

The Social Construction of Mental Illness Reading List

Compiled by Isaac Ahuvia

Social construction refers to the way that people in a society collectively come to understand something. To say that mental illness is socially constructed is not to say that mental illnesses are fake or imagined. Rather, seeing mental illness as socially constructed means recognizing that the way we understand and treat mental illness is more than just “common sense”—it is the product of our history and culture, has changed dramatically over time, and *remains up for debate*.

This reading list has been developed over the years as I have taught the course “The Social Construction of Mental Illness” to undergrads at Harvard University and Stony Brook University. This reading list is longer than the one I assign to students, and it doesn’t correspond exactly with each course’s list (some readings here aren’t a good fit for the course, and vice versa)—but it broadly reflects the topics and readings we discuss in the course. This document is meant to be used (and shared!), but please provide attribution as possible.¹

Unit 1: How is Mental Illness “Socially Constructed”?

1.1 What is mental illness?

Readings that lay the groundwork for understanding what mental illness is. Identifying and overcoming common logical fallacies regarding the reification of mental illness categories.

Aftab, A. (2026, May 11). Here’s what psychiatrists mean when they say you have A.D.H.D. *The New York Times*.

Fried, E. (2022). Studying mental health problems as systems, not syndromes. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 31(6), 500-508.

Kendler, K., Zachar, P., & Craver, C. (2011). What kinds of things are psychiatric disorders? *Psychological Medicine*, 41(6), 1143–1150.

Wakefield, J. C. (1992). The concept of mental disorder: on the boundary between biological facts and social values. *American Psychologist*, 47(3), 373.

Te Meerman, S., Freedman, J., & Batstra, L. (2022). ADHD and reification: Four ways a psychiatric construct is portrayed as a disease. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 13, Article 1055328.

Kajanoja, J., & Valtonen, J. (2024). A descriptive diagnosis or a causal explanation? Accuracy of depictions of depression on authoritative health organization websites. *Psychopathology*, 57(5), 389-398.

1.2 Medicalization

Readings that discuss how deviant thoughts, feelings, and behaviors become constructed as medical problems (rather than as criminality, sin, etc.).

Conrad, P., & Schneider, J. (1992). *Deviance and Medicalization: From badness to sickness*. Temple University Press.

¹ <https://isaacahuvia.com/social-construction-reading-list>

Conrad, P. (1975). The discovery of hyperkinesis: Notes on the medicalization of deviant behavior. *Social Problems*, 23(1), 12-21.

Drescher, J. (2010). Queer diagnoses: Parallels and contrasts in the history of homosexuality, gender variance, and the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 39(2), 427-460.

Aftab, A. (2026). The Medical Model of Psychopathology. In C. Conway & R. Krueger (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Dimensional Models of Psychopathology* (pp. 53-71).

1.3 Biomedicalization

Readings that discuss how mental illnesses have become understood as not only medical problems, but specifically *biomedical* problems.

Harrington, A. (2019). *Mind fixers: Psychiatry's troubled search for the biology of mental illness*. WW Norton & Company.

Deacon, B. (2013). The biomedical model of mental disorder: A critical analysis of its validity, utility, and effects on psychotherapy research. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 33(7), 846-861.

Haslam, N., & Kvaale, E. (2015). Biogenetic explanations of mental disorder: The mixed-blessings model. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 24(5), 399-404.

Lebowitz, M. S. (2014). Biological conceptualizations of mental disorders among affected individuals: A review of correlates and consequences. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice*, 21(1), 67-83.

Kendler, K. (2025). A history of metaphorical brain talk in psychiatry. *Molecular Psychiatry*, 30(8), 3774-3780.

Unit 2: Diagnosis and Labeling

2.1 Diagnosis

Readings about the process of diagnosis (applying/receiving a mental illness label) and its consequences.

Link, B., Cullen, F., Struening, E., Shrout, P., & Dohrenwend, B. (1989). A modified labeling theory approach to mental disorders: An empirical assessment. *American Sociological Review*, 54(3), 400-423.

Perkins, A., Ridler, J., Browes, D., Peryer, G., Notley, C., & Hackmann, C. (2018). Experiencing mental health diagnosis: a systematic review of service user, clinician, and carer perspectives across clinical settings. *The Lancet Psychiatry*, 5(9), 747-764.

O'Connor, C., Kadianaki, I., Maunder, K., & McNicholas, F. (2018). How does psychiatric diagnosis affect young people's self-concept and social identity? A systematic review and synthesis of the qualitative literature. *Social Science & Medicine*, 212, 94-119.

Schwartz, E., Docherty, N., Najolia, G., & Cohen, A. (2019). Exploring the racial diagnostic bias of schizophrenia using behavioral and clinical-based measures. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 128(3), 263.

