

### Functionalist theory of health and illness

According to the functionalist perspective, health is vital to the stability of the society. Therefore, sickness is a sanctioned form of deviance. Patients must perform the “sick role” in order to be perceived as legitimately ill and to be exempt from their normal obligations.

#### Criticisms

- Accessing the sick role is not possible for everyone. For example, working-class patients may not take the time off work to access the sick role due to the need to focus on earning a wage to support the family.
- Some illnesses are long-term illnesses or incurable, and therefore some people may choose not to enter the sick role and instead carry on as best they can.
- **Illich** argued that going to seek medical advice and following it often leads to more serious problems than the patient suffered in the first place. Illich called this ‘iatrogenesis’, meaning doctor-induced illness. Once areas of life have become medicalised it becomes increasingly difficult to deal with a stressful life event other than by seeking help from a doctor.

### Interactionist theory of health and illness

The interactionist approach to health and ill-health focuses on what happens in individual’s life. Interactionists are concerned about the effect of labelling someone as ill as this could affect an individual’s self-esteem, self-image as well as their family and social life. Interactionists would not be concerned about the health and social care system itself. Instead, they focus on the relationship between doctors and patients and how a person might be labelled by such professionals and then treated by society because of this.

Critics state that the interactionist approach ignores the effects of social inequality for health and illness. It also fails to acknowledge where definitions, designations, illness and labels of deviance come from, nor does it identify who makes the rules as to what is defined as illness and disease and why.

### Marxist theory of health and illness

Marxists believe that our definitions of health and ill health are determined by the **bourgeoisie**. Marxists believe that doctors hide the real social causes of illness (poverty, class inequality, etc.) by focusing on the individual and their physical symptoms. For Marxists, health problems are linked to the workplace or process of production, where workers may suffer from industrial diseases and injuries or stress-related ill health. Income and wealth are major determinants of people’s standard of living – where they live, their access to educational opportunities, their access to health care, their diet and their recreational opportunities. The **proletariat** will experience inequalities in terms of accessing adequate housing, healthcare, education and healthy diet.

#### Criticisms

- Marxist approaches have been criticised for their rather crude analysis that sees medicine as a means only of making a profit and keeping workers fit for employers.
- It fails to recognise that doctors, medical technology and the medical pharmaceutical industry can all make major contributions to improving the length and quality of people’s lives.
- Marxists also fail to consider that those in the upper classes can also experience stress-related illness and unhealthy workplaces (e.g. banking, investment, politics). Therefore, this is not limited to the proletariat.

### Feminist theory of health and illness

Feminists argue that males are dominating the medical profession, and this has an adverse impact on women, such as pregnancy and childbirth being regarded as a medical issue, sometimes even as an illness rather than a natural process. Feminists believe that the exploitation of women by a patriarchal society has contributed to the fact that more women suffer from depression, anxiety and stress than men. Critics would argue that feminists fail to acknowledge the strides forward that have been made in terms of empowering women in the birthing process, e.g. birth plans and choice. They also fail to acknowledge the higher rates of male suicide in comparison to female.