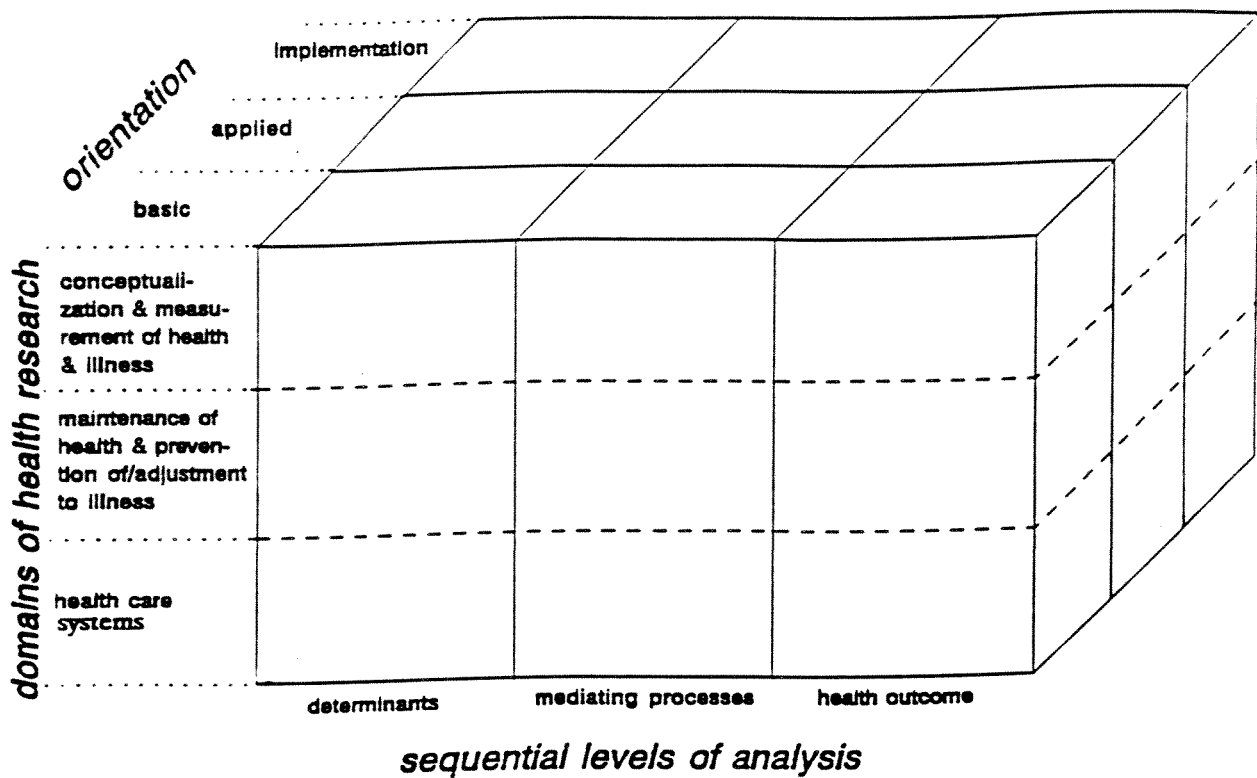


# A STRUCTURAL FRAMEWORK OF PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH RESEARCH



## A. Domains of health research

The domains of psychological health research can be broadly divided into three categories which concern (1) the conceptualization and measurement of health and illness, (2) maintenance of health and prevention of/adjustment to illness, and (3) factors relating to health care systems.

It should be noted that the boundaries between these three categories are flexible, also, that this is the major dimension along which research projects are classified.

### (1) Conceptualization and measurement of health and illness

The first domain is the basic level of approaching health and illness phenomena. This domain is oriented towards fundamental issues without specific reference to applications per se. One example would be the investigation of lay theories of health and illness as well as their influence on processes of symptom recognition and interpretation. Another example would be the influence of cultural factors and gender on health and illness behavior.

Much ongoing research aimed at a better understanding of both the processes involved in, and the causes, diagnosis and treatment possibilities of bio-psychological disorders also falls into this domain. Fundamental research on psychophysiological and neuropsychological factors in cognitive, emotional, and social functioning belongs to this category.

Furthermore, basic assessment and diagnostic research, such as the development, testing and application of questionnaires and interview techniques is included in this domain. For example, the construction of scales for the assessment of symptomatology, quality of life, and ways of coping with critical life events would fall within this domain.

