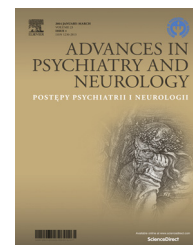


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Review/Praca poglądowa

Karl Jaspers' Psychopathology and contemporary psychiatry

Psychopatologia Karla Jaspersa a psychiatria współczesna

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: 29.09.2014

Accepted: 12.11.2014

Available online: 20.11.2014

Keywords:

- Karl Jaspers
- Psychopathology
- Descriptive psychopathology
- Philosophy of psychiatry

Słowa kluczowe:

- Karl Jaspers
- psychopatologia
- psychopatologia opisowa
- filozofia psychiatrii

ABSTRACT

The book *Allgemeine Psychopathologie (General Psychopathology)* by Karl Jaspers has been a source of constant inspiration influencing generations of psychiatrists over the past century. The aim of this paper is to outline the theoretical perspectives given by Jaspers in his work, with reference to modern times, and particularly to contemporary clinical practice and research. The background of *General Psychopathology* and the areas of investigation dealt with in the book are discussed; moreover, specific features of Jaspers' descriptive psychopathology are characterized.

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The monumental work by Karl Jaspers published a century ago, *Allgemeine Psychopathologie* (1913) [1], has been a constant source of inspiration for European and American psychiatry. Moreover, it is still an object of considerations and inspiration in the contemporary debate on how to develop an adequate classification of psychopathology, and constitutes a frame of reference for changes in psychiatry. What has decided about the uniqueness of this book and what picture

of contemporary psychiatry emerges from an analysis of the Heidelbergian psychiatrist's and philosopher's work? What would psychopathology construed along the lines of Jaspers' concept be like, and what in his approach would seem nowadays archaic and useless? The present author's task is to outline in this article the theoretical and clinical perspectives adopted by Karl Jaspers, with reference to the modern times and particularly, to current clinical practice and

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.pin.2014.11.001>

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research, since the discussion concerning his *General Psychopathology* should not be of solely historical nature, irrespective of the contemporary reality.

Background of General Psychopathology

As a medical school graduate Karl Jaspers got engaged in clinical practice at the Heidelberg psychiatric clinic. He was a member of the therapeutic community therein for some years. His book was not only deeply embedded in local realities and discussions going on in the field of psychiatry of that time, but also referred to issues of debate in European science and philosophy. Jaspers' work was quite considerably influenced by the German academic psychiatry of the 1870s and 1880s. He himself described this period – immediately preceding his own research in psychiatry – as the development of “brain mythology”. The figure of an alienist deeply engaged in clinical practice has been replaced then by that of a “brain pathologist”, as exemplified by Meynert and Flesching. In accordance with the idea ascribed to Wilhelm Griesinger that “mental disorders are diseases of the brain”, the focus of attention has shifted from the patient and his experience to a detailed and thorough histopathological examination of his brain. In this context Jaspers felt obliged to outline a broader research perspective, including not only the assumptions of the “first biological psychiatry” [2], but also more anthropological and humanist research instruments. However, Jaspers' final view on the nature of mental disorders was rather balanced. His analyses presented in *General Psychopathology* evidence his awareness of interrelations between mental and biological aspects of human life, of mutual influences and limitations existing between the body and soul, particularly salient in medical conditions. While Jaspers generally acknowledges the need for the development of neurobiological sciences, yet he recognizes the difficulty in theoretical grasping of the relationship between mental and somatic events. He does not believe that any simple relation between a cerebral change (brain damage) and mental change (disorder) can be determined. He is apprehensive about consequences of the biological model domination, i.e. about the “somatic superstition” that neurobiological research will solve all the problems of the ambiguous status and therapeutic ineffectiveness of psychiatry of that time [1].

Karl Jaspers wrote his book as a 30-year-old physician and psychiatrist with no significant research and clinical experience. Nevertheless, he was able to refer the discussions conducted at that time in the field of psychopathology to the framework of anthropological, epistemological and existential considerations. In his analyses the ideas proposed by Wilhelm Dilthey, Max Weber, neo-Kantianism, or Edmund Husserl were creatively implemented, resulting in a synthesis of the knowledge available in his time and a courageous application of humanist methods to psychiatry. Generally, Karl Jaspers' contribution to the developments in the domain of psychopathology is based on a constation that rejection of meta-theoretical and philosophical reflections may lead only to the emergence of hidden forms of ideology and dogmatism.

Areas of psychopathological investigations

The extensive, multi-level and multi-faceted book by the Heidelbergian psychiatrist may turn out to be a rather difficult reading material for practitioners and clinicians. However, since the book has the form of a manual, it can be fruitful for the reader to get acquainted with selected fragments and chapters only, and not necessarily with the complete work. Nevertheless, the aim of this paper is to present a general overview of the *General Psychopathology*. According to the contemporary psychiatrist, Mario Maj [3], three significant areas of reflection can be distinguished in the *General Psychopathology*: epistemological problems, issues of mental disorders classification, and the subjective dimension of disorders.

1. In a holistic approach to psychopathology besides analysis of particular disorders larger-scale epistemological issues also must be taken into account. Thus, theoretical and conceptual assumptions present in the psychiatric practice should be reconstructed, including the problem of proper research methods, awareness of one's own theoretical perspective, recognition of the patient's ways of conceptualization of the world, and knowledge about limitations inherent in attempts at objectivization of experiences of people with mental disorders. The issue of particular importance to Jaspers was the characterization of different scientific and research perspectives, of their possibilities and limitations. Despite his methodological pluralism and his acknowledging the necessity for development and acquirement of various research methods and therapeutic perspectives, Jaspers above all compares explanatory methods (i.e. seeking the causes and mechanisms of illness) with methods of understanding (i.e. analyzing and interpreting the meaning of patients' experiences and behaviors). Moreover, the problem emerges on the relationship between psychiatry on the one hand and neurobiology and genetics on the other. An important aspect of Jaspersian philosophical perspective is his existential skepticism or agnosticism, i.e. the impossibility of an overall grasp of the whole reality of the patient's world. Mario Maj emphasizes that such epistemological issues are particularly salient in the current debate on the “atheoretical” character of contemporary psychiatric classifications (first and foremost – DSM [4]), and in a more thorough explanation of mental disorders due to the development of neurobiology.
2. The problems of mental disorders' classification are focused on possibilities of a clear-cut demarcation of particular nosological units and on differentiation between states of mental health and illness. Jaspers polemizes with the Kraepelinian assumption that there are separate pathological entities equivalent to natural kinds, characterized by a similar etiology, pathogenesis, symptomatology, prognosis, and, possibly, treatment. He criticizes also the so-called “mosaic-like structure of mental disorders” supposedly consisting of identical components or basic blocks that in various configurations constitute all mental diseases. Contrariwise, according to Jaspers' approach psychiatric classifications are always tentative

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