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Research Article

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF HEALTH AND ILLNESS: A THEORETICAL REVISITING ON DIVERGED DIMENSIONS

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ABSTRACT
The sociology of health and illness has a long history. Over the last 100 years many concepts, theories, findings have been explored for the better understanding of health behavior of human being and the role of the society. Majority theories and approaches relating to the health and illness have been originally propounded by the western sociologists only. Even today researchers in developing countries are heavily depending on western theories to explain health culture and behavior of the rural community. In developing countries social class, caste, gender etc play a vital role in accessing suitable healthcare facilities. More than these the underlying social, political and economic forces are also counting a lot. It is found that sociology of health and illness significantly helps us in better understanding of people's concepts about onset of various diseases and its cure in a cross cultural framework. Health and illness are a universal concept in all societies. Each community organizes itself through experience, through different means, through different elements and finally will develop different approaches to fight against illness and diseases. In this way each and every society develops specific medical institutions called health care system in a relevant social context. This health care system will have origin, symptoms, development, process and curing of various diseases/illness. This system will have different symbols expressed through the means of practices, interactions and institutions. This paper is bas don the review of various secondary materials.

Keywords: *Health, Illness, Sociology, Institutions*

INTRODUCTION
Health is an elusive concept. We have numerous definitions to define the term health. Good health can be some time positive or sometime negative or more precisely absence of any kind of health rerated problems like physical or mental. Herzlich (1973) said "health is to feel well, in good form, happy content, with a good appetite, sleeping well wanting to be up and doing; it is to feel well and strong; that's what good health is". Parson (1951) defines health is a good status of physical body which can perform any task. He said 'healthy person can do any social role which is a normal part of his/her societal responsibility. Health disorder may reduce the capacity of the human being'. We can also opine the cultural setting of any given society regarding, 'perception, preference, evaluation and satisfaction about 'health' is more vital while generalizing term' (Nagala, 2007). The health of any society is intimately related to its value, system, philosophical and political and ecological organizations (Singh *et al.,* 2008). Moreover health is subjective in its basic nature.

"Sociological research deconstructs such discourses and highlights their implications on the notion of agency of the patient, meanings of informed consent, patient participation in different cultural contexts and notions of health and illness as doing. Health becomes an everyday moral duty" (Mishra, 2010).

Sociology brings two different focuses of analysis to the study of health and illness:

1. At the first instance it focuses to 'make sense of illness', by applying various sociological perspectives both to a scrutiny of the understanding of illness, and to the social structuring of health and disease. Further, sociology makes an imperative input to multi-disciplinary and multi faceted assessment into issues of interest to health care providers and helps in the development of new appropriate health policies;
2. At a second level, sociological enquiry can give more options to an understanding of the effect of wider social and cultural phenomenon upon the health of individuals or the community and various social

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groups. Such processes include social inequalities, health culture, behavior, change, knowledge, medicalizations and power.

Albrecht (2000) writes "An massive body of work in the sociology of health and illness is not so patently realistic but is intention on understanding what it means to be sick, to have a chronic illness or disability, to be a woman, to experience fertility and menopause, to be poor, a member of a minority group and in need of health care and social services" (Albrecht *et al.,* 2000; Bird *et al.,* 2000).

Since communities' perception on health and illness varies from culture to culture sociologists have given various theories and approaches to study about health and illness over the period of time using longitudinal studies. Truly speaking the very basic concept of sociology of health and illness is to enlighten about the social origin and influence on the onset and choosing suitable medical care of any diseases or illness and role of different components of the society relating to that issue. Sociology of health and illness also explains how different social groups have come up with the specific diseases over the period of time and what other culture can learn from their experiences. Also concept on health and illness of the society is based on the cognitive orientation of a particular social group and cure will also follow the same cultural logic.

Culture is a shared concept of the specific social groups. The concept of health, hygiene, illness, well being, and sickness are the fundamental issues present in all types of culture across different societies. Every culture will have its own notions, concepts about health and illness. Culture is a vital concept and an instrument to conduct health studies among the rural population as patients' belongs to different social groups. These people express unique health behavior and medical pluralism to cure their health problems. People's construction of illness is a focal point in sociology. The Influence of religious belief and social network on the health culture is a vital issue studying health and illness from the sociological point of view. Every culture has its exact clarification and justifications for all types of ill health. Culture provides people with ways of thinking that are "concurrently models of and models of actuality".

