

Development of Psychopathology

Augustine Trine*

Department of Psychology, State Islamic University of Raden Intan, Lampung, Indonesia

Psychopathology is the study of abnormal cognitions, behavior and experiences which differs according to social norms and rests upon a number of constructs that are deemed to be the social norm at any particular era. It can be broadly separated into descriptive and explanatory. Descriptive psychopathology involves categorizing, defining and understanding symptoms as reported by people and observed through their behavior which is then assessed according to a social norm. Explanatory psychopathology looks to find explanations for certain kinds of symptoms according to theoretical models such as psychodynamics, cognitive behavioral therapy or through understanding how they have been constructed by drawing upon Constructivist Grounded Theory or Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. A practitioner in a clinical or academic field is referred to as a psychopathologist.

Biological psychopathology is the study of the biological etiology of mental illnesses with a particular emphasis on the genetic and neurophysiological basis of clinical psychology. Biological psychopathology attempts to explain psychiatric disorders using multiple levels of analysis from the genome to brain functioning to behavior. Although closely related to clinical psychology, it is fundamentally an interdisciplinary approach that attempts to synthesize methods across fields such as neuroscience, psychopharmacology, biochemistry, genetics, and physiology. It is known by several alternative names, including “clinical neuroscience” and “experimental psychopathology.” Due to the focus on biological processes of the central and peripheral nervous systems, biological psychopathology has been important in developing new biologically-based treatments for mental disorders.

Biological psychopathology is a field that focuses mostly on the research and understanding the biological basis of major mental disorders such as bipolar and unipolar affective disorder, schizophrenia and Alzheimer’s disease. Much of the understanding thus far has come from neuroimaging techniques such as radiotracer positron emission tomography (PET), and functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) scans, as well as genetic studies. Together, neuroimaging with multimodal PET/fMRI, and pharmacological investigations are revealing how the differences in behaviorally-relevant brain activations can arise from underlying variations in certain brain signaling pathways.

Understanding the detailed interplay between neurotransmitters and the psychiatric drugs that affect them are key to the research within this field. Significant research includes investigations relevant to biological bases such as biochemical, genetic, physiological, neurological, and anatomical fields. In a clinical viewpoint, the etiology of these diseases takes into account various therapies, diet, drugs, potential environmental contaminants, exercise, and adverse effects of life stressors, all of which can cause noticeable biochemical changes.

Child psychopathology refers to the scientific study of mental disorders in children and adolescents. Oppositional defiant disorder, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, and autism spectrum disorder are examples of psychopathology that are typically first diagnosed during childhood. Mental health providers who work with children and adolescents are informed by research in developmental psychology, clinical child psychology, and family systems. Lists of child and adult mental disorders can be found in the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems, 10th Edition (ICD-10), published by the World Health Organization (WHO) and in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5), published by the American Psychiatric Association. In addition, the Diagnostic Classification of Mental Health and Developmental Disorders of Infancy and Early Childhood (DC: 0-3R) is used in assessing mental health and developmental disorders in children up to age five.

The etiology of child psychopathology has many explanations which differ from case to case. Many psychopathological disorders in children involve genetic and physiological mechanisms, though there are still many without any physical grounds. It is absolutely imperative that multiple sources of data be gathered. Diagnosing the psychopathology of children is daunting. It is influenced by development and context, in addition to the traditional sources. Interviews with parents about school, etc., are inadequate. Either reports from teachers or direct observation by the professional are critical. The disorders with physical or biological mechanisms are easier to diagnose in children and are often diagnosed earlier in childhood. However, there are some disorders, no matter the mechanisms, that are not identified until adulthood. There is also reason to believe that there is co-morbidity of disorders, in that if one disorder is present, there is often another.

Correspondence to: Augustine Trine, Department of Psychiatry, State Islamic University of Raden Intan, Lampung, Indonesia, E-mail: Augustine@gmail.com

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Early explanations for mental illnesses were influenced by religious belief and superstition. Psychological conditions that are now classified as mental disorders were initially attributed to possessions by evil spirits, demons, and the devil. This idea was widely accepted up until the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Individuals who suffered from these so-called “possessions” were tortured as treatment or as Foucault outlines in the History of Madness: viewed as seers. Religious practitioners used this technique in hoping to bring their patients back to sanity but increasingly there was the shift to the great confinement.