

Week 2: Health as a social construct

Health and illness are socially distributed

- Some diseases are socially produced due to work, risk of injury, environment, social norms etc.
 - o As a result some groups have higher morbidity/mortality rates that are beyond the individual's control
 - E.g. cholera – completely avoidable yet due to lack of sanitation experienced in India, Africa etc.
 - E.g. under 5 mortality rate – much higher in countries with poor healthcare like Africa
- The health experience is socially constructed, forming our understandings of health and illness
 - o Is a reflection of our culture, politics and morality in a particular society at a particular time

Social organisation of healthcare

- How a society organises, manages and uses health services
 - o Includes medical profession's influence on system – who influences scarce resource allocation?

Models of health

- **BIOMEDICAL**: illness is a malfunction of body systems, focuses on diagnosis and treatment. Prominent in Australia
- **BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL**: blends psychology, biology and social factors. Focuses on reducing risk factors
- **SOCIAL**: health is influenced by social structures, modification of which alters health – focuses on prevention
- **SOCIAL ECOLOGICAL**: how micro, meso, exo and macro systems interact to influence health

Agency versus structure

- Extent to which human behaviour is determined by social structure
 - o **STRUCTURE**: how social structures like institutions and groups constrain an individual's choices
 - o **AGENCY**: how much control an individual has to change the world – ability of people to influence their own lives and the society they live in

~BLAXTER: How is health embodied and experienced~

- Many illnesses have social causes
- Embodiment is the physical and mental experience of living
- Health relates to the physical, mental and social existence
- Blaxter found 5 main health categories:
 - o Health means to be *free of illness* – this view is held by better educated higher SES
 - o Health refers to *physical fitness and vitality* – held by younger people, particularly males
 - o Health refers to *social relationships* – more commonly held by women
 - o Health is the *ability to function* – held by older people with an importance on self sufficiency
 - o Health refers to *psychosocial wellbeing* – people with non-manual jobs, higher education, middle aged women
- Self-rated health is usually pretty accurate
- Blaxter identified 8 categories that illness/disease could fit into:
 - o Infections and environmental agents
 - o Heredity/familial tendencies
 - o Secondary to other diseases/trauma/surgery
 - o Stress and psychological
 - o Constraints of poverty and neglect
 - o Inherent individual susceptibility
 - o Voluntary behaviours
 - o Natural degeneration

- It's easier to talk about illness rather than health
- Health and illness aren't merely opposites
- Health is holistic and context dependant
- Health is associated with being a good person, youth and strength whilst illness is associated with weakness, sin and redemption