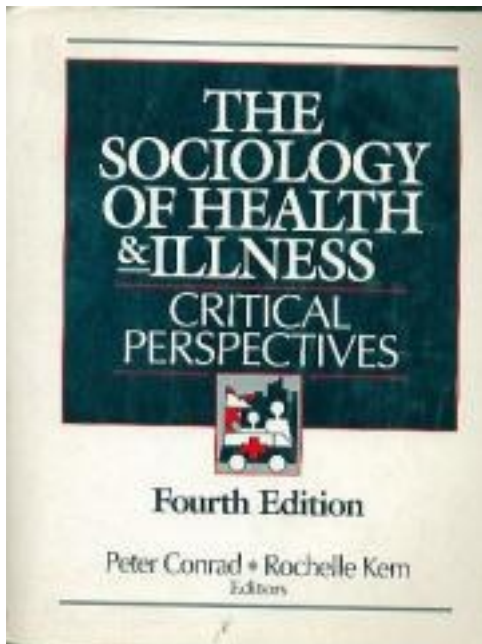


# The Sociology of Health and Illness: Critical Perspectives



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General Introduction

Toward a Sociology of Health and Illness

The increase in medical sociology courses and the number of medical sociological journals now extant are but two indicators of rapid development in this field.<sup>1</sup> The knowledge base of medical sociology expanded apace so that

this discipline moved in less than two decades from an esoteric subspecialty taught in a few graduate departments to a central concern of sociologists and sociology students. The causes of this growth are too many and too complex to be within the scope of this book. However, a few of the major factors underlying this development are noted below.

The rise of chronic illness as a central medical and social problem has led physicians, health planners, and public health officials to look to sociology for help in understanding and dealing with this major health concern. In addition, increased government involvement in medical care has created research opportunities and funding for sociologists to study the organization and delivery of medical care. Sociologists have also become increasingly involved in medical education, as evidenced by the large number of sociologists currently on medical school faculties. Further, since the 1960s the social and political struggles over health and medical care have become major social issues, thus drawing additional researchers and students to the field. Indeed, some sociologists have come to see the organization of medicine and the way medical services are delivered as social problems in themselves. In recent years, sociologists have been deeply involved in research on how to prevent HIV-AIDS and best stem the AIDS epidemic.

Traditionally, the sociological study of illness and medicine has been called simply medical sociology. Strauss (1957) differentiated between sociology "of" medicine and sociology "in" medicine. Sociology of medicine focuses on the study of medicine to illuminate some sociological concern (e.g., patient-practitioner relationships, the role of professions in society). Sociology in

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