Psychopathology: is it still important for clinical practice?

Ana F. Freitas¹, A. Gameiro¹, and H. Esteves¹


Abstract

Introduction: In the last years, psychiatry has given primarily importance to the construction of categorical classification systems (DSM and ICD), neglecting the importance of recognizing and describing the signs and symptoms of mental illnesses. On the other hand, the increasing use of scales and questionnaires has further undermined the semiotic investigation, acting as if psychopathology is a transparent instrument in which symptoms are seen as stable entities over time. This idea is wrong, as Jaspers has already postulated, considering psychopathology as a dynamic and continuously evolving entity.

Objectives: To provide a review to understand the importance of psychopathology in today’s psychiatric practice.

Methods: A literature review was taken using PubMed and Medscape databases with the following search terms: psychopathology, practice, importance.

Results: Psychopathology means the study of the diseases of the soul, spirit or mind. It appeared as an organized discipline, in the early XX century, with the publication of Karl Jaspers “Allgemeine Psychopathologie” (General Psychopathology). Psychopathology can be seen essentially from two perspectives: the phenomenological (Comprehensive or Descriptive Psychopathology) and the psychodynamic (Explanatory Psychopathology). In 1952, a categorical system (DSM) appeared with the purpose of facilitating diagnosis and treatment of soldiers. Since then, it has been an important tool, having been revised several times. Other tools appeared and are used currently – such as questionnaires and scales – trying to bring objectivity to clinical practice. In the last 20 years, neurosciences and genomics have also contributed to revolutionary changes in psychiatry. Yet, phenomenological psychopathology maintains a core role in clinical practice and could have an important place in the future growth of scientific psychiatry.

Discussion and Conclusions: Neuroscience and genetics contributions, the use of questionnaires and scales in the clinical evaluation and classification systems, are in fact relevant tools in clinical practice, which importance should not be neglected. However, they should be used with caution, never in a reductionist way, warning about the misunderstanding of pathology as simply check-lists. Instead, they must be understood in a dynamic/longitudinal perspective. In conclusion, it seems that psychopathology continues to be the main discipline in which psychiatric practice relies.