Biography Inscribed in Biology:

The Diagnostic Criteria for Psychosomatic Research and the Embodiment of Lived Experience

Ralph I. Horwitz, MD

The publication of Guidi and colleagues' systematic review of 30 years of research using the Diagnostic Criteria for Psychosomatic Research (DCPR) marks a crucial moment in our understanding of how psychological and social factors shape health outcomes. Across 96 studies encompassing diverse medical settings, this comprehensive review demonstrates that the DCPR identifies clinically significant syndromes that standard psychiatric nosology consistently fails to capture. More importantly, these findings challenge us to reconceptualize what we term "psychosocial factors" as fundamental determinants of biology itself. The DCPR framework, particularly through its emphasis on allostatic overload, provides compelling evidence that biography becomes biology, that lived experience is literally inscribed into our physiological systems.[1,2]

The systematic review presents striking findings. DCPR syndromes were prevalent across clinical populations, often exceeding the prevalence of formal psychiatric diagnoses. Demoralization, for instance, showed a median prevalence of 23.8% in medical settings, while allostatic overload ranged from 9.3% to 57.5%, with a median of 20.1%. Critically, when DCPR assessments were administered alongside *DSM*/*ICD* diagnostic evaluations, a substantial proportion of patients with DCPR syndromes did not meet criteria for any psychiatric disorder. In multiple studies, the number of DCPR diagnoses was 2-fold that of *DSM*/*ICD* diagnoses, and patients with psychiatric diagnoses frequently presented with additional DCPR syndromes that provided meaningful clinical characterization beyond their formal diagnosis.[1]

These syndromes span several clinical domains: stress and psychological manifestations (allostatic overload, demoralization, irritable mood); abnormal illness behavior and somatization (health anxiety, disease phobia, thanatophobia, hypochondriasis, illness denial, persistent somatization, conversion symptoms, anniversary reaction, and somatic symptoms secondary to psychiatric disorder); and personality features (alexithymia, type A behavior). What unifies these apparently diverse phenomena is that they represent the clinical manifestation of how individual life histories, chronic stressors, coping resources, and illness experiences become embodied.[2,3]

The concept of allostatic overload, central to the DCPR framework, provides the theoretical bridge between biography and biology. Bruce McEwen's seminal work on allostasis and allostatic load in the 1990s fundamentally reconceptualized how we understand the relationship between stress and health. McEwen defined allostasis as the process of achieving stability through change, characterizing the constant physiological adjustments that organisms make to maintain viability in the face of environmental challenges. Allostatic load, conversely, represents the cumulative burden that accrues when allostatic systems are repeatedly activated or fail to shutdown appropriately after stress exposure. This concept moved beyond the older homeostatic model to recognize that the body's regulatory systems are not simply switched on and off but rather are adaptive and can become maladaptive when chronically activated.[4,5]

The DCPR operationalization of allostatic overload captures precisely this phenomenon. The diagnostic criteria require both an identifiable source of distress that taxes individual coping skills and associated manifestations of sleep disruption, lack of energy, anxiety, sadness, and, significantly, impairment in environmental mastery (feeling overwhelmed by everyday demands). These criteria describe the breakdown of adaptive capacity under sustained environmental demand. When Guidi and colleagues found allostatic overload prevalence as high as 57.5% in some clinical populations, they were documenting the frequency with which patients' biographical circumstances have exceeded their physiological capacity to maintain stability.[1,6,7]

McEwen and colleagues demonstrated that chronic stress exposure results in measurable changes across multiple biological systems: sustained elevation of cortisol and catecholamines, alterations in inflammatory markers, changes in metabolic function, and structural remodeling of brain regions including the hippocampus and prefrontal cortex. These are not transient functional changes but represent the biological embedding of experience. The person who has endured years of financial insecurity, who has navigated chronic workplace harassment, or who has managed the demands of caring for a disabled family member while working multiple jobs has their hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis, their immune system, and their cardiovascular reactivity fundamentally altered by these

experiences. Their biography has quite literally been written into their biology.[6,8]

This reconceptualization moves us decisively beyond Cartesian mind-body dualism. The traditional dualist framework positions mental and physical as separate domains that mysteriously influence one another across some ontological divide. Even much contemporary discussion of "psychosocial factors affecting medical conditions" implicitly maintains this separation, suggesting that psychological factors from one domain act upon medical conditions in another. The allostatic load framework dissolves this distinction. There is no mind acting on the body, no psychology influencing biology across a categorical boundary. Rather, social experience and psychological processes are biological processes.[9] The chronic activation of stress response systems in the face of sustained life difficulties is simultaneously a psychological experience (feeling overwhelmed, demoralized, anxious) and a biological state (elevated cortisol, altered immune function, cardiovascular strain).

