

Modernity Theories and Mental Illness: A Comparative Study of Selected Sociological Theorists

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Abstract

Background. The analysis of past research shows that the study of mental illness was part of the agenda of the founders of the discipline of sociology. Additionally, the sociological study of mental illness changes to reflect the mark of historical periods such as premodernity, modernity and postmodernity. *Aim.* The aim of this study is to compare and contrast some modern sociological theories of mental health problems and determine in what ways they reflect or not the period of modernity. *Analysis.* Comparative analysis of sociological frameworks of four sociologists (Durkheim, Merton, Marx, and Scheff) from the epoch of modernity was conducted. *Conclusion.* Most sociological studies related to mental illness of the period of modernity mirror key concepts of that epoch such as structure, balance, stability, order, system, and universalism. *Implications for policy, future research, and limitations are discussed.*

Keywords: Modernity, mental illness, mental health, and sociological theories

Introduction

Conceived as the absence of conformity to social norms and values, mental illness is on the rise in the United States and other parts of the world (Gallagher III, 2012; Mecahnic, 2008). Each year more and more people are being diagnosed with mental problems (Mirowsky& Ross, 2003; Scheff, 1999). In reaction to the increasing number of the population suffering from these problems, additional mental health treatment care facilities are being created in the U.S. (Manderscheid, Henderson, Witkin, &Atay, 1999). Despite the growing number of care facilities servicing mental health patients, only very few patients actually received treatment they needed (Pescosolido& Boyer, 1999). One possible, and the most common, explanation of this disequilibrium between the demands and the available service of mental health treatment is the lack of funding (Mechanic, 2008). However, another and the least popular explanation would be the striking increase in the number of individuals affected by the problem (Gallagher III, 2012). While researchers have a limited power to increase funding toward the mental health care system, they can potentially participate through their studies in reducing the prevalence of mental illness in the population. It is toward this second goal at which several disciplines such as psychiatry, psychology, biology, and sociology are aiming.

Whereas the first three disciplines are relatively well-known for their interest in and contribution to the study of mental disorders, the acceptance of the sociological participation is less obvious (Scheff, 1999). Despite the less frequent consideration of sociology by others as important to mental disorders, the concordant results of several studies provide evidence to the contrary (Branaman, 2006; Hannigan, 1999; Horwitz, 2002; Horwitz&Scheid, 1999;Mirowsky& Ross, 2003; Peng, 2009; Scheff, 1999;). The findings of these studies point toward the conclusion that social factors influence individuals' mental health. In fact, the sociology of mental health distinguishes itself from the three other disciplines through its theoretical approaches. The sociological perspectives most commonly used to explain mental disorders in society are the structural strain theory (Merton, 1957), anomy theory (Durkheim, 1951), the social stressor theory (Thoits, 1999), and the labeling theory (Scheff, 1999). Even though these perspectives are different on several points, they nevertheless share some similarities. One of the similarities among them is the epoch at which they were formulated, as all three belong to the epoch of modernity.

Another common point they share is the underlying concept of structure with its corollary notions of balance, equilibrium, order, stability, predictability, system, and universalism. These common concepts are not the result of luck, but instead are the reflection of the temporal context of modernity.

1. Need and Purposes

Not only does the contribution of the sociology to the study to mental health is not recognized as the psychiatry or the psychology, but also there is a lack of sociological frameworks related to mental disorders. Probably that this scarcity of theories pertaining to the study of mental health justifies the fact that less sociological research studies are being focused on mental health issues. As a result of fewer extant sociological studies on the issue, it appears logical that the influence of sociology on the mental health problems is not adequately recognized. With respect to this observation, it is clear that there is a need for more sociological studies and especially theoretical work on the topic of mental health. Thus, one of the purposes of this present paper is to contribute to the sociological literature. Another and the major one is to compare and contrast four different modern sociological theories formulated by Durkheim, Merton, Scheff, and Marx. The advantage of this comparative analysis is that it will allow evaluating the specificity of each one of the four the frameworks. It will also allow assessing the similarity in the perspectives of these four theorists in order to determine how it correlates or not to the prevailing ideas and concepts of the modernity period.

