

# Mental Health in the Consumer Society Looking beyond the Biological Dogma

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## ABSTRACT

As Mental Health Disorders are on the verge of becoming one of the leading factors of disability in the world, a new perspective of mental health disorders is necessary. In fact, mental health disorders are largely analyzed within the biomedical model, leaving out those social and power structures in which a disease might be embedded. In fact, due to a focus on growth, individualism and materialistic values, societies have grown ever more fragmented in the age of capitalism as is visible within diminishing relationships. Therefore, this thesis proposes an analysis of the structural forces behind mental health disorders that can be linked to a social logic of consumption.

## Keywords

Mental Health, Global Health, Capitalism, Structuralism

## INTRODUCTION

The longest study on happiness, a Harvard study on adult development which has tracked the lives of 724 men over the duration of 80 years has delivered crucial insights into human well-being (Waldinger, 2015). While the notion of happiness in today's world is often conflated with the acquisition of goods as a marker for prosperity, freedom and greater choice, the study has indicated that this is actually not what creates happiness. In fact, humans in western capitalistic systems are generally pushed to work and achieve more, have a desire for money and status, and believe that economic prosperity will eventually bring the good life. However, contrary to this, the study has indicated that social connections are crucial for our development and overall well-being. This is evident in the fact that people, with a greater social network, often report higher well-being and physical health than those less well connected. On the same note, loneliness and the absence of human relationships have proven to be toxic for individual's well-being as those living more isolated, have earlier declining health and brain functioning, are more likely to become depressed and generally seem to live shorter lives (Waldinger, 2015).

While economic growth has brought higher living standards and led, at least in western nations, to the fulfilment of individual's basic needs, the extent to which the consumption of goods is correlated with individual well-being, remains contentious. In line with this, Alan Durning (1991) argued that increasing consumption levels around the globe do not only degrade our natural resource base, but also decrease our overall quality of life as the integration of consumerism in industrial countries has replaced traditional nonmaterial values. As such, success is becoming increasingly equated with materialism. Rather than foregrounding traditional values such as integrity, honesty and skill, indicators of social worth and status are now retrieved from consumption-based comparisons to others, as individuals aim to outconsume one another (p.153-170). In this sense, consumption develops ever more unsatisfactory as it leads to increased competition among people to enhance one's social status. As a

consequence of this, others might not be perceived as sources of support, but instead as obstacles to personal advancement, which can worsen the social divide between people and lead to isolation (Matthews, 2019, p. 56).

Conforming to the previous findings, the deepening of individualism in western societies, corresponds to an upsurge in mental health disorders within the last decade. In fact, estimations by the World Health Organization (2012) indicated that 450 million people currently suffer from mental health conditions. Likewise, one in four people will be affected by mental or neurological disorders at one point in their lives. Accordingly, one could suggest the emergence of a mental health crisis detrimental enough to significantly disrupt the social, political and economic system within the world. Taking a look at the global burden of disease, a concept developed to measure the leading causes of death, disability, and diseases in the world, it was estimated that the number of people with mental and neurological disorders will account for 15% of all Disability Adjusted Life Years by the year of 2020 (WHO, 2007) while it could be even higher. Given that it is one of the leading causes of death within the global burden of disease, it is safe to say that mental health disorders represent a significant constraint to individuals' well-being and human development.

Because social decline and mental health problems are severe risk factors for the health of individuals and society, it is necessary to analyze the root causes of their emergence. Therefore, this thesis investigates the question whether the social logic of consumption, as enabled by capitalism, can be regarded as a contributing factor to the formation and continuance of mental health disorders. It will thereby aim to fill the gap in research relating to structural causes of mental health.

## SECTIONS

For clarity and understanding of the complex problem at stake, the thesis is divided into three parts as well as an introduction and conclusion. The three main parts, are organized into chapters namely; *the Bioessentialist Approach to Mental Health*, *A Structural Account of Mental Health Disorders*, and *the Current Mental Health Crisis in Society*. This is necessary as the analysis of the problem is three-fold. The thesis will begin by examining the current approach taken to analyze mental health disorders, namely the biomedical model. Given that its assumption about mental health disorders largely stem from biological factors, its analytical focus is concentrated on the individual. This has a multitude of implication since the disease is being investigated in isolation from its social environment. Therefore, instead of viewing mental health from an individual perspective, it is necessary to analyze the structural forces in which it emerged.

Because power structures within society are non-tangible, they can only be observed via their effects. For this reason, the second chapter argues that the mental health crisis can

be in part traced back to a social logic of consumption that has been pervasive of many aspects of human life. Basing the theory on Durkheim's social facts, Bourdieu's social field and Baudrillard's Consumer Society, it shows how the social logic of consumption is not based on a logic of satisfaction to account for human needs, but rather on a commercialized logic of growth which artificially creates individual needs. This structure is linked to the socio-economic system governing many nations, capitalism. Owing to an inherent social logic in the system which builds on the logic of growth instead of one of satisfaction, capitalism is seen to create ever more needs and wants, leaving people with a never vanishing desire to consume (Matthews, 2019, p. 56). Accordingly, consumption is no longer associated with essential needs, but rather seen as a means to enhance one's social status. This is problematic as it can lead to increased social differentiations, and thus social exclusion. As communities develop more and more fragmented as a result of materialistic values and growing individualism, people become more susceptible to feelings of loneliness, social anxiety, or depression (Shaw, 2008, p. 4). In comparison, while hunter-gatherer communities had no personal possessions and did not partake in work, they shared everything with the rest of the community and consumed their food immediately as they trusted in the abundance of natural goods. In contrast, although modern society is characterized by the accumulation of goods, it is simultaneously plagued by anxiety and despair over a variety of insufficiencies (Ritzer, 1998, p. 11). With respect to this, it should be stressed that a lack of human relationships is a risk factor concerning depression and other mental health problems.

