

THE NEED FOR A NEUROBIOLOGICAL APPROACH TO MENTAL ILLNESS IN SAUDI ARABIA: THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF A CASE SERIES

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Introduction: Saudi Arabia has unique religious and cultural traditions that influence people's concepts of the nature of mental illness and psychiatry. There is a limited literature describing the nature and effect of this influence and its consequences.

Objective and Method: To present a neuropsychiatric case series that demonstrates the effects of cultural and religious perceptions of mental illness. Thematic analysis of clinical case narratives was used to extract relevant themes related to the perceptions of mental illness in this country and how it affects care. **Results and Discussion:** 10 case vignettes are presented. Relevant themes describing cultural/religious perceptions of mental illness included: 1) in adherence to Islamic principles can directly lead to psychiatric illness; 2) psychiatric illness can be a form of "divine punishment", deserved because of bad deeds; 3) psychiatric illness is the result of demonic (Jinn) possession; 4) psychiatric illness can be a "divine test". Themes relevant to the impact on care include: 1) resorting to mystical evaluations such as Qura'nic reading as sole treatments; 2) rejection of psychiatric services and delay in crucial neurological tests; 3) providing a venue for conversion symptoms to sustain themselves; 4) providing a venue of suggestion techniques to work; 5) stigmatization and discrimination; 6) a source of support. **DISCUSSION:** We propose that emphasizing brain-behavior relationships and a neuropsychiatric approach may directly mitigate negative effects derived from traditional religious and cultural beliefs in Saudi Arabia while respecting people's religious beliefs otherwise. Suggestions are given as to how this paradigmatic shift can be introduced, and how further research may proceed in this area.