2. Selected Modern Sociological Theories of Mental Illness

The history of the development of human society can generally be divided into three major periods: premodernity, modernity and postmodernity. Even though each one of these three periods has its particularities, they have the similarity of reflecting the most prevailing ideas of their time. These prevailing ideas have an influence not only on technology but also on knowledge. Thus, the most prevailing ideas in sociology, mathematics, physics, and moral of the modern period have a common denominator which is logical reasoning (Best & Kellner, 1997; Quicke, 1996). This idea of logic and reason in these different disciplines during modernity contrasts sharply with the era of premodernity characterized by the assumption of religious force as the ultimate cause of social phenomena (Comte, 1975; Best & Kellner, 1997). This postulate of religious force as the pivotal assumption in the understanding of phenomena in society constitutes a revolutionary thought that distinguishes premodernity from other periods before it (i.e., dark ages) and after, such as modernity and postmodernity.

Modernity, with its prevalent idea of logic and reason, constitute a revolutionary thought that broke the tradition of premodernity. As a distinct period, modernity left its mark of logical reasoning on almost all the disciplines including sociology. With some rare exceptions, all the sociological work during this time period mirrored and reflected key concepts that characterize modernity. One example showing how sociology illustrates the prevailing ideas of the current epoch can be found in the work of several the sociological theorists such as Durkheim, Merton, Marx, and Scheff.

2.1 Durkheim

A modern sociological theory associated with mental health is anomie theory formulated by Durkheim. In his book titled "Suicide", Durkheim remarkably demonstrated that suicide rate varies in function of social integration and collective regulation (Durkheim, 1951, p. 145). Using different levels of both concepts of social integration and collective regulation, he postulated the existence of four types of suicides.

One of the four typologies of suicide is the *egoistic* suicide (Durkheim, 1951, p.152). According to Durkheim, the most important characteristic of the egoistic suicide is that it is connected with a low degree of social integration. In clear terms, the egoistic suicide is committed by individuals who are not well socially integrated. However, these individuals who score low on social integration can avoid taking the path of suicide if the collective conscience is strong. In the absence of strong social cohesion and strong social constraint in the form of norms, values, and morals for example, these individuals are more likely to commit suicide. Another type of suicide is *altruistic* suicide. The traits of this second type "are the opposite of those characterizing egoistic suicide" (Durkheim, 1951, p. 283). Compared to the egoistic suicide, which is linked to low social integration, the altruistic suicide is connected to high social integration. Thus the altruistic suicide is the opposite of the egoistic one.

The third type of suicide in Durkheim's system is the *anomic* one. "Contrasting both with the first variety...and with the second" (Durkheim, 1951, p. 284) variety of suicide, this type of suicide is related to a low degree of social constraint. According to Durkheim, in the absence of a strong "system of collective states of conscience" (Durkheim, 1951, p. 318), the impulse takes over the individuals' behaviors. With less social censure, the individuals give satisfaction to their wildest imaginations, which for the most part lead toward suicide. Durkheim associates this third type of suicide to the lack of social stability and order. The fourth and the last type of suicide is designated as the *fatalistic* suicide (Durkheim, 1951, p. 276). As it was in the case of the first two types, the fatalistic suicide is the exact opposite of the anomic suicide. These types of suicides reflect different degrees of social constraint. While the anomic suicide is associated with low level of social constraint, the fatalistic suicide is attributable to an "excessive regulation" (Durkheim, 1951, p. 276).

