

Abstract

Anthropologists have turned in increasing numbers to carry out investigation on health care systems, etiologies and management of diseases and illnesses in societies of differing complexity. What is apparent from their works is that little has been done on mental illness with regard to etiological concepts, health seeking behaviour and role of traditional health care in the management of the problems particularly in the non- Western societies. This underscores the primacy of looking at these aspects in a given culture, thereby providing this study a major point for departure. This study was undertaken among the Bukusu community of Bungoma District. The study discusses mental illness with regard to causation, perception and resources employed in the management of the problem. It tries to investigate the extent to which Babukusu are aware of various signs and symptoms of psychiatric disorders and their attitudes towards the mentally ill and/or mental illness. The study also examines factors that may influence therapeutic choice, etiological concepts and perception of mental illness. The study found that there are various definitions of mental illness and that physical appearance and behaviour are major factors in identifying signs and symptoms of mental illness. As a result, the study found, socioeconomic factors notwithstanding, conditions as sadness, hopelessness, restlessness are not considered by the majority to be in the domain of mental illness. This, it is concluded, is a consequence of cultural perception in which mental illness is mainly considered as the wildest insanity. As a result, it was found, attitudes towards mental illness are for the most part negative. There is, however, evidence to suggest that the severely afflicted mental patients are likely to face worse treatment than the less afflicted. Further, the study found that etiologies of mental illness are multiple and so are therapies. Thus, it is concluded, no single etiologic model can be posited to explain the occurrence of mental illness. Also the study found that socioeconomic factors notwithstanding, a majority attribute the occurrence of mental illness to social etiological concepts. This, it is concluded, would have consequences for the sort of therapy chosen. The findings also show, and indeed it is one conclusion of this study, that no single system of health care can adequately deal with the problem of mental illness. It is also observed that concurrent or serial use of different healing systems in search of cure seems to be common among the Bukusu society. It is also one major finding of this study that among factors as socioeconomic status, past experience, social skill of therapists and satisfaction of the users, etiological concepts contribute substantially to therapeutic choice. A major conclusion here is that traditional healing system is perceived as providing effective health care services and to the satisfaction of those who utilize it. Support system, therefore, exists that guarantees its future.