The health care system is also a part of general culture. There will be no much differences between socio-cultural experiences and episode of illness with respect to a particular social group. Each and every individual through his/her personal episode of illness will keep on adding his/her prospective to the society's health culture. We cannot neglect health and illness episode of a lay person. Health culture will develop according to the social, economical, legal and political development etc. of the society. In this matter various medical institutions and the systems will also play a vital role in the maintaining of the "state of health" (Langdon and Wikinson, 2010; Kleinman, 1980; Langdon and Wilk, 2010).

Health care system normally will have two components.

1. Social component;
2. Cultural component

Social Component: In case of social elements it consiss of different health care institutions, healers, health culture, health behavior etc., It also includes traditional medicinal system like folks system, faith healers, quacks herbalists etc., Apart from these we can also witness for the growth of other medical system like Unani, Sidda, Tibetian and Chinese medicinal system side by side. Also we can see the concentration of different specialist practicing different therapeutic models based on different health culture and care. Each and every social group will have their own reservations, perceptions in accepting or acknowledging or rejecting these any type of medical system/s. This acceptance or rejection will be largely based on the socio-economic background, caste, family history, religion etc. we cannot isolate all these vital factors while studying the health culture of a community from a sociological point of view.

Cultural Component: The cultural system of health will help us with different knowledge and cognitions to identity perceive and explain disease/illness. Each and every culture will have their own concept about symptoms, classifications about various types of diseases/illness. However they are not universal. Every health cultures give etiological theories about multiple causes of disease and illness. Certain health culture theories provide us logic behind both preventive and curative knowledge of the people. Some theories enlighten us about various reasons for using more than one type of medical system (Medical pluralism) and how medical pluralism shapes communities' health behavior and health culture.

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Truly speaking health care system has been just a conceptual model to understand society's different health culture and behavior. This will help us to understand the different sets of elements and experiences involved in the health culture and behavior. Since the health care system is a cultural system, sociology will also help us in understanding medical pluralism operating concurrently in different social groups and cultural response for various health problems.

Sociology of health and illness specifically also deals about

- Various medical and healing agencies ;
- Social role;
- Symbols, power and the healing;
- Structure, process and outcome

Sociology of health and illness basically deals about the inter relationship between 'health and society' and 'medicine and society'. Study about health and illness in the society is not a new phenomena. From time immemorial, people are doing official or unofficial research study about societal reaction and responsible towards health and illness. Even during the Egyptian period also there were some intelligent people doing research on medicine and its connection with the society. Essentially there is a clear cut differentiation between medical sociology and sociology of health and illness. In medical sociology focus will be concerning health and illness delimited by a range of social institutions. Nevertheless in case of sociology of health and illness researchers by and large studies concern a) various social and cultural factors causing diseases and illness, b) health seeking behavior, c) health care seeking behavior and d) inherited health culture of the society.

It also focuses how health culture and behavior varies based on the socio-economic status of the community. Sociological concept about illness gives a fair idea how external determinants causes health problem to an individual and how he/she respondents to it in a given social context. It is a well known truth that the influence of socio-cultural factors varies across the globe. Normally these social factors demonstrated through various discourses on important diseases /illness and its outbreak in a specific geographical area. Basically experts' focus about the issues comprising society and medicine, socioeconomic setup, general cultural issues which are geographically specific while studying specific health culture of a community. Sometime a common disease may affect the larger population whereas a major disease may affect smaller population only. Medical anthropologists basically studies about these discrepancies.

It is found that basically sociology of health and illness study takes place in three vital doamins. They are-

1. Conceptualization of health and illness of a particular society or culture;
2. Measurement and distribution of health and illness;
3. Reason behind choosing particular type of healing approach

As we are aware different culture responds differently to different illness/diseases. Based on this study about how an illness affects social regulations or controls over the time would be worth for study. Measuring and distribution of various dieses/ illness will help how community is using various existing health services. It also helps in getting patients' perception about his/her illness and reason for that. Sociologist tries to study the various data to analyze the distribution pattern of disease and illness in a given society.