2.2 Merton

Another modern sociological theory related to mental illness is the structural strain theory postulated by the American sociologist Robert Merton (1957). Though primarily used to explain deviance, the strain theory is also helpful in shedding light on individuals' mental health problems. The explanation of the deviance phenomenon offered by Merton is mainly focused on such concepts as institutional norms, cultural goals, prescribed and proscribed behaviors, and anomie. According to Merton, the variation in rates of deviant behaviors depends on variation in cultural goals and institutional norms. Cultural goals are the purposes and the interests "held out as legitimate objectives..." (Merton, 1957, p. 132). Institutional norms are acceptable social mores that regulate the modes of "reaching these [cultural] goals" (Merton, 1957, p. 133). Prescribed behaviors result from the equilibrium between cultural goals and institutional norms. Proscribed behaviors, or non-conformity, to the social structure occur as a result of an imbalance between the two factors. For example, an emphasis on the cultural goals at the expense of the institutional norms will lead to deviance, as will the opposite. Applied in the case of the United States, for example, this theory allows Merton to argue that the "heavy emphasis on wealth as a basic symbol of success" without a strong emphasis on the way of reaching it constitutes the source of the proliferation of deviance in American society (Merton, 1957, p. 139). It is then this disequilibrium between the financial goals and the means to reach them (such as education and employment) which results in anomie.

Merton conceived of anomie as "the state of confusion" (Merton, 1957, p. 163) which leads to disorders in the value systems of a society. The direct consequence of the crisis in the value-system is "the marked anxiety" (Merton, 1957, p. 163) that most individuals suffer in present-day societies. This view of Merton on anomie leads to two possible conclusions regarding mental health problems. The first is that the exposure to negative conditions such as confusion or disorder (as opposed to order) can result in mental health problems for individuals (Agnew, 2002; Pearlin, Lieberman, Menaghan, & Mullen, 1981). The second is that the disequilibrium between expectations and actual achievements can also have an adverse effect on individuals' mental health (Agnew, 2002).

Like Durkheim, Merton also formulated five typologies resulting from the differential levels of variation between goals and the avenues to reach them. In other words, the typology of modes of individual adaption of Merton corresponds to the different levels of disequilibrium or equilibrium between cultural goals and institutionalized means. The first mode of adaption, or conformity, is the result of a match or equilibrium between societal goals and institutionalized norms. The second is innovation which refers to the individuals who score positively on cultural goals but negatively on the institutionalized means. The third type of adaptation is ritualism, which is exactly the opposite of innovation. Ritualists score negatively on cultural goals and positively on institutionalized means. The fourth type, retreatists, is the opposite of the conformists because retreatists reject both cultural goals and institutionalized means. The fifth and the last one is the rebellion. Rebels are peculiar cases because they score negatively on both cultural goals and institutionalized norms.

2.3 Marx

A third modern sociological theory that deals with mental illness is the conflict theory of Karl Marx. In his "Communist Manifesto", Marx (1998b) argued that the history of humanity is the history of class struggle (Marx & Engels, 1998b). This struggle is between the oppressors and the oppressed. The oppressors are the class of the bourgeoisie and the oppressed, the proletariat, are members of the working class (Marx & Engels, 1998a). The bourgeoisie is constituted of individuals who exploit the working class in order to get wealthy. As result of this exploitation, there is a power difference between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.

More precisely, the bourgeoisie owns the means of production and consequently is economically, politically, and socially advantaged compared to the proletariat. The differential level of status between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat has been used by sociologists to explain the high prevalence rate of mental illness among individuals with low socioeconomic status (SES) compared to those with higher SES (Breslau, Staruch, & Mortimer, 1982; Eaton & Muntaner, 1999; Emerson, 2003; Hastings, 2002; Horwitz, 2002; Hudson, 2005; Simon, 2000). The conflict theory has also been helpful in explaining the differential vulnerability between individuals at the subordinate position relative to those occupying higher positions.

Gender difference in mental is another areas in which the conflict theory is applied. The conflict theory helps sociologists understand why women experience higher levels of mental health problems relative to their male counterparts (Horwitz, 2002; Mirowsky & Ross, 2003). To explain this gender difference in mental health, researchers analyzed the distribution of power between men and women within the household. Women are often associated with low status compared to men. This observation leads to the notions of dominated and dominant. Given that men are for the most part the dominant figures and the women the dominated figures in the household, it is clear, through Marx's theory, that the latter will suffer more mental health problems than the former (Rosenfield, 1999). Being in the dominant position, men have the proclivity to vent their frustration toward the dominated (women) (Mirowsky & Ross, 2003).

