Sociology of Health and Illness
Three main themes

- The social Production of Health and Illness
- The Social Organization of Health care
- Contemporary Critical Debates
1. Explain why and how sociologists study medicine and health and illness.
2. Discuss the study of medicine and health and illness from a symbolic interactionist perspective.
3. Discuss the study of medicine and health and illness from the functionalist perspective.
4. Describe the sick role and some of the social factors that underlie this role.
5. Discuss the study of medicine and health and illness from the conflict perspective.
6. Discuss the professionalization of medicine and the factors that made medicine the only legal monopoly in the United States.
7. Trace changes in patterns and trends of health and illness in the United States.
Learning Objectives (II)

- 8. Discuss issues in health care today, such as access, inequality, malpractice and fraud, depersonalization, and sexism.
- 9. Explain what is meant by the medicalization of societies (e.g., childbirth, balding, weight, wrinkles, acne, anxiety, depression, a sagging chin, small breasts, the inability to achieve orgasm), and discuss the issues of medically assisted suicide and euthanasia.
- 10. Evaluate controversies over measures to slow the spiraling cost of health care.
- 11. Identify the major threats to health in the United States, and assess ways to reduce those threats.
- 12. Describe some alternatives to our present health care system, and assess the problems of implementing those alternatives.
The Social Production of Health and Illness

- Health: A state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease and infirmity.
- Disease: biophysiological phenomena -- changes in and malfunctions of the human body
- Illness: the experience of being sick or diseased.
- People feel ill in the absence of disease
The Social Production of Health and Illness (continued)

- differentials in IMR b/w racial groups in the US and b/w different countries
- *social class and mental illness
- *economic condition and mental illness
- *AIDS epidemic
- *Nevada and Utah. While similar in many ways, these populations have very different patterns of death.

Explanation: the lifestyles of each of the populations and that these lifestyle differences are the result of the cultural environments, values, and norms of each of the populations (Fuchs)
The Social Production of Health and Illness (continued)

- Social networks and stress have been found to be associated with the development of physical diseases (e.g., coronary heart disease, hypertension) as well as psychological disorders (e.g., depression) (Berkman and Syme 1979)

- Social class disparity:
  - People in lower social class → poor housing, crowding, racial factors, low income, poor education and unemployment → poor nutrition, poor medical care (either through non-availability or non-utilization of resources), strenuous conditions of employment in non-hygienic settings, and increased exposure to noxious agents.
Disabling environments

1. Although some occupations have high health risks that are evident, others have risks that become evident years after people have worked at what they thought was a safe occupation.

2. The greenhouse effect may lead to a warming of the earth, which in turn may change the globe's climate, melt its polar ice caps, and flood the earth's coastal shores.
   a. use of fluorocarbon gases is threatening the ozone shield, the protective layer of the earth's upper stratosphere that screens out a high proportion of the sun's ultraviolet rays.
   b. In humans, high-intensity ultraviolet radiation causes skin cancer.
Disabling environments

- At times, physicians and government officials have carried out misguided, foolish, and callous experiments that have jeopardized people's health and welfare.
- 1. In the Tuskegee syphilis experiment (Alabama), 399 African-American men suffering from syphilis were left untreated for forty years so that the Public Health Service could observe what happened.
- 2. In the cold war radiation experiment, soldiers were ordered to march through an area just after an atomic bomb had been detonated to discover if individuals could withstand fallout without any radiation equipment (Nevada).
- 3. When those in official positions believe that they can play God and determine who shall live and who shall die, the poor and powerless are exploited by being used as subjects in these kind of experiments.
The germ theory of disease

- Each disease is caused by a specific bacterium or agent (the basis of scientific medicine) and human body is the medium for disease.
- Implicitly denied a role to social and economic factors in disease causation.
- In the absence of a verifiable clinical entity, the patient was by definition (health is the absence of disease) pronounced healthy. His/her protestations of feeling ill became a matter for the psychiatrist.
Sociological Imagination

C. Wright Mills

- our ability to break ourselves free from our particular circumstances and see our social world in a new light.
- Example
- Why are people without health insurance?
- Need to examine both micro (personal) and macro (structural/institutional) factors
C. Wright Mills was a controversial figure in sociology because of his analysis of the role of the power elite in U.S. society. Today, his analysis is taken for granted by many sociologists and members of the public.
Sociological Theories in health and illness

- The symbolic interactionist perspective looks at the cultural meaning of health and illness, and how these are shaped by values and lifestyles.
The Symbolic Interactionist Perspective (continued)

- The role of culture in defining health and illness
  a. In Western culture a person who hears voices and sees visions might be locked up.
  b. In a tribal society, such an individual might be a shaman, the healing specialist who attempts to control the spirits thought to cause a disease or injury.
  c. Suppose you look in the mirror and see strange blotches covering your face and chest. You rush to a doctor. The doctor said that you had a disease and needed treatment.
  d. In one South American tribe this skin condition is so common few individuals who are not spotted are seen as the unhealthy ones. They are even excluded from marriage because they are sick (Ackernecht 1947; Zola 1983).
Functional Theory

- Society is a system composed of interrelated parts.
- Each element contributes to society's equilibrium.
- Functions can be either manifest (intended) or latent (unintended).
- Functionalists examine how controlling the sick role meets a society's needs.
Conflict theory

- Was founded on the work of Marx
- Posits that society is composed of groups and individuals competing for scarce resources, such as wealth, power, prestige, and privilege.
- Conflict theorists evaluate the effects of global stratification on health care and the disparity in health outcome within a society.
DEFINITION OF MEDICAL SOCIOLOGY

- Straus (1957): Sociology of medicine vs. sociology in medicine
- **Sociology of medicine**: study of medicine to illuminate sociological concern (e.g., patient-practitioner relationships, the role of profession in society). How sociologist look at the social organization of health care.
- **Sociology in medicine**: solving medical problems (e.g., sociological causes of disease and illness, reasons for delay in seeking medical care)
Institutionalization of medical sociology (MS)

- In 1959, MS became a formal section of the American Sociological Association.
- It publishes the Journal of health and social behavior.
The development of medical sociology

- According to Rodney Coe:
  a. the shift in patterns of morbidity and mortality to lifestyle-related diseases
  b. increasing attention to preventive medicine and public health
  c. the increasing complexity of the health care system
Social Organization of Health care

- **Health Care Professions**
  The emergence of allopathic medicine (medical training that leads to the degree [Doctor of Medicine](#)) as the dominant force in American medical systems, the culture of modern biomedicine, socialization of medical students into that culture, changes in medical education and medical practice over time, and other healing professions besides allopathic physicians.

- **Health Care Systems**
  The American health care system, its history, its organization, its policies and its problems, and compare to health care systems in other countries.

- Medical model focuses on treating disease, ignoring the social environment.