As new medical health care facilities discovered, health status of the communities across the world has started considerably improving. Gradual changes in the socio economic status of the people also led to have quality medical care. Diagnose and treatment also started to affect positively on the health care seeking behavior of the community. Now rural people are showing much interest to adopt modern health care facilities whereas certain sections are not yet. This change in the health culture of the community causes the issue of health and illness within given societal life to be highly volatile in definition. Hence studying health and illness from the sociological point of view continuously needs to be updated.

Wilkinson (1996) has opined society having poor health will tolerate high inequality in every aspect. Differences in health practices between various social groups would be more vital for sociological analyzations. Even in the same society, disparities in health status and health behavior can be seen among

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different social classes/castes. The wide income gap, material deprivation and psychological issues invariably effects on health and illness of an individual/community in a society. Wide gap between rich and poor people results in low social cohesion which finally affects the health of all members. It is found that vital differences in case of mortality and morbidity continuously increasing between low income groups and the elites of the society. However the research is on the way to find out how poverty and deprivation effects on general health issues and behavior among the members of developing societies.

Health seeking and health care seeking behavior of an entire family will be largely influenced by the social and cultural factors. Poor income means poor health. Finally it leads to have various effects on family causing various health problems. Income and health are closely related to life expectancy of any community. High income inequality also leads to have a big gap in the health disparity between different social groups. This health disparity is due to material deprivation and socio-psychological effects. Due to social exclusion (class and cast) certain sections of society may not get equal health benefits. Various social, cultural, developmental and psychological factors finally leave an impact on health condition of an individual irrespective of his/her class and caste. Moreover it is found that social capital like education, housing, social networks also places an imperative factors causing health and illness (Crision, 2007; Wilkinson, 1996; Marmot, 2004).

Social Construction of Illness

Bhasin (2007) writes "every culture has its particular explanations for illness. Frake (1961) during his research among Subanum of Mindanao, explained illness as a vehicle for pursuing other interests. He wrote "illness is fundamentally semantic or meaningful and all clinical practice is inherently interpretive.....".

According to Good (1977) "semantic illness network is the network of words, situations, symptoms and feelings which are associated with an illness and give it meaning for the sufferer".

Health, illness and cure are realities in everybody's life across the societies. Therapy, practices and results normally evolve over the period of time within the socio-cultural contexts. It provides different insights about health culture, behaviour, traditions; customs in the medical health care system. Through the personal experiences patients' and the doctors/ native healers will also add on to the knowledge of society's health belief system continuously over the period of time. All cultures consist of vital information's about how disease occurs, what makes illness and how to choose suitable healing approaches. This would be a health culture of each and every community. In each health culture there will be different concepts, ideology philosophy and thinking and planning in handling various diseases and illness appropriately (Bhasin, 2008). Obeyesakere (1976) has given a term called "cultural diseases" because some diseases are created partially because of "cultural" definition of the "situation".

Regarding social construction of disease and illness Rose (1992) has evolved an argument for analyzing 'behavior determinants of the health of individuals at the societal level'. Rose writes "concerning the social distribution and determinants of disease and illness cut across the view of disease as an autonomous individual affliction. It focus that new disease and the discloser to the range of possible risk factors are a result of the norms of any given society". Hence it is opined that beliefs held by the community/individual within a society about on set of disease and curing is critical always.

It is generally opined that illness has three domains:

1. Illness as Sanction (punishment for doing wrong)
2. Illness as Deviance(a form of social control)
3. Illness as an Indicator of Social System Performance (indicative of the performance of an existing social system)

It is well known truth that health and illness is a 'socially constructed concept'. Each and every society will interpret the term 'health and illness' differently in its own way. This would be depending largely on history, culture, religion, gender role etc. of that society. Moreover it depends who has the final authority to apply the label of 'illness' within a given society. Also it depends on the context or the circumstances in which illness occurs. Truly speaking social construction of illness means how society shapes illness

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behavior of an individual in which he/she normally live. Here one question arises what does really construct an illness?

Steven (2001) writes "clearest example of illness as a socially and culturally shaped through a similarity of eastern medicine system and description of illness versus western medicinal system and description of illness".

Illness has three historical origins:

1. Few illness notions are originally rooted historical and cultural meaning;
2. Most of all illness are socially constructed at the empirical level;
3. The true medical concept about illness is mostly framed by the vested interest

Social construction of illness depends on how people differentiate between illness and the disease. Social construction of illness has developed through an interaction in a social context. Meaning and the experience of illness will be largely framed by the historical and existing social system. Scholars say illness is not 'given' rather actually conferred by dominating social groups in a given society. They say society will confer illness as a part of the control/sanction (short term). Scholars who support 'symbolic' interactionims felt illness is an experience within the framework of daily social interactions of an individual.

