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“This patient is too complex, but the books taught us to reduce complexity” – qualitative investigation of how causality is being modelled in mental health professional education

Abstract

In this paper we argue that causal models of mental health conditions, as taught and implemented in real life settings, are usually based on an implicit “factor model”, which mimics Spearman’s statistical procedure. While researchers and teachers in the area of mental health talk about embracing complexity and contextual understanding of patient’s inner world, in reality they usually teach students “to reduce complexity” to abstract “factors”, which are supposed to add up and cause psychopathology. This simplistic vision of causality might be dominant in mental health education.

Method: we study a recent set of university- and university of applied sciences level textbooks on diagnostic decision making. We retrieve a representative sample of case reports conducted by students of the Dutch basic clinical registration (BAPD) and Mental Health Nurse Practitioners (VS GGZ) registration. Ethnography-based qualitative data analysis is applied to both data sets in order to identify how causality is constructed in clinical reasoning.

Conclusion: While many students in the field of mental health start their studies with curiosity about complex causality and idiosyncrasy of patient’s condition, they may later un-learn complex thinking and adhere to simplified “factor models” of mental health, which later provide poor prognostic capabilities in real-life clinical settings.