Module:
Mental Health in the Community

Week 1
A history of 'madness': Deinstitutionalisation to community care

Topic in Action 1.1
A brief history of 'madness' – Part 1 of 2

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Lecture transcript

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OK, well, what I'm talking about today is what I've called a 'brief history of madness'. My scope is how we've understood and tackled madness from early times to the era of deinstitutionalisation in the 1950s. I start with the disclaimer, because I'm a psychiatrist, not a historian, I'm English and depended on English language sources. And I have to say, there's a lot to read. In my defence, England is by far the best documented country in terms of mental health care over the long term. Though, as far as I can tell, it was entirely peripheral until the 1600s.

Now, mental disorder has always been seen as a part of medicine, or what we've understood as medicine at the time, and doctors have always claimed expertise in treating mental disorder.

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You will, in fact, find a lot about management of mental disorder in large-scale textbooks of the history of medicine: for example, Bynum and Porter's Companion Encyclopedia of the History of Medicine.

Now, there are a number of general histories-- in fact, quite a few general histories-- of madness or, perhaps, psychiatry available. So Andrew Scull writes Madness in Civilization from the perspective of a sceptical sociologist whilst Michael Stone, a psychiatrist, writes about Healing the Mind, provides us with a history of psychiatry.

Historians have also weighed in. So Edward Shorter, for example, produced A History of Psychiatry from what he termed the era of the asylum to the age of Prozac. That's, say, over the past 200 years or so.

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Now, what you don't hear much in the literature is the views or the voice of the service user. But a number of books do provide this. For example, Roy Porter, a social historian, has done this for the 18th century in his book, Mind-forg'd Manacles, and, over the much longer term in his The Faber Book of Madness, which has quotes dating back a very long time from both specialists, but also the person themselves.

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Now, there's quite a lot of literature on the early asylum era. So that, for example, Donnelly's Managing the Mind describes the late 18th century/ early 19th century asylum. Similar periods were described in detail by Andrew Scull in Museums of Madness. There's an interesting book in relation to George III who went mad, in fact, twice. And his illness stimulated what was called the 'mad business'. That metaphor is also apparent in Parry-Jones' book, The Trade in Lunacy.

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We also have histories relating to particular institutions like a book called Bedlam (or the Bethlem). And, finally, we have contemporary sources: so Samuel Tuke's account of the foundation of an early years of The Retreat in York is a very valuable source of what people were thinking at the time.

We've got institutional histories. So that, for example, is a big two volume history of British psychiatry up to 1991, edited by Hugh Freeman and German Berrios, which is a multi-author book.

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Now there's problems with looking at history. Firstly, the facts are often difficult to establish-- so Scull states that Donnelly got his facts wrong. Ideas are complex and open to interpretation, and ideologies often underlie historical accounts in ways that aren't obvious, necessarily. So what Scull says about things from a sociological perspective is very different from what Stone says as a psychiatrist.

Another danger is what you might call presentism-- looking at the past without understanding the intellectual, social, and cultural context. Some authors are, perhaps, guilty of what's in the business called the whig interpretation of history, a story of triumphal progress from ignorance of the past to current knowledge.

Finally, as I've already hinted at, there is elitism. We only tend to have accounts of the elite voice in the historical record.

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Now, there is a long, long history of writings about madness. So if you look at the Old Testament, King's Saul, 1 Samuel 16:14, 'the Spirit of the Lord had forsaken Saul, and at times an evil spirit from the Lord would seize him suddenly.' And 'whenever a spirit from God came upon Saul, David would take his harp and play on it so that Saul found relief, he recovered and the evil spirit left him alone.'

So what do we get from that? Clearly, Saul's causation of his problems were seen as spiritual. However, the treatment - David with his harp, lute - is a psychological treatment. And also, George Stein has argued that what we're seeing here is a description of bipolar disorder.

Now the idea of madness and the sacred is also apparent in early Greek thought. So the god or demigod, Asclepius, was worshiped in temples for healing throughout-- through ritual and sacrifice, but also a balanced diet, massage, sleep and warm baths were available for people with mental health problems.