Saks, E. (2007). *The center cannot hold: My journey through madness*. Hyperion.

Kaysen, S. (1993). *Girl, interrupted*. Vintage Books.

2.2 Self-Labeling and Mental Illness Identity

Readings about the process of self-labeling—coming to identify as having a mental illness—and its causes and consequences.

Ahuvia, I., & Link, B. (2025). The mental illness self-labeling model: A conceptual model for studying the effects of mental-illness self-labeling on clinical outcomes. *Clinical Psychological Science*, 13(6), 1031-1050.

Thoits, P. (1985). Self-labeling processes in mental illness: The role of emotional deviance. *American Journal of Sociology*, 91(2), 221-249.

Moses, T. (2009). Self-labeling and its effects among adolescents diagnosed with mental disorders. *Social Science & Medicine*, 68(3), 570-578.

Levinovitz, A., & Aftab, A. (2026). The Rumpelstiltskin effect: Therapeutic repercussions of clinical diagnosis. *BJPsych Bulletin*, 50(2), 191-195.

Aviv, R. (2022). *Strangers to ourselves: Unsettled minds and the stories that make us*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Wang, E. (2019). *The collected schizophrenias: Essays*. Graywolf Press.

Singh, M. (2024, May 4). Why we're turning psychiatric labels into identities. *The New Yorker*.

2.3 Stigma

Readings specifically about the stigma of mental illness labels and how this informs (self-)labeling process and outcome.

Link, B., & Phelan, J. (2001). Conceptualizing stigma. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 27(1), 363-385.

Rüsch, N., Angermeyer, M., & Corrigan, P. (2005). Mental illness stigma: Concepts, consequences, and initiatives to reduce stigma. *European psychiatry*, 20(8), 529-539.

Corrigan, P., Larson, J., & Rüsch, N. (2009). Self-stigma and the “why try” effect: Impact on life goals and evidence-based practices. *World psychiatry*, 8(2), 75-81.

Thoits, P. (2011). Resisting the stigma of mental illness. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 74(1), 6-28.

Rüsch, N., & Kösters, M. (2021). Honest, Open, Proud to support disclosure decisions and to decrease stigma's impact among people with mental illness: Conceptual review and meta-analysis of program efficacy. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, 56(9), 1513-1526.

Unit 3: Treating Mental Illness

3.1 The DSM

Readings about the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual: its history, function, critiques, and alternatives.

Aftab, A. (2025, October). You aren't in the DSM. *Asterisk Magazine*, 12.

- McWilliams, N. (2021). Diagnosis and its discontents: Reflections on our current dilemma. *Psychoanalytic Inquiry*, 41(8), 565-579.
- Hyman, S. (2010). The diagnosis of mental disorders: the problem of reification. *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology*, 6(1), 155–179.
- Chmielewski, M., Clark, L., Bagby, R., & Watson, D. (2015). Method matters: Understanding diagnostic reliability in DSM-IV and DSM-5. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 124(3), 764-769.
- Eaton, N., Bringmann, L., Elmer, T., Fried, E., Forbes, M., Greene, A., Krueger, R., Kotov, R., McGorry, P., Mei, C., & Waszczuk, M. (2023). A review of approaches and models in psychopathology conceptualization research. *Nature Reviews Psychology*, 2(10), 622-636.

3.2 Psychotherapy

Readings about psychotherapy contextualized as a healing practice.

- Frank, J., Frank, J., & Wampold, B. (2025). *Persuasion and healing: A comparative study of psychotherapy*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Wampold, B. (2001). Contextualizing psychotherapy as a healing practice. *Applied & Preventive Psychology*, 10(1), 69–86.
- Wampold, B., Imel, Z., Bhati, K., & Johnson-Jennings, M. (2006). Insight as a common factor. In L. Castonguay & C. Hill (Eds.), *Insight in psychotherapy* (pp. 119-139). American Psychological Association.
- Goldfried, M. (2019). Obtaining consensus in psychotherapy: What holds us back? *American Psychologist*, 74(4), 484-496.

Unit 4: Additional Topics

4.1 Blame

Readings on the philosophy of mental illness and blameworthiness.

- Pickard, H. (2011). Responsibility without blame: Empathy and the effective treatment of personality disorder. *Philosophy, Psychiatry, & Psychology*, 18(3), 209-223.
- Abumrad, J., & Krulwich, R. (Hosts). (2013, September 12). Blame [Audio podcast episode]. In *Radiolab*. WNYC Studios. <https://radiolab.org/podcast/317421-blame>
- Hammer, R., Dingel, M., Ostergren, J., Partridge, B., McCormick, J., & Koenig, B. (2013). Addiction: Current criticism of the brain disease paradigm. *AJOB neuroscience*, 4(3), 27-32.