2.4 Scheff

A fourth modern sociological theory of mental health is the labeling theory of Scheff (1999), which is derived from the study of deviant behaviors. According to Scheff (1999), the concept of deviance is related to the notion of rules or norms. In general, society spells out accepted and unaccepted norms. This organization of the society allows rewarding individuals who conform and punishing those who do not. One way to punish individual rule-breakers is to label or stigmatize them. However, labeling the individual rule-breakers will lead to more and severe rule-breaking (Scheff, 1999). From this perspective, Scheff postulates that the societal reaction to rule-breaking is contributing to the worsening of the problem of deviance.

Scheff applies this labeling theory to the area of mental health. In fact, Scheff (1999) considers mental illness as deviant behavior and consequently defines it as rule-breaking. However, unlike most deviant behaviors, mental illness is non-conformity to the residual rules. For him, residual rules are norms that are not explicitly classified as either prescribed or proscribed. They are, instead, norms or rules that are taken for granted and to which society does not have specific labels (Scheff, 1999). An example of rule-breaking might be conversing with a spirit by an unqualified individual (e.g., an individual who is not a religious figure or medium) under inappropriate conditions in the United States. Other illustrations of residual rule-breaking might be hallucinations and continual muttering (Scheff, 1999).

3. Modernity Characteristics within these Four Modern Sociological Theories

3.1 Equilibrium

A close examination of the four modern sociological theories reviewed above shows the importance of the concept of balance or equilibrium in their formulation. All of them put a strong emphasis on this central concept of balance and its corollaries. In the case of the anomie theory, Durkheim insisted on the importance of the balance or equilibrium between social integration and collective consciousness or "*conscience collective*." For him, the absence of this balance between these two concepts results in suicide in society. In other words, imbalance or disequilibrium between the two concepts is associated with negativity, social problems, and, more precisely, to mental illness that results in suicide. This pivotal concept of equilibrium noted in Durkheim's theory of anomie is also present in Merton's theoretical perspective of structural strain. In fact, Merton's theory shares much in common with Durkheim's point of view on anomie. One of them is the construction of typology. Durkheim categorized suicides into four groups and Merton identified five types of modes of adaptation. Another similarity between the two theorists is that the variation in their typologies corresponds to the variation in the equilibrium levels between two major concepts: social integration and collective consciousness (for Durkheim) and cultural goals and institutional norms (for Merton). According to Merton, and like Durkheim, the difference between the five types of individual mode of adaptation is related to the difference in equilibrium between cultural goals and institutional norms (Durkheim, 1951; Merton, 1957).

The close similarity between Durkheim and Merton can be attributed to several factors. First, both belong to the same theoretical tradition of functionalism. Second, Merton translated most of Durkheim's work from French to English. Thus, it is possible that Merton's thoughts were influenced by Durkheim's ideas as well as the critical place of the concept of equilibrium or balance. However, an examination of the theory of Marx on social classes indicates there might be more to the two simple explications on the similarities between Merton and Durkheim. An analysis of Marx's theory of social classes also stresses the importance of the concepts of balance or equilibrium. This is a bit surprising given that Marx is generally considered as the most prominent conflict theorist and, as such, the detractor of the functionalists' views on society and its organization. The presence of the concept of equilibrium as a critical concept to the formulation of Marx's conflict theory can be indicative of the impact of the societal change brought about by the modern epoch.

According to Marx, the absence of balance between the productive force and ideology is a source of the revolution that causes social problems and alteration of traditions. Stability and order within society can be achieved through equilibrium between the structure and the superstructure of society (Marx & Engels, 1998a). In terms of social classes, the absence of equilibrium or equality between the proletariat and the bourgeoisies is the source of social struggles and social problems, as well as the proliferation of mental illnesses in capitalist societies. From this perspective, Marx sought to resolve the problems and malaise of the capitalist society by proposing communism (Marx & Engels, 1998b). The merit of the communist system, according to Marx, resides in the fact it suppresses the inequality between classes. For Marx, a communist society can ultimately be defined as a classless society in which individuals live in harmony with each other. From the concepts of the classless society, equality and harmony can be linked to balance and equilibrium. Thus, the notion of equilibrium, balance, or equality was as important for Marx as it was for Merton and Durkheim.

