

Definitions of Health

Sociologists see health as more than just not feeling poorly. Well, they do like to complicate things.

The Biomedical Model says Health and Illness are Natural, Physical Things

The **biomedical model** (favoured by scientists and health professionals) says that health and illness are caused by factors **within** the body.

This model has **three** key characteristics:

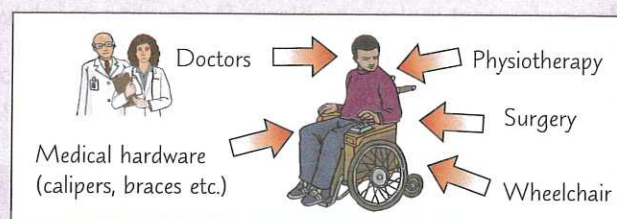
Key characteristics of the biomedical model

- 1) Health is seen as the **absence of biological abnormality**.
- 2) The human body is likened to a **machine** in that it needs to be **repaired** by treatment when it breaks down.
- 3) The health of society is regarded as dependent on the **state of medical knowledge**.

Related to this is the **biomedical view of disability**:

The biomedical model **looks in** at the patient and tries to **fix** the disability through medical practice.

Medical practice is **interventionist** — it's something that's **done to** the patient.



The Biomedical Model has been Criticised

- 1) Some sociologists, e.g. **McKeown (1976)**, say that **improved nutrition and hygiene** have been more important in improving health than **developments in medicine** — starting with 19th and 20th century public health reforms.
- 2) **Marxist sociologists** in the 1970s accused biomedicine of distracting attention away from what they see as the real causes of illness — the **social causes**.
- 3) The biomedical approach can be viewed as **stigmatising** people who have an illness or disability — it views illness or disability as something **abnormal** that should be **fixed**.
- 4) **Tom Shakespeare (2000)** said that traditional approaches **individualise** and **medicalise** disability. They deal with the symptoms of each case and **ignore** social patterns.
- 5) **Ivan Illich (1975)** and others have argued that modern medicine actually **creates disease**.

Medicalisation is when human conditions start to be treated as medical problems and studied, diagnosed and treated medically.

Illich Says the Medical Elite Actually Cause Bad Health

- 1) **Illich (1975)** defines **health** as the **capacity** to cope with the **human reality** of **death, pain** and **sickness**. This is a very different definition to the mainstream biomedical definition.
- 2) Illich believes that medicine has **gone too far**, and that the **medical elite (doctors)** have started to **'play God'** — trying to **wipe out** death, pain and sickness. OK so far... he then says that **trying to control death and illness** is a bad move which **turns people into consumers** or even objects. In his opinion, this messes up people's natural capacity for health and **makes people ill**.
- 3) Illich uses the word **iatrogenesis** to refer to this kind of illness that's caused by modern medicine. He says there are **three types of iatrogenesis**:
 - 1) **Clinical iatrogenesis** — the **harm** done to patients by **ineffective** treatments, **unsafe** treatments or getting the **wrong diagnosis**.
 - 2) **Social iatrogenesis** — the idea that **doctors** have **taken over control** of people's lives, and individuals can't make decisions about their problems. More and more of people's problems are seen as **suitable for medical intervention**. This is called the **medicalisation of social life**.
 - 3) **Cultural iatrogenesis** — the **destruction of traditional ways of dealing** with and making sense of **death, pain** and **sickness**.
- 4) According to Illich, dying has become the ultimate form of **consumer resistance** (when you're dead, you can't buy any more Nike trainers, I'd imagine). **Death** isn't seen as something normal. It's become a **taboo**.

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The Social Model says that Health and Illness are Social Constructs

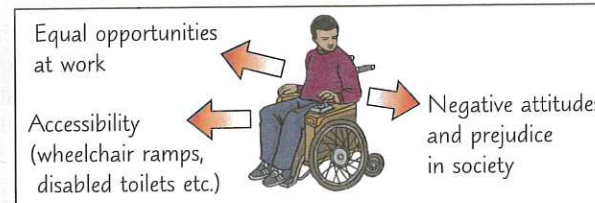
- 1) The **social model** (favoured by **sociologists**) says that health and illness are caused by factors **outside** the body.
- 2) The **medical elite** haven't always **dominated** the definition and treatment of illness — it's a modern phenomenon, e.g. in the **1700s**, **mental illness** was often thought to be caused by **evil spirits** — a **religious** thing, not a **medical** thing.
- 3) In modern society illness is only recognised as serious if it has been **diagnosed** by the medical elite. The **social model** says **definitions of health and illness** are **'social constructs'** — not actually always related to **real physical symptoms**.

A **'social construct'** is an **idea that's created by a society** — as opposed to an idea that's based on objective and testable **facts**. It's specific to the **values and behaviour** of that society — it's not universal.

- 4) The **social model of health** looks to see which **environmental, social and behavioural factors** have contributed to make someone ill. **Social factors** (such as diet, housing or stress) make some people more likely to become ill than others.

A social view of disability:

- The social model looks **outwards** from the individual to the **environmental and social** factors which disable an individual, e.g. lack of access, rights and opportunities.
- A person using a **wheelchair** might feel more disabled by the **lack of a wheelchair ramp** than the fact that they can't use their legs to walk.



The Social Model has been Criticised too

- 1) Illness is often **not subjective**, and **isn't** affected by changes in the social environment.
- 2) The social model of disability **ignores impairments**, such as **pain**, which cause the disability.

E.g. Whether or not you have food poisoning is not subjective.

An **impairment** is a **physical feature or characteristic** (e.g. **blindness**), whereas a **disability** is an **inability** to do something because **society** hasn't made a **provision** for it (e.g. a blind person using a **cash machine**). Impairments **don't always** cause disability, but disability is **always** due to impairment.

The Body is a Social Construction Too

- 1) The **ideal body size and shape** is socially constructed, e.g. today's **media** often portray a very **slim ideal** for a woman and a **muscular ideal** for a man. However, in the **past**, being thin was associated with not having enough to eat and **indicated poverty**, so a more curvaceous figure was more desirable.
- 2) The **typical body shape** of a society is also a result of the **dominant cultural attitudes** to diet and lifestyle, e.g. the **fast food culture** of the US is linked to **increased obesity**.
- 3) However, the ideal body **isn't just** a social construction. A high body mass index (BMI) is **objectively linked** to increased risk of a range of diseases.

Practice Questions

- Q1 What is the difference between the biomedical model and the social model of health?
- Q2 What does 'iatrogenesis' mean?
- Q3 Explain the difference between an impairment and a disability.

Exam Question

- Q1 Outline two ways that the body may be viewed as a social construct. Explain each one.

[10 marks]

All I care about is why I feel ill...

Hmm... the social model of illness seems a bit odd at first — how can it be society's fault that I've got a sore throat... But when you look into it, you have to admit that things like clean water, proper sewers and a good diet are at least relevant to health. As always, you're expected to know the key points of each theory, as well as their faults and pitfalls.