Few sociologists are showing interest to work on how 'symptoms' or 'symbols' are being labeled or identified as an 'illness'. It is also interesting to look what an accepted as "Illness or what is not accepted as not an 'illness' and what are the factors which play a vital role in differentiating illness from any biological framework. However, few scholars also say an argument over illness and it's societal construction approach as something 'Mixed' i.e. Illness has both medical and social deviance. Some time illness varies or may not have independent factors of effect on patient and health care system. Illness has also cultural symbolic domain.

Some illness has been labeled as stigma, while some illness is not stigmatized in society. For example AIDS will be severally stigmatized where as polio not some time. Illness stigmatization varies society to society based on the type, duration and severity etc. It may have less noticed in urban society whereas more serious in case of rural society. Some time due to stigmatization people may not come forward to take suitable medical care as all.

It is known fact that sociologists are studying 'patient perspective of illness' since 1950 onwards. Strauss (1975) opined that since patients' will spend only few days 'with illness (if is a minor problem) patient's personal experience/narrations may not same as the illness experiences of a patient having long term health problems' Hence it is necessary to focus on 'patients life's before illness, during the stage of illness and after the illness got medially cured'. This helps us in the social construction of illness based on patients' experiences in a given society. Also it helps us to know how the different components of the society helped him/her to come out of illness stage soon.

During the stage of illness patients' will be normally worried about their personal and social relationships and other day to day activities which could not be performed well. Sometime during the stage of illness patients will review their previous life and in some cases it may create new illness identification (ex. patients under dialysis) also.

Banks and Prior (2001) opined in this situation patients will create their own illness ideology based social context and their own illness narrations and parameters to measure their illness notions.

Truly speaking sociological study on health and illness mainly focus on two prospective:

1. Sociological analysis of different societal factors causing health and illness;
2. Social structure and how different segments of a society responsible for the current illness and how a patient responds to it.

Studying health and illness from the societal perspective will yield some diverse dimensions and discourses. This would be completely different when examining health from an individualistic prospective because social determinants and individual determinates are quite different. Social, cultural and economic conditions are some of the strongest determinants while studying illness in rural society.

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Theories about Origin of Diseases and Illness

There are various theories about origin, cause and cure of diseases and illness. Also theories explain how particular health behavior and health culture evolved in the society. Theories about diseases and illness may mainly divided into two groups they are: 1. Personalistic 2. Naturalistic 3. Folk Concept

1. Personalistic theories argue illness or disease causes due to supernatural powers including spirits, sorceries, souls, witches etc. According to this theory illness causes due to moral or spiritual violation by human beings. Violated social and religions taboos also cause illness as believed in many traditional cultures. This theory further believed that illness is a type of sanction by the super natural powers due to the immorality or breaching taboos in the life. This theory also opines failure to carry out certain rituals may also end up with illness. According to this theory recovery can be had by worshiping deity through ritual or through a trained healer. This theory also explains about sick role in the society and society can help him/her to come out of sick as spoons as possible. Also it explains the space of the sick person in the society and effect of sick role issue on the stability, continuity and cohesion of the society.

2. According to **Naturalistic theory** illness causes due to impersonal terms. This theory assumes illness causes due to disturbance of cultural order of human beings with his/her surrounding eco-system. This theory says harmony between human beings and eco-environment should be properly maintained without which it causes severe may harm of the health of a person. Humeral concept is a vital concept of naturalistic theory. Proper balance of various human systems would be a vital component for being healthy. According to this theory Indian system of medicine is also based on naturalistic theory. In India '*Prana*' (vital energy) concept exists since time immemorial, *Prana* is essential in keeping the human being alive. If the vital energy is disturbed human being may get sickness.

Folk Concept: This is one of the ancient concepts of explaining causes of illness and cure which is prevalent in many parts of India and other Asian continents. Folk concept's on illness and diseases ranges from the social world to the supernatural world. These symbols have cultural significance in explaining health behavior and health culture. Folk concept presumes illness and disease may cause due to evil eyes, imbalance of body fluids, hot and cold diet, sorcery, violation of taboos, improper behavior also. It also opined an individual failed in performing rituals regularly may get various health problems. Folk concept has a lot of symbolic meanings. This theory also explains how human body normally functions (humeral), and how it causes symptoms and the meaning of illness and its moral, social and cultural significance. Also it thrives to explain about illness within the individualistic perspective.

