

Mental Illness Through History

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Abstract in English

In this project I researched how society viewed mentally ill people in the past and the misconceptions and hatred that were prevalent before our time, from prehistory to the early modern era.

I have broken down my research into three sections: causes, the explanations that were given for people's erratic behaviour; treatments, different cures doctors, religious leaders or even the patient themselves used to treat the illnesses; and stigmas, the ways people were discriminated against, such as being tortured or killed because of their disorders.

I was able to prove with my investigation that the ignorance and lack of understanding from all people, ranging from doctors to family members, were a cause of great pain to the people who suffered from mental disorders throughout history. Only recently has psychology developed as a science and, even just in the past couple of decades, groundbreaking discoveries have been made, which is why it's of the utmost importance that we look back and see where we were mistaken so that we can evolve and change for the better. Even if we don't resort to exorcisms or witch-burning to cure "lunatics" nowadays, there are still prevalent stigmas around mental disorders that cause nothing but harm.

Abstract en español

En este proyecto he investigado cómo la sociedad del pasado veía a las personas con enfermedades mentales, así como los mitos y el odio que prevalecían antiguamente, desde la prehistoria hasta la edad moderna.

He dividido mi investigación entre tres secciones: causas, las explicaciones que se daban al comportamiento errático de las personas; tratamientos, diferentes curas que los médicos, líderes religiosos o incluso los propios pacientes usaban para tratar las enfermedades; y estigmas, formas en las que las personas sufrían discriminación, como ser torturadas o asesinadas por sus trastornos.

He podido comprobar con mi investigación que la ignorancia y la falta de comprensión de todos, desde médicos hasta familiares, fueron una causa de gran dolor para todas las personas

que padecieron enfermedades mentales a lo largo de la historia. Solo recientemente la psicología se ha desarrollado como ciencia y tan solo en estas últimas décadas se han hecho descubrimientos revolucionarios. Por esto es de suma importancia que miremos hacia atrás para darnos cuenta de dónde nos equivocamos para que podamos evolucionar y mejorar. Incluso aunque hoy en día no recurramos a los exorcismos ni a la quema de brujas para curar a los “lunáticos”, aún hay prejuicios que prevalecen sobre las enfermedades mentales que no causan más que daño.

Introduction

Psychology is a relatively new field in science which has made some groundbreaking discoveries in recent years and is highly probable to continue to grow and evolve.

However, mental illnesses and disorders have existed since prehistoric times and since then humanity has developed all sorts of explanations and treatments for them that nowadays seem rightfully shocking.

In this project, I researched what human beings are capable of doing when faced with the bizarre and the unknown that seems to lurk among and inside us.

Objectives

- The main objective of this project is to check if the way we treated mental disorders in the past differs from our current understanding of therapy.
- Another objective is to dive deeper into what we have believed in the past to cause mental illnesses, see how it ties to religion, culture and scientific advancements and check if different causes led to different treatments.
- My final objective is to research how society viewed the mentally ill or “insane” and how that stigma developed with cases of moral panic and cultural shifts.

My investigation

Causes:

Throughout history, lots of people and institutions have blamed divine or demonic forces for mental illnesses. A person could be possessed by a demon or have the Gods forsake them for sinning. The word “lunatic” comes from the belief that moonrays reaching someone’s brain could cause madness in their mind. More physiological explanations included the idea that fluids inside the body, such as yellow bile or hot blood, were responsible for a person’s erratic behaviour. It was also a well accepted theory that of uterus wandering inside of women’s bodies, causing hysteria and other mental disorders.

Treatments:

The earliest depiction of mental illness treatment dates back to 6500 BC, when holes were drilled into people's skulls to stop seizures. Since then, humanity has come up with all kinds of cures. On the spiritual side of the coin, rituals such as healing ceremonies in temples and/or exorcisms have been used to repent from sin or expel whatever demon had possessed the sufferer. The people who thought the body was responsible for the mind tried to get the responsible fluids out of someone by bloodletting (cutting their skin and letting their blood pour out) or tobacco induced vomiting. In ancient Greece, doctors used odours to guide the uterus back to its usual place. Other methods, such as drugs or throwing people into cold rivers as shock treatment, were also utilised for treating the mentally ill. In more recent times, mental health asylums kept their patients under inhumane living conditions and subjected them to torture-like treatments, such as lobotomy or extreme electroshock-therapy.

Stigmas:

Mental illness has historically been a very stigmatised topic. If you weren't possessed by the devil, you were working for him. From the 14th to well into the 17th century, mentally ill people were labelled as witches. About 50.000 people were sentenced to death in a witch-trial, mostly women. In the middle ages, the sufferer was left to the responsibility of the family or, in some cases, the Church. And while some children were treated as special or magical and taken under an adult's wing, most others were tortured, exiled or locked up by their family members to fix or hide them, so as to not tarnish the family's reputation. Mostly, the laws that were put in place were focused on protecting the "sane" from the "lunatics", especially confinement laws that forced mentally ill people into "madhouses", where they were treated as if they were animals who could live in the poorest conditions.

Conclusions

- Harmful stigmas and discriminations were the cause of great physical and psychological pain for mentally ill people throughout history. Thankfully witch-burning and blood-letting are extremely outdated debunked methods that no current doctor would approve of.
- The methods used were often tied to what was believed to be the great cause of all evil during each period, whether it was demons, bodily fluids or women.
- A good example of how our way of viewing the mentally ill has changed is that now people are diagnosed and treated instead of being chained up in madhouses for being "insane". We know better now and we will continue to evolve.

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