

---

# Stigmatisation Of People Who Suffered From The Mental Illness

C. Wright Mills' development of the sociological imagination encourages us to analyze the relationship between structure and agency. By applying this perspective to an individual's 'trouble' and a contemporary societal issue, it allows us to shape a comprehensive understanding and form a link between one another. Thus, through the use of the sociological imagination, we can critically explore the relationship between the personal trouble of mental illness and public issues surrounding it, such as stigmatization and the role that the media plays.

The sociological imagination is a term created by C. Wright Mills' who defined it as 'the vivid awareness of the relationship between personal experience and the wider society (Mills, 1959). The term is used in sociology to explain the relationship between personal troubles and public issues and to analyze how they impact each other. When applying the sociological imagination, Willis (2004) suggested that four sensibilities needed to be exercised, "historical, cultural, structural and critical", to gain a broader perspective.

The stigma which surrounds mental illness is one example that can be used to emphasize the connection between individuals and society. Stigmatization of mental illness has a long tradition within society and can be linked as far back to before there was a scientific understanding of mental health. The term stigma originated from the Ancient Greek word 'stigmata' which referred to the mark that was cut or burned into the skin of criminals, slaves or traitors, to visually recognize them as immoral individuals within the society. (Rossler, 2016) This then later lead to the religious traditions within Christianity and Judaism that portrayed mental illness as a punishment from God. Sufferers were thought to be possessed by the devil and were either burnt on the cross, tortured, or put into insane asylums - 'madhouses', where they would be kept as prisoners.

Although the mentally ill are no longer physically tortured, killed, or imprisoned, they still suffer stigmatization, stereotyping and social exclusion in today's society. It is currently estimated that around one billion people globally suffer from a mental illness or substance use disorder – that's 1 in 7 people. (Ritchie, 2019) These statistics are generally considered under-estimated due to mental health being typically underreported, which can be a result of the individuals feeling shame, isolation, and self-doubt which leads to a reluctance to ask for help or seek treatment. 'There is no country, society, or culture where people with mental illness have the same societal value as people without a mental illness.' (Rossler, 2016). For instance, a cross-sectional survey, which included participants from 27 countries was conducted to determine the global pattern of individuals with schizophrenia that experienced discrimination. Negative discrimination was experienced by nearly 50% of the participants in their relationships and up to 1/3 of the participants reported discrimination while finding and/or keeping a job. As many as 3/4 of the people with schizophrenia felt they needed to conceal their diagnosis. (Thornicroft, 2009) This data shows that mental illness stigma is negatively impacting individuals' wellbeing worldwide, therefore contributing to a global issue.

As well as having a deeply negative impact on the individual and society, mental illness stigma

---

---

also contributes to a high economic burden. A review of the economic impact of mental illness study was undertaken which included a total of 45 methodologically studies from Australia, New Zealand, UK, and Canada. The results indicated that individuals with mental illness had a greater chance of leaving school early, a lower probability of gaining full-time employment, and also had a reduced quality of life. The research from Canada also suggested that the total economic costs associated with mental illness would increase six-fold over the next 30 years with costs likely to exceed A\$2.8 trillion (based on 2015 Australian dollars). (Doran and Kinchin, 2017) Hence, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the impact it has on the individual and that relationship within the greater society. Another important contributor to the inaccurate and negatively portrayed stigmatization of mental illness is through various forms of mass media such as television news, entertainment, newspapers, and films. Rossler (2016), states that 'Media coverage of mental illnesses has been consistently and overwhelmingly negative and imprecise.' Two mass communications theories, Cultivation Theory (Gerbner & Gross, 1976) and Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) both work together to influence the perception of mental health stigma.

Cultivation theory suggests that people who spend a high frequency watching television are more likely to be influenced by the medias' views regarding mental illness. In conjunction, the social learning theory suggests that people behave and learn through observation from one another. Without a direct relationship or experience with people with mental illness, individuals rely solely on the media for their perceptions of those that have mental illnesses. Sadly, the media consistently portrays an individual with a mental illness as violent, unpredictable and only have themselves to blame for their illness. (Srivastava, 2018) This can then develop a misconception of mental illness and builds further stigma in society, which then increases personal issues of mental illness.

Despite the negative portrayal of mental illness in the media, the media can also have a significant role in promoting a more understanding and accepting perspective on mental illness. To reduce stigma and discrimination public media campaigns can be used to educate people in society, as well as foster a more positive community towards individuals with a mental illness. The World Health Organisation released a mental health action plan for 2013-2020 and stated that "Action can be taken to monitor, remove or prevent the use of images, messages or stories in the media that potentially would have negative consequences for persons suffering from mental and behavioral disorders." Other examples of campaigns used to fight stigma are "Open the doors" – the first-ever global program against stigma and discrimination against individuals with schizophrenia, and, "beyondblue"- provide support for Australians with anxiety, depression, and suicide prevention.

In conclusion, by applying Mills' sociological imagination we can form a firm connection between an individual's problem and the societal issue. By exploring these issues using Willis' historical, cultural, structural, and critical factors we can gain a broader perspective of the sociological imagination. As demonstrated through this essay it is evident that mental illness is not only a personal problem, but also affected by the wider society, through issues such as stigmatization, and the media's important influence.