Consider demoralization, the second most prevalent DCPR syndrome in this review. The diagnostic criteria describe a prolonged feeling state characterized by helplessness and subjective incompetence, the perception of being unable to cope with pressing problems. Critically, demoralization was found to be frequently independent of major depressive disorder, indicating that it represents a distinct clinical phenomenon.[1,10]

From a conventional Cartesian perspective, we might describe demoralization as a psychological state that increases vulnerability to physical illness. But the allostatic framework suggests something more profound: the sustained experience of helplessness and perceived lack of control is itself a chronic stressor that drives allostatic load. This is not merely a subjective experience happening in parallel to biological processes; the loss of meaning and agency represents a fundamental threat to an organism's ability to navigate its environment, triggering sustained stress response activation.[10,11]

The illness behavior syndromes identified by the DCPR similarly reflect the biological embedding of experience. Health anxiety, disease phobia, and illness denial are patterns of relating to one's body and illness that emerge from biographical context. The patient with health anxiety whose parent died suddenly of myocardial infarction, the patient with illness denial who witnessed a family member's deterioration through prolonged medical treatment, the patient whose persistent somatization reflects years of dismissal of legitimate concerns by medical providers have experience that shapes current perception and behavior.[1,12] But this is not simply a matter of "psychological" patterns overlaying "biological" disease. The sustained vigilance of health anxiety, the physiological arousal triggered by disease-related stimuli, and the chronic activation of stress systems in the face of denied illness all represent the biological instantiation of learned patterns of threat detection and response.[13,14]

Type A behavior with the chronic sense of time urgency, hostility, and competitive drive emerges from and is sustained by particular social and cultural contexts. The individual who develops type A patterns typically does so in environments that reward and reinforce such behavior, whether through family dynamics that emphasized achievement and performance or work cultures that valorize overcommitment and competitiveness.[1] These behavioral patterns are inseparable from their physiological correlates: heightened cardiovascular reactivity, elevated catecholamines, increased inflammatory markers. The person exhibiting type A behavior is not someone whose psychology is affecting their biology; they are someone whose learned patterns of engaging with their social world are simultaneously psychological and biological patterns.

The clinical implications of recognizing biography as biology are substantial. If DCPR syndromes represent the embodiment of lived experience rather than merely psychosocial "factors," then therapeutic interventions must address this fundamental biological inscription. The review notes that demoralization responds to psychotherapeutic approaches, particularly Well-Being Therapy, while showing limited response to antidepressant medications.[10] Psychotherapy that restores a sense of agency, competence, and purpose is not simply treating symptoms but facilitating a rearrangement of the biological patterns that inscribe the demoralized state.

Similarly, interventions for allostatic overload must recognize that they are addressing not abstract "stress" but the accumulated biological burden of biographical circumstances. Lifestyle modification, stress reduction, and improved social support are interventions that work not by addressing psychosocial factors that influence biology but by changing the environmental and behavioral contexts that drive sustained allostatic activation.[6] When we help a patient reduce allostatic load, we are quite literally changing their biology by changing their biography going forward.

The DCPR framework thus provides what the authors describe as a "clinimetric" approach, described as a system of clinical measurement that captures the complexity of how individuals' life circumstances, coping resources, illness experiences, and constitutional vulnerabilities interact to produce clinical presentations.[15] By identifying syndromes like allostatic overload, demoralization, and maladaptive illness behavior that standard psychiatric nosology misses, the DCPR allow clinicians to recognize

and address the biological consequences of lived experience.[1,6,10,12]

This reconceptualization has profound implications for how we understand health and disease more broadly. The traditional biomedical model locates disease primarily in tissue pathology, with "psychosocial factors" as external influences on an essentially biological process. The DCPR framework, grounded in allostatic load theory, suggests instead that for many conditions, the distinction between biological disease and psychosocial distress is artificial. The patient with persistent somatization, the patient with demoralization following myocardial infarction, and the patient with illness denial compromising their diabetes management are experiencing biology and biography as co-constitutive of disease and treatment response.[16]

Thirty years of DCPR research, as synthesized in this systematic review, demonstrates that biographical experience is not merely context for disease but constitutive of it. The stress of chronic life difficulties, the meaning-making around illness, and the learned patterns of emotional processing and behavioral response are not psychological epiphenomena accompanying biological pathology but fundamental determinants of physiological function and disease trajectory.[16] When we diagnose allostatic overload or demoralization, we are identifying the clinical manifestations of biography inscribed in biology.[6,7,9,10] This is not dualism but a more sophisticated understanding of biology as a dynamic system continuously shaped by the lived experience of the organism. The DCPR provide the clinical tools to recognize and address this fundamental biological reality.

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Author Affiliations: Temple University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Corresponding Author: Ralph I. Horwitz, MD, Aging + Cardiovascular Discovery Center, 3500 N Broad Street, Philadelphia, PA 19140 (horwitzri@gmail.com).

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