CHAPTER ONE:
ETIOLOGY OF PSYCHIATRIC ILLNESS

At the end of the chapter the student should be able to:

a. Discuss the difficulties associated with etiology in psychiatry.

b. Discuss the nature vs. nurture controversy

c. Classify cause of psychiatric illness

d. Explain some specific etiological factors to psychiatric illness

Etiology deals with the science or philosophy of causation of disease. It’s concerned with ascertaining which features of the individual and the environment are relevant and causal and which mechanisms in the body are involved in the illness.

Complexity of causes of psychiatric illness

Two factors complicate the etiology of psychiatric illness. Etiology or physical illness is usually straight.

1. Causes are often remote in time from the effects that they produce e.g. childhood experiences may predispose to future problems e.g. rape experience making one fail to establish relationships with opposite sex. Fetal distress predisposing to epilepsy in future.

2. A single cause may lead to several effects e.g.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cause</th>
<th>Effects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Over loving/-timidity</td>
<td>-timidity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protecting</td>
<td>-easy depression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>-poor frustration tolerance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Also a simple effect may arise from several causes

Genetically vulnerability
Parental deprivation
Social events e.g. divorce
Childhood experiences e.g.
Heredity and environment as influences of behavior and development

The differences between individuals or groups is attributable to the above two factors. Heredity is the source of both similarities and differences among individuals. The environmental influences are those that act upon organism at the earlier stages of development within the mother’s womb and later external environment after birth. Studies on monozygotic twins (identical) reared separately have shown that differences are attributable to the environmental factors e.g. Family environment, School environment, Cultural patterns of the society

The similarities are due to the hereditary factors. Hereditary & environmental factors are interdependent factors/forces. Hereditary supplies the potential talent which the favorable environment brings out. It also determines the possible limits of accomplishment for the individual in any given situation. The environment determines how close to these limits of performance any individual can achieve in a given situation.

The Nature – Nature controversy

The nature (heredity) – nature (environment) debate really concerns the relative importance of heredity & environment. But the general agreement is that human behavior & development is determined by the interaction of the two factors. Therefore, the causation of psychiatric illness is as a result of a complex interaction of a number of factors residing within the individual (Intrinsic factors) and environment (extrinsic factors). Initial attempts to establish a single etiological factor were fruitless. Multiple causation is the rule. The relative importance of intrinsic and extrinsic factors varies according to the:

- Type of illness – schizophrenia increases intrinsic
- The individual – psychopath – drug abuse.

There is a continuous interaction of intrinsic and extrinsic factors to bring about psychiatric illness.
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