HSS 250: The Social History of Mental Illness

Hans Pols (Homepage)

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Themes

This course will explore the social construction of mental illness throughout American history, from the eighteenth century until the present time. It will consider changing definitions of insanity, as well as conceptions of the sane and normal, changing attitudes towards the mentally ill, and the development of institutional, medical, and cultural responses to the mentally ill. The course will start with the establishment of mental asylums in the 18th and 19th centuries in America as the prime method of dealing with mental illness. The rise of psychiatry as a medical specialty in relation the asylum care will be investigated as well.

For this century, changing conceptions of mental illness, psychological problems, and the mind will be studied. The last few weeks will be devoted to more or less contemporary topics: the popularity of prozac and other pharmacological means to influence emotion and behavior; the repression of traumatic memories, as well as false memories and suggestive psychotherapy; and the current wave of multiple personality disorder. Each of these issues will be explored in historical context; we will search for patterns and explanations of change. A critical question to bear in mind is to which extent mental illness is socially constructed, how does society arrive at its concepts of and attitudes towards both emotional and behavioral disturbance as well as notions of adjustment and normality?

Required reading


Bulkpack.

The books are available at the Penn Book Center, 3726 Walnut St. The bulkpack is available at Wharton Reprographics, 400 Steinberg Dietrich Hall.

The final grade will be based on:
Two take-home exercises done during the course (both 15%)

A final take-home exam (short paper) (40%)

Class presentation (20%)

Participation (10%)

1. Sept. 10. Orientation

Orientation, first (overview) lecture.


There are several interesting movies that have mental illness and/or mental hospitals as their theme, for example: One flew over cuckoo's nest; An angel at my table; I never promised you a rose garden; Psycho; Awakenings; Rain man. What function do mentally ill people have in Hollywood movies?

2. Sept. 17. Mental illness as experience

Based on the movie and the book, we will discuss the experience of mental illness and changing definitions of mental illness. The following questions are central: To which extent is mental illness defined by social, and to which extent by medical categories; what determines changing social reactions to mental illness; what is the healing effect (if any) of mental hospitals; why has the mental hospital become so central in our approach to the problem of mental illness?

Sheehan, Is there no place on earth for me?

Further reading:

There is a great number of autobiographical and literary accounts in which mental illness figures prominently. To mention a few:


3. Sept. 24. The place of psychology and psychiatry in American society

A long time ago, it was said that madmen could roam free through society. Physicians were not particularly concerned with their care; nor was there any movement to promote their incarceration. Initially, the mad were locked up together with the idle, vagrants, criminals, and other non-productive individuals. Later, physicians singled out the mentally ill as being properly cared for in an asylum under medical jurisdiction. This week we will investigate these transitions.


Presentation:

Further reading:


Moral treatment, the first effective method of asylum management, had been developed by Pinel and Tuke. Its roots were religious rather than medical. In America, it coexisted with more somatically oriented therapeutic regimes. During this week, we will investigate how moral treatment replaced brutal and heroic forms of treatment; how the principles of moral treatment were implemented; how it functioned in practice; and how the medical profession adopted it for its own ends.


Andrew Scull, "Moral treatment reconsidered." In: *Social order/mental disorder*.

Video fragment: The madness of King George.

5. Oct. 8. Patients and families

With the establishment of large State Asylums, asylum care for the insane became increasingly accepted in American society. More and more patients were committed from the middle of the 19th century on. This led to problems with overcrowding and asylum management.


Gerald Grob, "Realities of asylum life." In: *The mad among us*.


First exercise: take home. Due Oct. 22.

6. Oct. 15 -- Fall break

7. Oct. 22. The female malady

Women have often been considered more susceptible to mental illness and a wide variety of mental complaints. This week we will investigate a number of analyses around this issue.


Presentation:


Video: *Asylum*. With Gerald Grob.

Further reading:


8. Oct. 29. Therapeutic pessimism and neurasthenia

With the overcrowding of mental hospitals, possibilities for treatment and therapeutics. Darwinian theories on degeneration became popular among psychiatrists. At the same time, neurologists find occupations outside of mental hospitals in the cure of the vague mental complaints of a more affluent clientele.


Presentation:

Max Nordau, *Degeneration.* New York: Appleton, 1905, chapter 1: "Fin-de-siècle."


Further reading:


9. Nov. 5. Freud in America, or, psychiatry as a cure for social ills

Few historians dispute that the United States was the country were psychoanalysis became the most popular and successful. There is, however, less agreement about the nature of psychoanalysis-American-style: for some, it represents the ultimate banalization and commercialization of its roots. For others, American psychoanalysts developed the theory to its natural consequences.


Presentations:

Showalter, chapter 8: "Women and psychiatric modernism."


10. Nov. 12. Trauma and recovery: The war experience

The second World War created a new awareness of the influence of severe psychological stress on mental health. At the current time, the debate has been revived around the new diagnosis of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) which is still controversial.
Showalter, chapter 7: Male hysteria


Hans Pols, "'Their mothers' sons': War neuroses, maladjusted veterans, and overprotective mothers." Manuscript.


Presentation:

The schizophrenogenic mother. Readings from Edward A. Strecker, *Their mothers' sons* (1946) and Frieda Fromm-Reichmann on the role of the mother in the family.


Spock and advice to mothers. Nancy Pottishman Weiss, "Mother, the invention of necessity: Dr. Benjamin Spock's *Care for Infant and Child.*" In *Growing Up in America: Children in Historical Perspective*, edited by N. Ray Hiner and Joseph M. Hawes.


11. Nov. 19. Somatic treatment old and new: From lobotomy to prozac

Prozac is, at this moment, America's favorite psychoactive drug. Its advent coincides with a somatic turn in psychiatric thinking. For some, prozac is a cure-all; for others mere opium for a dissatisfied people. Patients force their physicians to prescribe the drug for them while researchers find ever more applications.


Video: Moving back into the light. Propaganda video paid for by Eli Lylli, the makers of Prozac.

Presentation:

Valenstein, "Bizarre illnesses, bizarre treatment," and "Anything that holds out hope should be tried." Same source.
12. Nov. 26. Trauma, repressed/false memories, and Multiple Personality Disorder

The debate regarding the recovery of repressed memories with the aid of hypnosis or intensive psychotherapy is far from over. Counter-claims about manipulative psychotherapists and false memories are abound. This week we will have a closer look at a number of recent developments in this debate.

Judith Lewis Herman, Trauma and recovery: The aftermath of violence, from domestic abuse to political terror. New York: Basic Books, 1992. Introduction, and "A forgotten history."

Ian Hacking, Rewriting the soul: Multiple personality and the sciences of memory. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1995. Chapter 1, "Is it real?" Chapter 2, "What is it like?"


Presentation:


Propaganda material from the False Memory Foundation.

13. Dec. 3. The psychologization/psychiatrization of American society (?)

Several cultural critics have argued that American society has become atomized and individualized—a process started by the forces of capitalism but strongly aided by the psychological professions. As a consequence, ties to the community and social cohesion have been lost; a predicament for which psychotherapy hardly can offer a panacea. During this last session, we will investigate these claims.


Handing out of final examination.

Questions about exam, course, wrap-up, review of course, etc. (Attendance is voluntary).