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Sociology *for* Physiotherapists and Nurses



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Foreword
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JAYPEE

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Chapter 2 Social Factors in Health and Disease

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MEDICAL SOCIOLOGY/SOCIOLOGY OF HEALTH AND ILLNESS

Sociological approaches to health and health care have a long history. What was known as for many years as 'medical sociology', but now that is being redesignated as 'the sociology of health and illness'. These concerns relate on the one hand to the extent to which social and economic structures determine people's life chances and possibilities including their possibilities of health. On the other hand, they relate to the extent to which people through individual or collective actions may have some control over their lives including in relation to their health. There continues to be a debate within medical sociology about the extent to which 'structures' determine health, compared to the degree to which people have the capacity to control (to use their agency over) their health.

Currently there is considerable research in medical sociology on the precise effects of a range of inequalities such as economic, class, gender, age and ethnicity, e.g. on specific patterns of ill health and disease. Further there is complementary research on the degree to which the remedy to the differential distribution of health and illness should be addressed mainly at a structural level (particularly by lessening economic inequalities in populations) or at an individual level through an individual's own lifestyle decisions and actions.

Another growing area of sociological research in relation to health and illness has been that focusing on the meanings, effects and practices associated with health and illness at the level of social interactions between people—in small groups, amongst families and friends, between doctors and patients and in other social interactions focused on health.

There is considerable interest by sociologists in how disease categories may change as the role of medicine changes and in the

ways in which 'new diseases' such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS) become incorporated into medical practice.

SOCIAL FACTORS INFLUENCING HEALTH STATUS

The health status of an individual depends upon the interaction of a large number of factors. Social and economic factors, which include housing, occupation, financial and social status, climate, geography, nutrition, norms and roles of the society in which the individual lives and personal characteristics of the individual, which include the age, sex, genetic makeup, intellect and personality, personal habits, behavioral characteristics and medical history.

As a result of the interaction of the above factors, the individual either maintains or fails to maintain equilibrium. Break down in this equilibrium results in ill health. A United Nations expert committee listed 12 factors, which need to be improved if levels of living were to be raised. They are:

- Health including demographic condition
- Food and nutrition
- Education including literacy and skills
- Conditions of work
- Employment situations
- Aggregate consumption including savings
- Transportation
- Housing
- Clothing
- Recreation and entertainment
- Social security
- Human freedom.

The state of health is not absolute; one can always be healthier than at a particular time relatively, this is known as positive health. In the state of positive health, all the organs of the body function at the best physiological level and the body as a whole attains the full biological, potential and balance in the total environment. A little disregard to the rules of health may at times not affect adversely, the very stable balance once acquired. This is because of the development of strong non-specific immunity or resistance against the harmful microbes.

Health cannot be distributed or given, it has to be consciously acquired and won. One can promote one's health only by

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understanding what it is, on what it depends and applying this knowledge meticulously in everyday life. In fact, care of the body regarding food, clean water and air, cleanliness, exercise, rest, sleep, measures for protection against diseases, etc. are essential for the growth and maintenance of health.

It is the prime duty of everyone to take care of his/her body and maintain good health. This is a duty he/she owes to him/herself, to his/her family, neighbors, community, country and nation, and above all to his/her creator.

Medical Care Facility

Medical care facilities play an important role in improving the health status of individuals and community by providing curative, preventive and promotive services. A humanist approach is required to provide for a system of health care, which is technically adequate and socially acceptable, so that the vicious circle of poverty, malnutrition, high mortality and morbidity and high fertility leading to more poverty is broken. Providing effective, efficient and good quality medical care within the reach of people, would promote the health status of the individuals and their families.

Provision of merely assets like safe and potable water supply, sanitary latrines and facilities for maintaining environmental cleanliness, etc. do not itself secure freedom from water and fecal-borne diseases. People must recognize good drinking water and sanitary disposal of human excreta and wastes, as 'felt' health need to give up their old, unhygienic habits of polluting water supplies and fouling their surroundings by indiscriminate disposal of feces and garbage.

In the present world, there is a denial of the basic right (health) to millions of people, especially in the underdeveloped countries, who are caught in the vicious circle of socioeconomic exploitation and ill health, and who are also chained by out of date customs and traditions, and superstitious beliefs leading to an unhealthy lifestyle.

Providing good and efficient medical care, good environmental conditions such as safe drinking water, sanitary latrines, good houses, nutritious food and environmental cleanliness will not by itself promote health or prevent ill health; they have only potential to good health. Individuals must take up the responsibility of managing and utilizing the resources effectively and efficiently, and adopt healthy ways of living.

