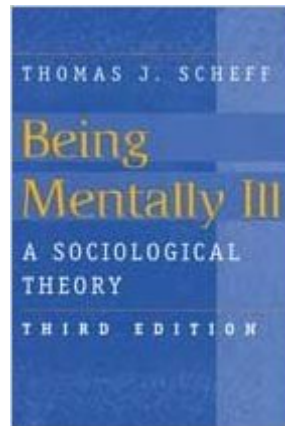# Being Mentally Ill: A Sociological Theory

Synopsis

In incorporating social process into a model of the dynamics of mental disorders, this text questions the individualistic model favoured in current psychiatric and psychoanalytic theory. While the conventional psychiatric viewpoint seeks the causes of mental illness, Scheff views "the symptoms of mental illness" as the violation of residual rules - social norms so taken for granted that they are not explicitly verbalized. The sociological theory developed by Scheff to account for such behaviour provides a framework for studies reported in subsequent chapters. Two key assumptions emerge: first, that most chronic mental illness is in part a social role; and second, that societal reaction may in part determine entry into that role. Throughout, the sociological model of mental illness is compared and contrasted with more conventional medical and psychological models in an attempt to delineate significant problems for further analysis and research. This third edition has been revised and expanded to encompass the controversy prompted by the first edition, and also to re-evaluate developments in the field. New to this edition are discussions of the use of psychoactive drugs in the treatment of mental illness, changing mental health laws, new social science and psychiatric studies, and the controversy surrounding the labelling theory of mental illness itself.

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Customer Reviews

I read the first edition of Scheff's Being Mentally Ill when I was a doctoral student in the late '70's. By then labeling theory had already begun to devolve into a set of sensitizing concepts, and prospects for a full-blown labeling theory of mental illness, or deviance more generally, had begun to

fade.Nevertheless, Scheff demonstrated remarkable insight and skill in theory construction in making a case that contextual factors, especially the responses of others, whether they be individuals or specialized institutions, contributed substantially to who was characterized as mentally ill by others as well as by themselves.Scheff argued forcefully and with a good deal of wisdom that mental illness was a socially created phenomenon. The systems model that he used to outline this process, complete with feedback loops that demonstrated how the judgments of others could turn innocuous miscues into pathological symptoms that were acknowledged by observers as well as by the afflicted, was quite compelling and hardly the stuff of soft sociology.For a time, I was convinced that all mental illness was a socially created phenomenon that existed only in relational terms, rejecting alternative psychological and physical explanations. I have since disabused myself of that misconception, but I remain convinced by Scheff's work that some instances of mental illness are, in fact, products of ongoing social labeling processes.I've done program evaluation in schools, a juvenile court, alcohol and drug abuse clinics, mental health facilities, and geriatric assistance programs. Having read Scheff's work on social labeling processes, I could see them dong their damaging work in each kind of setting.

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