

## Sociology of Mental Health

### Fourth Edition

*Sociology of Mental Health*, Fourth Edition, offers a comprehensive introduction to the impact of social forces on mental health. Fully updated throughout, it features eleven new chapters on such topics as immigration, the work–family interface, and LGBTQ+ mental health. Part I addresses the central theoretical developments in the sociology of mental health. Part II examines the social context of mental health, including the social structures, statuses, and positions that affect mental health. Part III moves to the system level, focusing on the structural forces that shape mental health care. Each chapter is written by leading scholars who have defined our understanding of the relationship between mental health and society. This book is designed for mental health students, educators, researchers, and providers, serving as an essential resource for anyone seeking to understand mental health and mental health delivery systems.

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# Sociology of Mental Health

## Theories, Social Contexts, and Systems

FOURTH EDITION

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We dedicate this volume to David Mechanic, Professor Emeritus at Rutgers University. Professor Mechanic is a leading scholar in mental health policy and wrote the introductory chapter for the first edition and the foreword to the second and third editions of *A Handbook for the Study of Mental Health: Social Contexts, Theories, and Systems* (1999, 2010, 2017). As he pointed out in his many books addressing policy, and in his 2017 foreword, “there is a great gap between what we know and what gets done.” This volume significantly advances sociological contributions to what we know about mental health. We hope it will also lead to getting more done in terms of not only innovative research, but in providing guidance for mental health reform.

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## Foreword

The origins of the sociology of mental health date to the late 1930s when sociologists Robert Faris and H. Warren Dunham published their landmark study of the distribution of mental disorders across diverse neighborhoods in Chicago. The field flourished in the 1950s and 1960s as sociologists focused on how social class and family dynamics influenced both the development of mental health conditions and patterns of treatment-seeking for them. During its initial period, the sociology of mental health was part of the Medical Sociology section that originated in 1955 within the American Sociological Association. In 1993 the Sociology of Mental Health became an independent section in the ASA, launching its own journal, *Society and Mental Health*, in 2011.

Since the 1970s, the stress process model associated with Leonard Pearlin has dominated research in the area. This model views generalized states of psychological distress as the combined result of stressful social arrangements and the coping resources that people use to respond to them. In particular, research using the stress paradigm shows that people often become distressed in three general contexts, which generally correspond to core traditions in classical sociological theory. These emphasize the importance of social stratification, social relationships, and cultural systems of meaning represented by the works of Marx, Durkheim, and Weber, respectively. The central achievement of the stress process model has been to show how such social factors often lead to distressed emotional states in normal, nondisordered people.

The sociology of mental health developed as an alternative to the dominant psychiatric model of mental illness. While psychiatrists think in terms of discrete mental disorders such as schizophrenia, bipolar conditions, autism, or ADHD, sociologists of mental health look at more generalized states such as depression, anxiety, and general well-being. Second, the psychiatric approach focuses on particular individuals in contrast to the sociological emphasis on social conditions, social roles, and varying rates of mental health across different groups. Third, the psychiatric model typically relies on studies of treated patients while sociologists of mental health generally examine untreated people in the general population. Finally, the psychiatric response to mental disorder usually employs drugs and/or psychotherapy, unlike sociologists who emphasize the need to change social conditions as a way of improving mental health. The sociological approach to mental health is thus dramatically distinct from the psychiatric view.

The sociology of mental health has been a vibrant and sophisticated subfield of sociology since it emerged but had little visibility outside the discipline itself. Remarkably, the few years between the publication of the third edition of this volume in 2017 and the current fourth edition have been marked by a seismic change in the visibility of mental health in the general

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culture. Initially stimulated by the dramatic social changes that the COVID-19 pandemic produced, social concerns about mental health vastly increased during this short period. These have many manifestations including, among many others, the influence of social media use on the mental health of children and adolescents; the growing awareness of the importance of mental health in all levels of the educational system; the flourishing of research on mental health differences among diverse racial, ethnic, and gender groups; the development of mental health days taken by the general population; the consideration of mental health reasons for transgender surgery; and the issuance of a report on loneliness from the Surgeon General. Far from its previous isolation, the sociology of mental health is now a core concern of contemporary society.

The chapters in this volume demonstrate the great value of a sociological approach to mental health. For the past several decades, mental health professionals, epidemiologists, policy-makers, advocacy groups, and the media have typically conflated studies of mental disorder and of mental health, combining these two separate phenomena into a single entity and calling both “mental disorders.” Instead of showing how individual problems reflect social conditions, the result was to reduce social problems to individual pathologies that come to be treated with medication or therapy. The fundamental message of the sociology of mental health, in contrast, is that much distress results from stressful social arrangements but is not a mental disorder. The chapters in this volume epitomize the advantages of studying mental health as a societal phenomenon that is distinct from mental pathology but is an intrinsic aspect of social life.

Allan V. Horwitz

## Preface

Mental health has become an everyday news event, with regular media attention to the “mental health crisis” and mental health a top priority in President Biden’s 2022 Presidential Address. The crisis in mental health has also received global attention with the World Health Organization’s 2022 *Mental Health Report: Transforming Mental Health for All*. There is widespread recognition that the source of the mental health crisis is not individual pathology, but society itself. Sociologists provide critical insights into how larger social forces shape our mental health. *Sociology of Mental Health: Theories, Social Contexts, and Systems* is the fourth iteration of *A Handbook for the Study of Mental Health: Social Contexts, Theories, and Systems* (1997, 2010, 2017). The new title is a reflection of the major reorganization of the text. Part I addresses the central theoretical developments in the sociology of mental health. Part II examines the social context of mental health, which includes the social structures, social statuses, and social positions that shape our mental health. Part III moves to the system level, with a focus on the larger structural forces that shape mental health care. Each chapter has been written by leading scholars who defined our understanding of the relationship between mental health and society. *Sociology of Mental Health* is geared toward the wider audience of mental health researchers, providers, educators, and students. It is an important resource and will guide future research as we work to confront the long-term consequences of the mental health crisis.

The authors of the chapters in *Sociology of Mental Health* are leading pioneers in the field; all active scholars who have provided original theoretical perspectives and comprehensive research. Many of these scholars are now emeritus professors, but still writing, conducting research, mentoring new generations of researchers, and extending our understanding of mental health, distress, and illness. We thank them for their many contributions and revisions of previous chapters. A second group of scholars maintain active research agendas within academia or research agencies and are leading scholars within the sociology of mental health and public health. We thank them for their original chapters which focus on emerging areas of research and innovative methodologies, and provide directions for future research. Their work builds upon the key conceptual frameworks developed by the pioneers in the discipline. We also have to thank Staci Batchelor and Miles Calloway who worked tirelessly to update the references for the volume. A unique feature of *Sociology of Mental Health* is that references are combined at the end, providing the reader with a comprehensive bibliography. Special thanks are due to Frances Hiller, who worked tirelessly with great patience and grace during the final stages of production.

The chapters in *Sociology of Mental Health* share a focus on key concepts, and the reader will see how these concepts are intertwined throughout the text and enhance our understanding

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of mental health. Some of these concepts are social context, social status, social support, stigma, stress, stratification, structure, and policy. Another key issue addressed by the chapters is measurement, or how we operationalize these concepts so as to understand how they operate together to influence mental health. The reader will learn a great deal about the data, research methods, and the complex research designs that characterize the sociology of mental health. All of this research provides important insights into how social structures can be changed to enhance mental health.