



DE-CONSTRUCTING MENTAL ILLNESS: A FOUCAULDIAN ANALYSIS

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Abstract

The present paper attempts to deconstruct the notion of mental illness from a Foucauldian perspective. Foucault is considered to be a prominent figure in critical theory. The assumption of critical theory is that theory and practice share a dialectical relation. Foucault's concern was largely related with the notions of power, knowledge and discourse. His popular book, 'Madness and Civilisation' raised several pertinent questions that remain almost unchangeable and of grave importance even in the present times. The focus of this paper is to study the underlying themes of power, oppression and alienation in Foucault's 'Madness and Civilisation' from the perspective of critical psychology. Attempt has been made to understand psychological distress as a socially embedded phenomenon. Some questions raised in this process of meaning making are: How is mental illness constructed? How do social factors contribute to the construction of mental illness? Is there a temporal dimension to mental illness?

Keywords: Foucault, Critical Theory, Mental-illness.

Genesis of Critical Theory: The Frankfurt School

'The nature of theory is to undo, through a contesting of premises and postulates, what you thought you knew, so the effects of theory are not predictable'

(Culler, 1997)

The term critical theory was applied first to the work of the Frankfurt School. This group of leftist scholars gathered at the Institute for Social Research at the University of Frankfurt in 1923, many later emigrated to other countries because of the threat of Hitler and the Nazis. The critical theory that they developed was influenced by the work of several thinkers-Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Freud, Marx, and others. Central to the Frankfurt School's critical approach, however, is Marx's method of examining ideologies and showing their short comings. Some leading figures in the Frankfurt School were Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Jurgen Habermas, Foucault, Judith Butler, Giddens and others.

It is a vast and complex field of intertwined work that links contemporary poststructuralism, social constructionism, postcolonial theory, phenomenological hermeneutics, feminist psychoanalysis, critical race theory, multiculturalism, and so on. The critical theorists and philosophers emphasise on understanding how human beings construct 'reality' through a complex interaction of consciousness, language, power, and embodied social living. Critical theorists assert that theory and practice stand in dialectical relation to each other. Theorists use the term praxis to refer to this ideal synthesis in which theory informs practice and vice versa. The idea of praxis contrasts with the primary operative modes of dominant psychology.

Fox, Prilleltensky & Austin (2010) in their book, 'Critical Psychology: An Introduction' assert that, concerns that critical theorising raise about mainstream development theories (for example, those of Piaget or Erikson)-

- What does it mean to think of earlier or late stages as inferior to others? Whose perspective does this evaluation privilege? Who gains power over whom?
- What is the social scenario in which development takes place?
- When a theory defines specific stages or issues as built into the nature of social existence, does it impose a specific cultural frame on humanity in general?
- How can we reconcile a developmental perspective that points to increasing abilities as one matures with the idea that in modern societies we become increasingly alienated from nature and ourselves as we become socialised?
- What do institutions do to children or adults who do not move through the designated stages in 'normal' ways? How do schools, workplaces, and families treat such children?
- Do stage models have unanticipated practical implications in the lives of people to which they apply?

Doing theory critically means,

- Exposing and being suspicious of the assumptions that fuel a theory, especially when these assumptions reflect power relations and social processes that foster oppression or exclusion. Beyond exposing hidden assumptions in others' theorising, being clear as possible about one's own assumptions, privileges, and values is also part of doing theory critically.
- Questioning the analytic move that isolates individuals from their life contexts (cultural, historical, economic,



familial, institutional, and so on) in order to explain their behaviour solely in terms of internal or immediate social factors.

- Looking hard for what has been hidden by or left out of concepts that purport to explain a certain phenomenon.
- Evaluating not just the adequacy or accuracy of a theory in relation to the objects or processes it explains, but the social effects of the theory itself as it is implemented.

Biographical Sketch of Foucault

Michel Foucault (1926-1984) is one of the most important figures in critical theory. He was born in the city of Poitiers, west-central France, as the second of three children to a prosperous and socially conservative upper-middle-class family. He studied at the Lycée Henri-IV and then at the École Normale Supérieure, where he developed an interest in philosophy and came under the influence of Jean Hyppolite and Louis Althusser. His theories have been concerned largely with the concepts of power, knowledge and discourse. The impact of his work has been felt across a wide range of disciplinary fields, from Sociology and Anthropology to English studies and History. His theoretical work has caused heated and very productive debate from 1960s and 1970s. His work is not simply concerned to analyse social conditions, but is at the same time, an analysis of the bases on which we think about analysing social conditions.

Some of his major works are as follows:

Table-1

Year	Book	Thrust area
1967	Madness and Civilization	Development of the distinction between madness and reason
1972	The Archaeology of Knowledge	Discourse determines the reality that we perceive
1973	The Order of Things	Radical questioning of the stability of the individual subject or self
1975	Discipline and Punish	Changes in the way that societies punish those they consider to be criminals
1976	History of Sexuality, Vol.I.	Categorisation in the 19th century of certain women as suffering from hysteria
1984	History of Sexuality, Vol.II	The way that homosexuality has been viewed in different societies and at different periods

Understanding Madness and Sanity

Foucault analysed the construction of the notion of mental illness. Although most of Foucault's academic training was in philosophy, after his first degree he trained for a higher degree in psychology and a diploma in pathological psychology, and he worked for a short period in a mental hospital and psychologically assessed prisoners; this interest in psychology persisted in many of his works, most notably in *Madness and Civilisation* (1967). He himself suffered persistently from depression and attempted suicide on several occasions.

