

Social Justice, Human Dignity, and Mental Illness

Increasingly, mental illness is often portrayed in a reductionistic way as being only a brain disease, while alternatives to the medical model of mental illness are hardly discussed. Such a biological reductionism privileges some and penalizes others, and it obfuscates the many social justice implications of how mental illness can be best understood and treated. By drawing upon the insights of existential personalist ethics, we will argue that the concept of human dignity provides an important basis upon which to critically evaluate the ethics of diagnosis and treatment in a way that serves social justice for mental health consumers. Human dignity, understood as an appreciation for the intrinsic and incalculable worth and irreplaceability of each person, is a key concept of existential personalist ethics. This concept seems to have great promise in guiding critical reflection on ethical concerns central to psychiatry and clinical psychological research and practice. Assaults on human dignity in psychiatry and clinical psychology include biologically reductive approaches to conceptualizing mental illness, a rhetoric that frames mental health in terms of mere adjustment to pathological social norms, stigmatization that remains blind to the intrinsic value of persons suffering mental anguish, and the exploitation of psychiatric consumers that results from the collusion of the drug industry and the psychiatric profession. These are social justice issues, because social justice, as articulated for example in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, is predicated upon the foundation of human dignity. When human dignity is under assault, this substantially increases the risk that those under assault will be stigmatized and their rights will be jeopardized. To protect mental health consumers from human rights violations, it is first and foremost necessary to protect assaults on their dignity.