As power structures are invisible, and since human relationships are difficult to explain and define, it is necessary to end the thesis with a case study. Accordingly, the third chapter investigates whether increased consumption can have an effect on human connectivity and relationships. Since mobile phones have become a constant companion in our ever globalizing world, it is logical to analyze how phone usage and social media consumption have further widened the social divide through reducing human face-to-face interactions. Having analyzed all these aspects, the thesis aimed to establish a causal link between the current mental health crisis and the capitalistic structure in which it is embedded.

### Subsections

With regard to the density of topics discussed in the thesis, it is necessary to further divide the chapters into subsections. Therefore, Chapter one is divided into three subsections. First, it will begin by assessing the *Ontological Character of Mental Health* to show the differential treatment of physical vis-à-vis mental diseases. Having done so, *The explanatory model and the Link to the commercial sector* will be questioned to show how the biomedical model has been transformed into a consumption logic of its own by foregrounding its commercial character. Since an explanatory model can turn into a social institution, it can be argued that it can also affect our social reality. Thus, it is lastly necessary to investigate the *Performative Character* of the biomedical model to account for patients' conceptions of mental health and their behavior towards it. After indicating that the biomedical approach by itself is insufficient to account for mental health disorders, the thesis will argue for a structural analysis by emphasizing for a paradigm shift.

Thus, the chapter "A Structural Account of Mental Health Disorders", will argue to move beyond the biomedical frame to include the structures and social determinants in which a disease is embedded. By doing so, it investigates the potential link between capitalism and mental health. Within the Section *The Social Logic of consumption*, a theory to exemplify how capitalism, and its innate logic of consumption, have driven a divide between people will be developed. Since consumption of goods has become a way to enhance one's social status, it can be argued that social solidarity and bonds have been decreasing which are necessary for positive mental health.

Finally, the last chapter "The Current Mental Health Crisis in Society" will examine the link between capitalism, consumption and mental health. To do so, the section *An essentialist object of the capitalist society*, will examine whether phone usage and internet behavior contribute to diminishing social relationships and as such worsening mental health. Since social bonds are established through face-to-face interactions, genuine human contact is diminishing as people communicate through phones and social media. Consequently, as more time is devoted to the consumption of private goods such as phones, less time will be spent with other people, or public goods and services.

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### CONCLUSION

This thesis has investigated the question whether the social logic of consumption, as enabled by capitalism, can be regarded as a contributing factor to the formation and continuance of mental health disorders. As consumption is no longer associated with the essential needs of people, but rather seen as a means to enhance one's social status, mental health in consumer societies are seen to decrease as a result of differentiation and pressure from the rest of society. Moreover, following Maslow's hierarchy of needs, after physiological and safety needs are fulfilled, human needs become increasingly characterized by the need for social belonging and rootedness. However, in a capitalist society guided by materialist values and characterized by the logic of differentiation, competition and individualism, the sense of belonging has been undermined by the increasing fragmentation of human society. As such, it could be argued that as a consequence of diminishing human relationships, mental health disorders have become a symptom of the system, characterized by loneliness and mental diseases. Finally, this thesis portrayed a causality between our current capitalistic system and a rise in mental health disorders. However, with regard to mental health disorders, further research should be conducted in order to create an appropriate framework to alleviate the burden of mental disorders for individuals. As such, the focus to treat mental health and especially depression needs to move away from a purely biological focus towards an inclusion of deeply embedded issues in our society which relate to the global economic order. Accordingly, questions such as "how can overconsumption be limited in society" and "how can we reestablish a focus on social relationships" should be asked.

## ROLE OF THE STUDENT

Anna-Lena Hasselder is an undergraduate student at the University of Groningen where she studies International Relations and International Organization and recently finished her Bachelor of Honours. Within the core module Power, Politics and Global Health, the research was carried out under the supervision of Dr. Nadine Voelkner.

The topic of mental health was not covered within the core module of Global Health, but sparked interest in the student regardless as the severity of mental health disorders and its implications for society should no longer be underestimated. The student found it crucial to debunk current assumptions about mental health disorders in order to spark further debates within the discipline. Since this topic is situated within the realm of International Relations, Psychology, and Philosophy, the student aimed to achieve a multidisciplinary approach to analyzing mental health as she believes that the issue is more complex than initially perceived.

Accordingly, the subject of the research was chosen and developed independently by the student with the possibility to acquire feedback from the supervisor as well as peer feedback from other students. As such, the research outline, the research design, and processing of results, the formulation of the conclusion and the writing process were independently performed by the student.

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