4.2 Mental Health Awareness/Concept Creep

Readings on contemporary mental health awareness efforts and “concept creep”—the broadening, over time, of diagnostic language.

- Haslam, N. (2016). Concept creep: Psychology's expanding concepts of harm and pathology. *Psychological Inquiry*, 27(1), 1-17.

Tse, J., & Haslam, N. (2021). Inclusiveness of the concept of mental disorder and differences in help-seeking between Asian and White Americans. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, Article 699750.

Hacking, I. (2007). Kinds of people: Moving targets. In P. Marshall (Ed.), *Proceedings of the British Academy, volume 151, 2006 lectures* (pp. 285–317). Oxford University Press.

Foulkes, L., Winterburn, I., Sandra, D., Inzlicht, M., Andrews, J., & Guzman Holst, C. (2026). The psychological consequences of mental health awareness efforts. *Nature Reviews Psychology*, 5(3), 173-184.

Horwitz, A., & Wakefield, J. (2007). *The loss of sadness: How psychiatry transformed normal sorrow into depressive disorder*. Oxford University Press.

4.3 Constructions Across Cultures

Readings about the construction of mental illness across cultures and how this informs the experience of deviant thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

Luhrmann, T. (2007). Social defeat and the culture of chronicity: Or, why schizophrenia does so well over there and so badly here. *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry*, 31(2), 135-172.

Luhrmann, T., Padmavati, R., Tharoor, H., & Osei, A. (2015). Differences in voice-hearing experiences of people with psychosis in the USA, India and Ghana: Interview-based study. *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, 206(1), 41-44.

Cantor-Graae, E., & Selten, J. (2005). Schizophrenia and migration: A meta-analysis and review. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 162(1), 12-24.

Kirmayer, L. (2001). Cultural variations in the clinical presentation of depression and anxiety: Implications for diagnosis and treatment. *Journal of Clinical Psychiatry*, 62, 22-30.

Weiss, M., & Somma, D. (2007). Explanatory models in psychiatry. In D. Bhugra & K. Bhui (Eds.), *Textbook of cultural psychiatry*, (pp. 127-140).

Nichter, M. (2010). Idioms of distress revisited. *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry*, 34(2), 401-416.

Watters, E. (2010). *Crazy like us: The globalization of the American psyche*. Free Press.

4.4 Other Contemporary Battlegrounds

Readings about ongoing battles over the social construction of mental illness not covered above.

Yeung, A., Ng, E., & Abi-Jaoude, E. (2022). TikTok and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder: A cross-sectional study of social media content quality. *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*, 67(2), 899-906.

Dai, X., Leng, L., Liu, Y., Huang, Y., & Wong, D. (2026). The paradox of agency in psychotherapy: How people with mental distress experience support from generative AI chatbots and human therapists. *BMC Psychiatry*, 26(1), 49.

Jaarsma, P., & Welin, S. (2012). Autism as a natural human variation: Reflections on the claims of the neurodiversity movement. *Health Care Analysis*, 20(1), 20-30.

Ahuvia, I., Gurbuz, E., Cuda, J., Kapp, S., Houck, A., Gates, J., Schleider, J. & Gurba, A. (2026). Identifying as autistic without a formal diagnosis: Who self-identifies as autistic and why? *Autism in Adulthood*.

Frith, U. (2026). Autism spectrum disorder: Has it lost its meaning and is it leading to misdiagnosis? *Psychological Medicine*, 56, Article e240.

Doherty, M., Henderson, J., Hill, H., Rabenstein, K., Lang, J., Grosjean, B., Dakin, C., Wijetilleka, S., & Shaw, S. (2026). Historical diagnostic failure, not conceptual collapse: A response to Frith. *Psychological Medicine*, 56, Article e305.

Additional Teaching Resources

An exercise to illustrate social construction, i.e., how natural kinds do not always correspond to social kinds. (I adapt the script somewhat, but stick to the overall structure—it is very effective.)

Brouillette, J. & Turner, R. 2010. "Creating the Sociological Imagination on the First Day of Class: The Social Construction of Deviance." Class Activity published in TRAILS: Teaching Resources and Innovations Library for Sociology. Originally published 2003 in *Deviance and Social Control*, edited by B. Hoffman and A. Demyan. Washington DC: American Sociological Association.
https://www.asanet.org/wp-content/uploads/savvy/teaching/resources/TRAILS/creating_the_soc_imagination.pdf

A video clip to illustrate the biopsychosocial model and the coexistence of multiple explanatory frames/levels of analysis. Teach the first eight minutes. (I got this idea from Adler, R. H. (2009). Engel's biopsychosocial model is still relevant today. *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, 67(6), 607-611.)

Pollock, G. (Director). (1963). *Murder at the gallop* [Film]. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.
<https://archive.org/details/Murder.at.the.Gallop.1963>