



# Mental Institutions in America: Social Policy to 1875

Gerald N. Grob

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Mental Institutions in America: Social Policy to 1875 examines how American society responded to complex problems arising out of mental illness in the nineteenth century. All societies have had to confront sickness, disease, and dependency, and have developed their own ways of dealing with these phenomena. The mental hospital became the characteristic institution charged with the responsibility of providing care and treatment for individuals seemingly incapable of caring for themselves during protracted periods of incapacitation.

The services rendered by the hospital were of benefit not merely to the afflicted individual but to the community. Such an institution embodied a series of moral imperatives by providing humane and scientific treatment of disabled individuals, many of whose families were unable to care for them at home or to pay the high costs of private institutional care. Yet the mental hospital has always been more than simply an institution that offered care and treatment for the sick and disabled. Its structure and functions have usually been linked with a variety of external economic, political, social, and intellectual forces, if only because the way in which a society handled problems of disease and dependency was partly governed by its social structure and values.

The definition of disease, the criteria for institutionalization, the financial and administrative structures governing hospitals, the nature of the decision-making process, differential care and treatment of various socio-economic groups were issues that transcended strictly medical and scientific considerations. *Mental Institutions in America* attempts to interpret the mental hospital as a social as well as a medical institution and to illuminate the evolution of policy toward dependent groups such as the mentally ill. This classic text brilliantly studies the past in depth and on its own terms.



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