



Public Mental Health Today

A handbook

Edited by Isabella Goldie

Mental Health Foundation

Pavilion



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Chapter 4

Some sociological aspects of public mental health

David Pilgrim

Introduction

The relationship between mental health and its social context has been explored in a number of ways by sociologists. Two main trends have been evident. First, for those interested predominantly or wholly in causal arguments, there is an overwhelming case that past and present social conditions are strong determinants of mental health status (eg. Brown & Harris, 1978). Age, gender, sexuality, race and social class all predict mental health status (Rogers & Pilgrim, 2003). Of these variables, social class is the most robust predictor, with the fewest mixed findings and caveats about data interpretation. Moreover, in all social groups childhood neglect and abuse predict diagnosed mental disorder and so may, in large part, account for intra-social group variation (Pilgrim, Rogers & Bentall, 2009; Spataro *et al*, 2004). These arguments about social determination can be located strongly in the structuralist and materialist traditions of sociology (especially derived from Marx and Durkheim).

Second, for those more interested in constructivist arguments, the social is also important because of the emergence and ubiquity of context-specific meanings in human social organisation (compared to that of other species). The social implications of complex language use are extensive and profound

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