*(2) Maintenance of health and prevention of/adjustment to illness*

The second domain refers to aspects of both primary and secondary prevention. Health promotion and primary prevention have been of increasing concern to researchers and practitioners in recent years because of changing patterns of illness. Until the twentieth century, the major causes of illness and death were disorders such as tuberculosis, pneumonia, and other infectious diseases. Now, however, conditions such as coronary heart disease, strokes, cancer, and accidents are the main causes of death. Since it has been estimated that a substantial proportion of the deaths from these causes are due to modifiable factors (Centers for Disease Control, 1980), the task of installing good habits and changing bad ones has become vitally important as well as the restructuring of situations which may provoke or foster bad habits.

High rates of mental illness have also been of great concern in recent years. For example, psychological disorders are alleged to account for 28% of people registered as disabled according to the Disablement Insurance Act (WAO) in 1990 (Schröers, 1993). Affective and anxiety disorders, and distress in general, may be triggered by a variety of factors: loss of a loved one, job loss or work stress, chronic lack of social support, early childhood and recent traumatic experiences and, in a small percentage, by congenital factors. Early detection of common etiological factors, identification of risk-prone groups in society as well as the identification of situations (e.g. organizational structure) which contain health risks, and the development of prevention policies are central concerns of clinical, experimental, social, organizational and developmental psychology.

The study of coping with stress and illness forms another important part of this domain. The focus here is on secondary prevention and psychological adjustment to acute, ongoing, and chronic stress and illness. Coping has been defined as the process of managing external or internal demands that are perceived as taxing or exceeding a person's resources. Coping processes have been identified as important moderators of the impact of stressful life events (e.g. trauma, loss of a person) on health. More recently the processes of coping with chronic illnesses and the interactions between coping and illness have become important areas of psychological research. Study of the coping strategies of parents of chronically ill children and the impact that these strategies have on the health and well-being of these parents would be an example of a study in this domain, as would be the study of the impact of dementia on family and health care professionals. Finally, research on the psychophysiological and neurophysiological processes that mediate between the experience of critical life events and health outcome would also form an important part of this domain.

It is important to stress that studies within this domain do not consider "health" purely as an outcome variable, as is frequently the case. "Health" is a general term for an interrelated set of processes, not simply an outcome variable. For example, the mechanisms underlying precursors of depression and/or other deteriorations of "healthy" functioning are not yet adequately understood.

### *(3) Health care systems*

Recent trends, such as the increase in the number of elderly persons in our society, or the rise in medical costs, have led to major reorganizations within the health care system. Assessment of the efficacy of health care and health care systems is important not only to ensure efficiency at an organizational level and low costs, but to maximize personal well-being. Issues relating to *health care systems* form the third domain of health research. Central to this domain is the treatment within health care systems of mental and physical disorders and debilities (including studies of treatment context, type, and efficacy). Studies of patient-practitioner interaction belong to this category, as do studies on the physically and mentally ill and the impact of the growing number of elderly on various aspects of health care (systems). An example in this domain would be the comparative study of the impact on patients' health of placement in sheltered housing versus in-patient care. A further example is the cognitive and behavioral changes that define the condition dementia to establish precisely the patterns of impaired and preserved abilities, which consequently have implications for care and rehabilitation. On the macro level, research on the impact of health policy on health and illness would form part of this domain.

### **B. Sequential level of analysis**

The remaining two dimensions of the cube (described in this and the next sections) are fairly self-explanatory. The second concerns the level of analysis. The study of the three domains of health research outlined above typically covers three sequential levels of analysis from determinants through mediating processes to health outcome. Using the study of health impairing behavior patterns as an illustration, psychologists are not only interested in their social determinants, but also in the processes that mediate their impact on health. For example, research on alcoholism has looked at personality and social characteristics of alcoholics and at physiological and behavioral and psychological processes mediating the impact of excessive alcohol consumption on health. Similarly, psychoimmunophysiological research has provided important insights into the processes which mediate the relationship between psychosocial stressors and health outcome.

### **C. Orientation**

Finally, the orientation of research, the third dimension of the cube, can range from basic through applied to the implementation of research findings for the development of health policies. For example, the study of the modification of health impairing behavior patterns would be an application either of basic clinical theories and research on psychotherapy or basic social psychological theories and research on attitude and behavior change, or the restructuring of work along the lines of ergonomic findings. Another example is the study of

linguistic behavior in healthy and aphasic subjects, which would subsequently encourage research into the development of rehabilitation programs. If it is successful, then this applied research should result in the implementation of large scale national or international programs.