3.2 Balance

The notion of balance was also important for Scheff and is consequently present in his labeling theory. However, Scheff did not explicitly use the concept of balance or equilibrium but instead the one of conformity (Scheff, 1999). Conceiving of mental disorder as the non-conformity to residual rules reflects the idea of the disequilibrium between the individuals' behavior and the residual norms. This can implicitly mean that the conformity of the individuals to the residual norms will result in the absence of mental disorder. This assumption stresses the importance of the balance or equilibrium between the individuals' behavior and the societal residual norms.

3.3 Structure

Another similarity shared by these four modern sociological theories is the concept of structure, which is related to the previous ones of balance and equilibrium as in Scheff's labeling theory depicting the idea of structure. By postulating that mental health is the non-conformity to residual norms, Scheff is structuring the individuals in society into categories. According to him, society contains two main types of norms. On one side are norms that are explicitly labeled and on the other are those that are not (which are designated as residual norms). The violation of explicit norms is punished by society by explicit labels such as thief, batterer, prostitute, cheater, drug user, alcoholic, child molester, rapper, murderer, etc. However, the violation of residual norms is not specifically labeled but instead classified as mental illness. The concept of structure can also be identified in the theory of Merton. Merton, through his notions of equilibrium between institutional norms and cultural goals as well as proscribed and prescribed norms, underlines the idea of social structure. Durkheim's theory on anomie also depicts the idea of structure. Durkheim's idea of collective regulation or social integration reflects, to some extent, the concept of structure. These notions indicate that society is composed of several parts which can be integrated into a whole and sometimes collaborate cohesively. Marx's social theory portrays the ideas of structure as well. In fact, Marx considers the productive force, the classification of the society into proletariat and bourgeoisie, as part of social structure. However, the ideology justifying this structure or arrangement of society is an example of the superstructure of the society (Marx & Engels, 1998a; 1998b).

3.4 Order

The idea of structure found in these theories can be linked to that of order. The analysis of most modern sociological theories reveals some form of order. The formulation of the four types of suicide by Durkheim indicates the thinker's motivation to classify and consequently to order the different types of suicide.

The five types of mode of adaptation of Merton are indicative of the presence of categorization and ultimately the idea of order. Marx's division of society into two main classes (bourgeoisie and proletariat) reflects this idea of order as well. The labeling theory of Scheff also is based on the same idea of order. Order in labeling can be found in the notion of rule-breaking. This notion indicates that there are individuals in society who are labeled as rule-breakers and those who are not labeled rule-breakers. Additionally, the term of labeling associated with Scheff's theoretical perspective contains a sub-classification within the rule-breakers. This sub-classification also shows Scheff's view, according to which, not all the individual rule-breakers are the same. For instance, Scheff distinguishes rappers from child molesters, murderers, or thieves, just to mention a few.

3.5 Universality

Universalism is another characteristic of most modern sociological theories. An example of theory that illustrates concept of universality is Durkheim's proposition on anomie. According to Durkheim social anomie, which he found to be related to mental health problems, exists in every society. Given its existence in each society, Durkheim postulated that it plays a role in society. Beside Durkheim, Marx is another theorist whose perspective can be classified among the long range theories (i.e. inclusive and integrative frameworks with universal tendencies). Like Durkheim Marx pointed out that with the exception of the communist societies all the others contain two major social classes. Thus for Marx, there are forms of bourgeoisie and proletariat in almost every society (Marx & Engels, 1998b). As social class is universal so is its implication that the struggle between classes, along with social inequality, is found to be related to mental health problems in society (Peng, 2009).