He tried to demonstrate that rather than madness being a stable condition, mental illness should be seen as 'the result of social contradictions in which humans are historically alienated'. These social contradictions change from era to era. He saw madness as being constructed at a particular point in history; madness is constituted to ring-fence reason or sanity and to create clear distinctions between madness and sanity. Madness is also constructed as part of a wider process of the development of modernity, and hence as a part of a process whereby the *épistémé* moves from explanations based on religion, to those based on medical analysis. Foucault's method in analysing the history of madness is 'rather than asking what in a given period, is regarded as sanity or insanity, as mental illness or normal behaviour, instead ask how these divisions are operated'. He is interested in how madness is kept in place, what tools are used to keep madness in circulation as a category, and what processes are used to distinguish between the mad and the sane. Behaviour such as hearing imaginary voices, hallucinating, hysteria, speaking in tongues, which would, in other periods of history, have been seen as possessions by spirits or God, or visions inspired by angels, instead of being valued and sanctified by the Church, became something which needed to be treated by confinement and the administering of drugs.

"in the Renaissance, madness was present everywhere and mingled with every experience by its images or its dangers. During the classical period, madness was shown, but on the other side of the bars; if present, it was at a distance, under the eyes of a reason that no longer felt any relation to it and would not compromise itself by too close a resemblance."

(Foucault, 1999)

Foucault identifies a shift in the way that madness is conceptualised. He also shows that during the Classical period, rather than madness being considered as an illness, it was seen as a manifestation of animality. This implies that, if madness is



considered to be the epitome of animality then the only cure is discipline and brutality to curb these passions; if madness is considered to be the result of chemical imbalance in the brain, or of repression of trauma during childhood, then the only cure is the use of drugs to restore the chemical balance, and/or therapy. He confronts us with the strange treatments of madness which developed in the eighteenth century, when madness was seen as due to imbalance within the system of humours. Patients were given blood transfusions, were shocked by sudden immersion in cold water, were forced to ingest bitters. This focus on the strangeness of the way that madness was treated in the past forces us to consider the strangeness of the way that we treat mental illness, with madness now functioning as a pathology, treated by confinement, drugs or the use of electric shock therapy.

Foucault examines, in *Madness and Civilisation*, the way that institutional changes, such as the availability of houses of confinement, contributed to the development of such a distinction. Foucault describes the way that the institutionalisation of those considered to be insane developed from the practice in the 12th century of confining those who were suffering from the highly infectious disease leprosy. Leper houses were built in Europe from the twelfth century onwards to prevent leprosy from spreading to the rest of the population. In the seventeenth century, hospitals which had been built to house lepers were taken over to be used as asylums for those who were categorised as 'socially useless'; this included the idle, the poor, those who had scandalised their families, together with those whose behaviour was considered to be in any way abnormal. What strikes Foucault about this process of confinement, which he terms 'the great confinement', is just how many people were confined: he claims that 'more than one out of every hundred inhabitants of the city of Paris found themselves confined. In the nineteenth century, these houses of confinement began to be used solely for the confining of those who were considered insane. In *Madness and Civilisation*, Foucault argues that:

"the asylum was substituted for the [leper] house, in the geography of haunted places as in the landscape of the moral universe. The old rites of excommunication were revived, but in the world of production and commerce. It was in these places of doomed and despised idleness, in this space invented by a society which had derived an ethical transcendence from the law of work, that madness would appear and soon expand until it had annexed them. . . . The nineteenth century would consent, would even insist that to the mad and to them alone be transferred these lands on which a hundred and fifty years before, men had sought to pen the poor, the vagabond, the unemployed."

(Foucault, 1999)

Foucault argues that this should not be seen as a simple improvement of conditions: 'the asylum no longer punished the madman's guilt but it did more, it organised that guilt.' The diagnosis of mental illness seems also to imply a failing on the part of the individual for which they can be blamed. Foucault claims that:

"the asylum . . . is not a free realm of observation, diagnosis and therapeutics; it is a juridical space from where one is accused, judged and condemned, and from which one is never released except by the version of this trial in psychological depth, that is by remorse. Madness will be punished in the asylum, even if it is innocent outside of it. For a long time to come, and until our own day at least, it is imprisoned in a moral world."

(Foucault, 1999)

This has led to the stigmatisation of mental illness, even when it is clear that psychological damage is the result of social conditions, sexual abuse or poverty, the individual is held to be at fault or to blame.

Foucault's focus on the changing way in which the distinction between madness and sanity is made, and the invention of mental illness, rather than on the individual subject makes us analyse the process of subjection and resistance at work in the relation between institutions, the government, the family and individual subjects.

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