A quadruple dose of disorder

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These four text books are designed specifically for students taking undergraduate abnormal psychology at North American universities. They would serve as useful resources on undergraduate psychology courses on this side of the Atlantic. However supplementary reading would be essential to add a European or British dimension to these volumes which are distinctly North American in the conceptual frameworks they use and the empirical research to which they refer. For example, all four tests make explicit reference to fourth edition of Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM IV) published by the American Psychiatric Association. Only Comer mentions in passing that within the UK and throughout Europe the WHO international Classification of Diseases (Chapter 5: Mental and Behavioural Disorders) is in common use and informs research and practice in abnormal and clinical psychology. Important developments in UK evidenced-based psychodynamic psychotherapy, notably Cognitive Analytic Therapy are not mentioned. There is scant reference to the ground breaking work on evidence-based family therapy for eating disorders conducted at the Maudsley Hospital.

Leaving aside the exclusively North American focus of these texts, important therapeutic approaches, particularly family systems approaches and social constructionist approaches, are give far less coverage than they deserve. In contrast cognitive-behavioural
and biological approaches are strongly privileged throughout these volumes with moderate coverage of psychodynamic explanations of abnormal behaviour.

Having noted these reservations, it is only fair to say that the four volumes, which are all more similar than different, achieve their stated aim: to provide an overview of abnormal psychology in an interesting and informed way to undergraduates in this field.

All four text books have between 15 and 19 chapters and span between 500 and 700 pages approx. All four texts open with the consideration of theories about abnormal behaviour from the earliest times to the present with due regard being given to theories which emphasize the biological and psychological and social factors in the etiology of psychological difficulties.

In all four text books an integrative lifespan oriented, bio-psycho-social approach is advocated. The four books deal with research methods in abnormal psychology from a scientist-practitioner model which has gained ascendance in both the US and the UK.

There is also a section in the opening chapters of each of the four texts which addresses the issues of assessment, diagnoses and treatment of psychological difficulties.

Against this backdrop each of the four texts devotes the lion’s share of their chapters to common psychological difficulties, such as childhood disorders, anxiety and mood disorders, psychoses, somatic disorders, sexual disorders, addictions, personality disorders, and psychological problems in older adulthood. The DSM IV conceptualization of psychological problems within each of these categories is privileged within all four text books. However controversies surrounding this type of conceptualization of psychological problems are adequately covered.
Each of the text books closes with a chapter addressing professional issues in the practice of clinical psychology and the organization of services for people with psychological difficulties and the framing of relevant legislative issues.

The chapters that make up the main body of each text are very similar in the types of material they cover. Most chapters open with case studies followed by a description of the clinical features of the disorder. Then the results of epidemiological studies are given. Multiple theoretical explanations are then outlined followed, usually by bio-psycho-social integrative explanations. Summaries of key research findings, illustrative examples of research studies and discussions of controversial ethical issues are commonly presented also. It is a commendable feature of all four texts is that research findings, references and case material is very much up to date.

The four text books share fairly similar sets of features which make them user-friendly learning resources. The texts are well laid out and beautifully illustrated with colour photographs and diagrams. Chapter overviews, summaries and glossaries are common to all four texts. Also these texts have numerous ancillaries including CD ROMs containing case material and interactive exercises; videos containing dramatizations of the various disorders described in the texts; study guides for students; instructor’s guides for lecturers; readers or case-study books of related material; and banks of test items. In addition useful information is available for all four texts on publishers’ web sites.

An important issue is the degree to which these four texts all published in 2001 differ from the previous editions. The oldest of them all, now in its fourth edition (the Seligman, Walker and Rosenhan) was initially published in 1984. Combers text which is also on its fourth edition was initially published in 1992. Significant revisions to both of these texts have occurred over their four editions. The only two texts (by Barlow & Durand and Nolan-Hoeksema) have been brought up to date since they were first published in 1998. However
they have not undergone the level of transformation that the Seligman and Comber books have. Libraries would be well advised to include a recent edition of at least one of these texts in their Abnormal Psychology section. In terms of value for money, the best one is probably the book by Seligman and Walker, which is cheaper than the other three but comprehensive and up to date.

**Brief Biographical Note**