Unlike Durkheim and Marx, who were explicit about the universality of their frameworks, Merton and Scheff were more implicit about theirs. Even though Merton and Scheff did not openly emphasize the long range effect of their theories, a careful reading of these two researchers indicates the presence of the concept of universality in their work. Merton, for example, did not explicitly qualify his structural strain theory as universal, but the way he used it to illustrate the case of deviance in the United States implicitly shows that it can be applied to other countries as well. The universality in Scheff's labeling theory can be connected to the policy implications of his revolutionary thoughts. The phenomenon of deinstitutionalization in the mental health care system in the United States, Canada, and other countries of Europe is the resulting effect of Scheff's labeling theory. The shift of paradigm in the treatment of individuals suffering from a mental disorder can be traced to the labeling theory formulated by Scheff. Change in treatment of mentally ill individuals is also accompanied with other changes, the most prominent of which is related to the facilities of treatment (Mechanic, 2008). Since the formulation of the labeling theory, policy makers within mental health care systems are supporting new types of facilities oriented toward community in lieu of the old psychiatric state hospitals (Mechanic, 2008). The support for the novelty in facility is guided by two main interests. The first one is related to the expensive cost of running the old fashioned state hospitals compared to group homes or assisted living facilities. The second is related to the quality of treatment. Given the smaller ratio of staff to consumers in assisted living facilities compared to hospital-like facilities, it is clear that the former are more likely to provide quality care than the latter. Quality care, according to most experts, refers to the active interaction with the clients in a way that encourages or speeds up their normal return to society (Scheff, 1999).

Conclusion

Mental health is a dynamic concept that evolves in accordance with the epoch and its most prevailing current of thought. That is, the conception and the investigation of mental health in the modernity time period are more likely to be different from the ones of the periods of premodernity and postmodernity. This influence of the epoch on social conditions, structures and arrangements is so strong at the point of defying the specificity of the political borders. For example, despite that Durkheim, Merton, Marx and Scheff have different nationalities their sociological frameworks related to mental health present a lot of similarities; one of which is their idea of equilibrium or balance. Beside the concept of equilibrium, the four theorists also have some other concepts in common such as structure, order, and universalism. The most intriguing of this strong effect of the epoch on sociological thoughts resides in the fact that a common ground can be found between the major supporters of two diametrically opposed theories which are functionalism and conflict theory. Reconciling the functionalists such as Durkheim and Merton perspectives related to mental health with the one of their major opponent Marx through the four major concepts of the period of modernity constitutes an illustration of the strong influence of this modernity era on sociological thoughts.

The similarity found in the four frameworks of the four different sociological theorists reviewed leads to the similitude in the resulting approach of solutions. For example, following the Durkheimian perspective of anomie, it appears that one possible avenue of solving the problem of suicide rate is the establishment of the balance, the equilibrium between social integration and the collective regulation within social structure. Merton also supports this idea of the rearrangement of the structure of the society as a measure to solve the proliferation of mental health problems. However, unlike Durkheim who focused on social integration and collective regulations, Merton argues that a balance between the norms and the goals constitutes a solution to the individuals' mental health problems. Using the theory of labeling, Scheff also corroborates the viewpoints of Durkheim and Merton regarding the solution to the problems through the concept of conformity. From the Scheff's perspective, it results that there will be less mental health problems when there is alignment or balance between the individuals behaviors and the residual norms of the society. The idea of the re-structuration of the society in such a way that it promotes more equality between its composing parts occupies a pivotal place in the Marxian sociological thoughts. In fact, Marx's suggestion regarding the communism society reflects the centrality of the ideas of equilibrium and balance of the structures within the society emphasized by Durkheim, Merton and Scheff. The long range character of all these different frameworks (functionalist theory, conflict theory, and the labeling theory) gives to their derived approach of solutions their attribute of universality.

The examination of the solutions that derive from the frameworks of the four sociological theorists can be synthesized into one imposing conclusion that the individuals' mental health problems are embedded within the structure of the society. Consequently, the solution should be sought in the re-ordering of the composing parts of the structure of the society. While this conclusion lends support for policies aimed at correcting the structural problems such as welfare programs in the society, it invites to rethink about the medicalization approaches which are the products of the period of modernity as well. Future studies can be focused on the medicalization approaches to mental health and document how they relate and reflect or not to the modernity era. A comparison of the sociological approaches of mental health and the psychiatric ones within the period of modernity is granted. Furthermore, future studies should seek to overcome one of the limitations of the present paper which is the small number of theorists reviewed. Consequently, future studies should include more sociological theorists into their analyses.

Authors' Note

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