

What Is Mental Illness?

Introduction

Mental illness is a complex and multifaceted concept, the understanding of which can vary greatly depending on the perspective taken. Generally, it refers to a wide range of mental health conditions that affect a person's mood, thinking, and behavior. These conditions can include depression, anxiety disorders, schizophrenia, eating disorders, and addictive behaviors. However, the conceptualization of mental illness extends beyond these conditions and delves into sociology and biomedical sciences.

Arguments put forward by Sociologists such as Scheff, Saas, and Goffman State that Mental Illness is a Social Construction

Several sociologists, including Thomas Scheff, Thomas Szasz, and Erving Goffman, have posited that mental illness is not simply a product of biological factors but is a social construction. They argue that what society deems 'mental illness' is often a label applied to individuals who do not conform to societal norms and expectations (Scheff, 1966; Szasz, 1974).

Szasz, for example, argued that mental illness is a myth, with 'symptoms' being behaviors and feelings that society deems inappropriate or unacceptable. Similarly, Scheff suggested that mental illness is a label assigned to individuals who exhibit 'residual rule-breaking.' These perspectives emphasize that the concept of mental illness is not solely grounded in biology but is shaped significantly by societal and cultural norms and expectations.

How this Differs from a Biomedical Approach

Contrasting the sociological perspective, the biomedical approach to mental illness maintains that these conditions are similar to physical diseases. It posits that mental disorders are associated with physiological changes in the brain and can be categorized, diagnosed, and treated like physical illnesses (Kandel, 1998).

This model assumes that mental illness is objective and universal, whereas the sociological perspective posits that it is subjective and influenced by societal standards. The biomedical approach also focuses on using pharmaceutical interventions for treatment, while sociological perspectives might emphasize the importance of societal change.

How Goffman's Approach Differs from a Biomedical Approach

Erving Goffman, another prominent sociologist, conceptualized mental illness from a dramaturgical perspective, suggesting that mental illness is a role played by individuals in the 'theatre' of life. In his book 'Asylums,' Goffman discusses the concept of 'total institutions' and how these environments, such as mental hospitals, can shape an individual's behavior and identity (Goffman, 1961).

Goffman's approach differs significantly from the biomedical model. He posited that the behaviors associated with mental illness often respond to the individual's societal role and environmental context rather than being primarily rooted in biology. His focus was not on treating the individual's biology but on changing the societal structures contributing to mental illness.

Conclusion

In conclusion, understanding what constitutes mental illness involves taking a multifaceted approach. While the biomedical model views mental illness as a physical disease, sociological perspectives such as Scheff, Szasz, and Goffman propose that mental illness is a socially constructed phenomenon influenced significantly by societal norms and expectations. These contrasting views underline the complexity of mental illness and the importance of comprehensive, integrated perspectives in its understanding and treatment.

References:

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