Sociological Approachs: Sociological theories of health and illness relatively based on imbalances inside the human body. Certain sociologists argue illness causes due to problems in the social relationship. Also they argue that illness causes due to broken relationship between the human being and the eco-system. Indian system of medicine is based on the same belief that the human body is made-up of three basic substances called 'spirit, phelem and bile'. Chinese's medicine is also based on the belief that the body is made-up of five elements including 'water, metal, earth, fire, and wood'. In addition Greek system of medicine opines that human body has four different of forces. Expert says any imbalances among these basic elements would cause illness and disease among human beings. Certain sociologist's proposed their theories about illness and diseases based on natural and super natural causations. Theories of natural causation focus on disturbance of health as a physiological consequences including infection, germs, mental trauma (Murdock, 1980).

There are three vital theoretical modules to get into the in-depth understanding of health and illness from the perspective of Medical Anthropology.

1. Epidemiological approach
2. Interpretive
3. Critical Medical Anthropology

1. Epidemiological Approach: In case of epidemiological approach, normally researchers studies health and illness from the prospective of social and cultural factors. The core part of this theory deals how ecology and environment affect causing various health problems in the society. In this approach, normally focus would be on various risk factors which cause diseases and illness and how it relates to the

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environment. This theory also propounds the relationship between urbanization and new public health problems. According to these theory social interactions, food habit, and household ecology also play a vital role in causing health disorders. This theory adds urbanization and migration invariably causes new social pattern of health problems in the society.

This approach further divided into three more divisions;

a. Retrospective Approach: it conducts reasons for various diseases and illness which are occurred already.

b. Prospective Approach: informs us whether the diseases occur or not? More precisely we can say prospective approach gives an idea of possibility about future occurrence of some diseases. Epidemiological approach will not avoid the occurrence of any diseases but gives a hint in advance.

2. Interpretive Approach: Basically this approach studies diseases/ illness from the micro prospective. Interpretive prospective further elaborates how specific cultural factors cause disease/ illness. It also focuses how health behavior and health culture evolved over the period of time in a given society/community. This study would be useful in analyzing health behavior and health culture of small communities.

Critical Medical Anthropology here researchers would focus on how economics and political issues of the society play significantly in the development or underdevelopment of various human health issues. Economics and politics are the major factors in the development/underdevelopment of human health. Also this approach deals about various social problems and effects of the media on the prevailing health care system in the given society. This theory further focuses how dominant western biomedicine discriminates poor and powerless in the society with respect to health. This approach also sheds light on pseudo-medicalism, medical exploitations, cost of treatment, Doctor's behavior, medicalizations process etc. This approach strongly believes in the notion that political and economical structure of the society basically responsible in establishing good/ bad health status of a community. Finally this approach criticizes the western health care system for being de-humanized. This theory also strongly criticizes about 'over medicalizations'.

Further sociological study also revealed how different social process and functions affects on health status of different social groups. In addition it helps to reveal how different social groups are experiencing health and illness. Supplementary it reveals layman's health beliefs, and illness behavior. Many studies have proved that layman's health beliefs vary according to social and cultural background. How a layman experiences, describes, justifies health and illness would be a vital point in understanding general conceptions of health and illness of the people. However certain medical sociologists have opined there will be a big difference in case of general societal opinion than an individualistic opinion about socio-cultural aspects of health and illness. Because individualistic determinants for health and illness cannot be simply generalized or add up to become the general social determinants s in a border way (Crimson, 2007).

Conclusion

A lot of changes have also occurred in the basic theory of illness ideology and sick role because of the availability of speedy healing techniques/treatments. The significance of the "sick role" has also been diluted because of globalizations. Globalization has affected even on the concept of traditional or folk medicine today. Today public health communication has been effective due to the availability of new and upcoming formal and informal channels. However, because of globalization western bio-medicine acting as a system of social control ruling out the role of sociological argument pertaining to health and illness. Report says today western part of the globe turning to use the non-biomedical healing system rather than modern medicines which leads sociology of health linens to aside.

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