Considerations, Forensic Evaluation