Attempts to reach consensus about the nature of mental disorders have long been fraught with multiple controversies. These include philosophical debates about such topics as mind versus body and nature versus nurture, but have also involved scientific questions regarding the reliability and validity of psychiatric diagnosis—calling into question fundamental conceptions of the disorders themselves. These issues have come to the forefront in recent years with concerns raised during the revision process for the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), which began in 1999. A decade later, the US National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) began work on the Research Domain Criteria project (RDoC). RDoC was developed as a research framework for studying mental disorders in terms of deviations from normative behaviors and cognitive processes, and of perturbations in the neural systems that implement these processes. The framework was explicitly designed to take into account well-known factors in the etiology of mental disorders, including neurodevelopmental trajectories and their interaction with environmental influences and life events.

This presentation will provide an overview of the RDoC project in the context of contemporary viewpoints regarding the diagnosis and treatment of mental disorders, with a particular focus upon the nature of psychopathology as seen from an RDoC perspective. From this basis, the talk will address the ramifications that follow from this position. These include specific implications for diagnosis, treatment, and prevention, but will also include a discussion of such issues as the concept of “cure” for mental disorders and potential changes in societal and cultural views of mental disorders.