Public mental health and comparative health research: between social theory and psychiatric epidemiology.

Prof Piet Bracke
Ghent University, Belgium.

The study of the societal roots of population mental health goes back as far as Durkheim's Le Suicide (1897), and every subsequent generation of social scientists (Faris & Dunham, 1939; Brenner, 1973, just to name a few) contributed to the development of the field of social change and mental health.

Part of the sociological attention for mental health and well-being was rooted in the 19th century's romanticists' discontent with self and society. The classical and contemporary social theorists’ views on the disconnection between culture and the ‘real’ self resembles the more recent evolutionary psychological assumptions about the maladaptation of psychobiological mechanisms to contemporary societal arrangements. In contrast to these perspectives, contemporary psychiatric epidemiological research has a strongly underdeveloped conception about the nexus between society and population mental health. Both perspectives, the social-theory-and-societal-discontent approach and the biomedical psychiatric epidemiological approach, have drawbacks. Starting from the pitfalls of the aforementioned perspectives, we explore the challenges that are posed by the development of a macro sociology of population mental health.

Recently, this research domain received renewed attention of scholars inside as well as outside sociology. The rise of multi-country, multilevel datasets containing health related information, as well as the growing attention for the fundamental social causes of health and illness (Link 2008), and the focus on population as opposed to individual health (Rose 2001) contributed to the revival of comparative public mental health research. Based on findings from our recent research, we illustrate how taking the context into account is vital when exploring the social roots of mental health and illness. In addition, we demonstrate how we can liberate a few so-called ‘control variables’ in risk factor epidemiology – e.g. gender, education, and age – from their suppressed status by linking them to core concepts of sociology. With our research we hope to further the development of a macrosociology of public mental health.

References