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One of the most famous voices of ancient medicine is Hippocrates - or, perhaps better, The Hippocratic Corpus - and there's a famous quote of Hippocrates: 'From the brain and from the brain only arise our pleasures, joys, as well as our sorrows, pain, grief, and tears. It is the same organ that makes us mad or delirious, inspires us with dread and fear, brings us sleeplessness and aimless anxiety.' The Hippocratic Corpus describes disorders such as mania, paranoia, hysteria, and melancholia in ways that are probably still reasonably well-recognisable. Now the

Hippocratic medicine was based on the concept of humours, and disease or disorder being due to an imbalance in humours. Four of them-- black bile, yellow bile, phlegm, and blood; and there's a nice Mediaeval picture of the four humours. So we have passion associated with the sanguine temperament; sadness associated with the melancholic temperament; indifference, the phlegmatic temperament; anger, the choleric temperament. Now, mania was seen to be due to too much yellow bile. Melancholia was seen as being due to an accumulation of black bile.

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Now, humourism provides a physical explanation of disease. It implies physical treatments aimed at restoring the balance of the humours. Now those treatments included blood letting, enemas, vomiting, and starvation. Humourism provided the dominant explanatory framework in medicine from Hippocrates, that's Greek, through the Roman Galen and the Islamic tradition into early modern times. It wasn't the only approach.

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So in the traditions of Epicureanism and Stoicism, we see philosophy as a cure for the anxieties of the soul. This tradition rejects humourism and any physical treatments. The physician Asclepiades prescribed diet, exposure to light, massage, physical exercise, herbs, and wine for people with mental disorders.

Cicero, in the Tusculum Disputations wrote, 'there is a medicine for the soul, philosophy... we must exert ourselves with all our resources and strength so as to be able to heal ourselves.' Cicero was, of course, very much an elite voice.

Now the physician Soranus of Ephesus described potential causes of mania. So we get 'continual sleeplessness, excesses of venery, anger, grief, anxiety, or superstitious fear, a shock or blow, intense straining of the senses and the mind in study, business, or other ambitious pursuits.' And most of these, of course, are psychological causes.

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Now, in terms of treatments, Plato, rather bluntly in The Republic, stated 'people whose psychological constitution is warped should be put to death'. There are, in fact, other accounts of Plato's views on mental disorder.

Celsus living between 25 BC and 50 AD, again, rather bluntly says, 'if it is the mind that deceives the madman, he is best treated by torture, fetters, or flogging.' But even in his world, there was room for psychological treatments. For melancholy, for example, soft music, warm baths. And Celsus provides a case study of a wealthy man who lived in fear of starvation. He says, 'His attendants announced pretended legacies to him to relieve his anxieties until he recovered his reason.'

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So if you look back, I think it's fair to say you've got three broad explanations for madness in the ancient world: madness as disorder the brain, as in Hippocrates; as a reaction to circumstances or moral weakness or failing; and, finally, as a spiritual or demonic possession. The spiritual approach is usually seen as bad, but, potentially in some traditions, the spiritual position can provide an insight into something really good. Now here, I'm tempted to pause a moment and ask, as we look forward, what's going to be new in terms of explanations.

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Now let's move on to the Islamic world, which, in many ways, was the successor of the Greek and Roman world. In that world, hospitals were founded called bimaristans, and there's a famous

bimaristan in Aleppo built in 1354 as a charitable hospital for the citizens of Aleppo.

The Islamic world incorporated Persian and Roman learning. It's the source of most of our knowledge of Greek and Roman texts and it was a very sophisticated and urban society, and provided a model for early institutions for vulnerable people that was copied, in fact, by the Western world. The bimaristan in Aleppo, obviously, did manage people with mental illness and even had rooms which were barred for violent patients.

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If we move to the Western world, there is an example of approaches to healing in the story of Saint Dymphna and the Wisdom of Geel. Saint Dymphna, as legend goes, was a 17th century Irish princess who fled her father from Ireland to Geel-- in present-day Belgium-- and was found and murdered by her father who was, in the description, clearly mentally unwell. A shrine developed and she became the patron saint of people with nervous or mental disorders.

And people with mental disorders would be brought to the Church of Saint Dymphna for healing. From the early Middle Ages, many would stay in homes in the surrounding area in a form of boarding-out paid for by their relatives. Saint Dymphna, the cult of Saint Dymphna, is still recognised in the Catholic church. For example, you can buy prayer cards to Saint Dymphna, which say, for example, 'you have willed that Saint Dymphna should be invoked as patroness of nervous and mental disease'.