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HEALTH AND ILLNESS

Definitions of health and illness are very complex, in that there are cultural differences in how societies classify, what are health and illness, and the causes and the treatment. However, disease occurs in patterns, it is thought that the conditions that determine health chances are social conditions. The way to think about health and illness is socially constructed as we are used to accepting the views of the medical profession.

In modern medicine, our bodies are seen as machines and doctors as mechanics. However, studies by sociologists show that there is a range of environmental, political and behavioral factors that contribute to the construction of health and illness. In societies, what appears to be abnormal or unacceptable is often labeled as disease, conflicts arise because what accounts for illness differs from place to place and from time to time. Numerous studies also show that a person's social class strongly affects health and longevity, and that poverty and social class are the most important factors determining health. The lower one's social rank, the more prone one is to early death.

There was a pattern to the wealth and health experienced by the different social classes based on occupation, the report showed health inequality and suggested that professionals fare better than managers, managers fare better than skilled workers and so on down the line.

The social selection explanation theorizes that it is not social class that affects heath, but health that affects social class, people who suffer poor health stay at the bottom of the occupational scale because they are not healthy enough to make any progress and that it is not the lower class, which actually causes their poor health, but rather people who are ill tend to take time off school and work, so their chances of succeeding are less likely than someone who is healthy and is rarely absent from school or work.

The health and illness that affect the social classes is often influenced by their environment for instance. The child mortality rate of the lower classes can be caused by living in poverty, damp housing, low income, inadequate diet, through unemployment, all are the issues, which contribute to stress and depression as the lower class is caught in an never ending circle, where each problem contributes to another and so lifestyles tend to stay the same. This diminishes hope

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and limits choices causing a threat to health. The lower classes also have the worst facilities of health care.

Gender Differences in Health Problem

Our ideas in society tend to construct gender differences in health problems, there appears to be some evidence that men take more risks than women such as dangerous sports and violent activities, and hazardous occupations, also women tend to consult doctors more often, but yet statistics suggest women have more ill health, but this could be because women in their socially produced gender roles are seen as more acceptable to show weakness and seek medical help. Women's lives are more often medicalized than men. In childbirth, reproduction and mental health; women are more likely to be given prescriptions for antidepressants or tranquilizers, men however are more likely to have alcohol-related problems, a more socially acceptable response to stress than it is for women.

A woman's role is often looking after everyone in the family and because she tends to carry an added burden of stress along with her usual responsibilities; she may be prone to physical and mental disorders. As victims of social and economic circumstances women tend to suffer from what is known as 'housewife syndrome'. The isolation and constant decision-making involved in housework are very stressful as is the responsibilities of looking after young children.

Social Construction

There is substantial evidence that illness is socially constructed through the medical professions intervention in creation of iatrogenic diseases. In many cases, the treatment causes more damage than the illness ever would. For example, the thalidomide drug, where the effects on the unborn children greatly outweighed the advantages to the pregnant women. People suffering from depression are often given tranquilizers and this in turn will cause addiction. There is also much evidence to suggest that there are many unpleasant side effects to the contraceptive pill as it can cause cancer or thrombosis and intrauterine devices can cause all sorts of infections.

Health and illness are socially constructed by the environment. Technological changes overtime have brought improvements in sanitary systems ending the risks of major epidemics. However, this

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industrial engineering has also brought about high levels of dangerous chemicals with the result that the major killers in modern industrial societies are heart diseases and cancers. The large drug companies, which are the most profitable in the world, help to shape the pattern of medicine and drugs are made to produce profit, therefore there is a relationship between doctors and drug companies designed to maximize the sale of drugs.

The elderly in society are also often diagnosed as sick because they are most vulnerable to illness; a large number of the elderly are in hospitals not because they are sick, but because there is no one to look after them at home and also because health and welfare services fail to provide enough care in the community.

The social construction of health and illness is a complex interaction of gender, class, age and other social characteristics, still vast social divisions of health outcomes, social class divisions in mortality and morbidity are probably the result of material factors, what is defined as disease often occurs in patterns, which are best understood sociologically. The improvement in life expectancy over the years is because epidemic diseases were reduced with improved sanitary conditions looked at in this perspective and modern medicine has been less important than changes in environments.

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Salient Features

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- Includes five new useful and interesting chapters: Sociology of Stress, Sociology of Aging, Drug Abuse and Drug Addiction, Social Control, and Sociology of Education
- Question Bank will be very useful for students.

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