

Re-Conceptualizing Mental Health

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Abstract—Though psychological well-being is an intrinsic and inseparable part of holistic conceptions of health, it has always been accorded a very low priority among public health concerns. The belief that population health is influenced by non-medical and non-behavioural characteristics is shared – to varying degrees – by those working within the arc of public health approach to understand and promote health. However, with regards to mental health this conceptualisation seems to focus more on individual ‘discrete events’ and behavioural aspects while progressively undermining other social, political, economic, cultural and more importantly structural underpinnings. Social determinants of mental health and well-being refer to macro-social influences that affect psychological well-being, such as poverty, caste, gender and religious affiliation that would prove very difficult for an individual to alter. These factors are found to be more prominent and prevalent in low and middle-income countries. In Indian context, interestingly the role of socio-economic and political forces in determining the quality of psychological well-being is largely either ignored or neglected. The present paper attempts to offers a broader based epistemology of health rather than individualistic, illness-oriented models that are solely focussed on by the bio-medical paradigm at the expense of more social determinants of health. The paper argues that mental health are fashioned by structural determinants; deeply rooted social norms and values, largely governed by the social structures like caste, class, gender, religion, ethnicity, etc.; and intermediate determinants which are the conditions of daily life and behaviour, such as poverty, unemployment, the quality of childhood and family environment, the nature of work and work-place conditions, the quality and availability of housing, and the availability of resources for food, recreation, and education, political and family violence, social inequity and inequality.