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'*
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> (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 Hokheimer, 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,