

Chapter 1

A Brief Introduction to the Sociology of Health, Healing, and Illness

DEFINITION OF MEDICAL SOCIOLOGY

Ruderman (1981:927) defines medical sociology as “the study of health care as it is institutionalized in a society, and of health, or illness, and its relationship to social factors.”

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF MEDICAL SOCIOLOGY

Setting the Foundation: The Importance of Social Factors on Health and Illness

Many physicians in ancient times perceived an essential interrelationship among social and economic conditions, lifestyle, and health and illness.

The Turn of the Century: Development of Social Medicine

The effects of the Industrial Revolution and rapid urbanization created a health crisis.

Grotjahn documented the role of social factors in disease and illness.

The term “social medicine” was coined to refer to efforts to improve public health.

Germ theory focused on biology of illness.

The Early- to Mid-Twentieth Century: More Studies on Health and Medicine

Social surveys became an important research technique.

Parsons' (1939) work on medical professionals

Rosen (1944) studied specialization in medicine

Hall (1946) focused on informal medical practice

The 1950s and 1960s: The Formal Subdiscipline Emerges

Changes in Health, Healing, and Illness

- 1. Changing patterns of morbidity and mortality**
- 2. The impact of preventive medicine and public health**
- 3. The impact of modern psychiatry**
- 4. The impact of administrative medicine**

1. Changing patterns of morbidity and mortality:

During this time, the primary causes of sickness and death shifted from acute, infectious diseases (e.g., influenza and tuberculosis) to chronic, degenerative diseases (e.g., heart disease and cancer).

2. The impact of preventive medicine and public health:

As the twentieth century progressed, however, it became apparent that protection of public health also required consideration of social factors.

3. The impact of modern psychiatry:

The development of the field of psychiatry led to increased interest in the psycho-physiological basis for many diseases and illnesses.

4. The impact of administrative medicine:

The abilities of sociologists to analyze organizations and structures, identify those who are harmed and who gains, and examine the consequences of alternative techniques were useful skills in organizationally complex environments.

External Recognition and Legitimation

Two key events in the 1950s and 1960s:

- 1. Medical schools began to hire sociologists for their faculty.**
- 2. Government and private foundations provided funding for medical sociology.**

Institutionalization of Medical Sociology

Two important additional events:

- 1. In 1959 the ASA accepted medical sociology as a formal section.**
- 2. The ASA adopted a medical sociology journal, the *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*.**

Foundational and Emerging Areas of Interest

Two topics in which interest is rapidly expanding:

- 1. Issues related to medical ethics**
- 2. Issues related managed care and health care reform**

Issues Related to Medical Ethics

- 1. Studying values, attitudes, and behaviors related to ethical medical issues**
- 2. Social policy questions**

Issues Related to Managed Care and Health Care Reform

Concerns about the high costs of health care and about the lack of access that millions of Americans have to quality health care have led to health care reform efforts in the United States.

SOCIOLOGY'S CONTRIBUTION TO UNDERSTANDING HEALTH, HEALING, AND ILLNESS

Sociology is “the scientific study of social life, social change, and the social causes and consequences of human behavior” (American Sociological Association, 2002:1).

The Sociological Perspective

Sociology attempts to understand “individual behaviors” by placing them in social context—that is, by looking for social patterns and examining the influence of social forces or circumstances that have an impact on individual behavior.

The Construction of Social Theories

In *Invitation to Sociology* (1963), Peter Berger describes sociology as searching for the general in the particular—attempting to determine how particular facts or individual behaviors may cause and reflect social patterns.

***Major Theoretical Orientations
in Sociology that Guide the Effort
to Find Explanations***

- 1. Functionalism**
- 2. Conflict theory**
- 3. Interactionism/symbolic interactionism**

Functionalism

Views society as a system (a structure) with interdependent parts (e.g., the family, the economy, and medicine) that work together to produce relative stability.

Conflict theory

Views society as a system largely dominated by social inequality and social conflict.

Interactionism/symbolic interactionism

Focuses on small-scale, day-to-day interactions among people.

The Scientific Foundation of the Discipline

Sociology is a social science, and through much of its formative years, researchers typically followed the same basic model of science and scientific research as did their colleagues in the natural and physical sciences.

Data-Collection Techniques

- 1. Survey research**
- 2. Experimental research**
- 3. Observational research**
- 4. Existing statistics**

Survey Research

1. **Most common**
2. **Measures attitudes and beliefs**
3. **Self-reported data**
4. **Must use proper sampling techniques**

Experimental Research

1. **Identifies cause-and-effect relationships**
2. **Experimental group receives independent variable**

Observational Research

The systematic observation of people in their natural environment.

Use of Existing Statistics

Researchers may examine birth and death records, medical charts and insurance forms, and any compiled statistics on mortality, morbidity, medical resources, or any other aspect of health care systems.

Getting at Socially Constructed Reality

These perspectives direct sociology to help us to understand the “socially constructed” nature of belief systems about health, illness, and healing practices.

THE ROLE OF THE MEDICAL SOCIOLOGIST IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

- 1. Demonstrate and emphasize the influence of cultural, social-structural, and institutional forces**
- 2. Maintain spirit of free and critical inquiry**
- 3. Seek interdisciplinary cooperation**