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A Sociodevelopmental Pathway to Psychosis: Update and Refinements

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Learning Goal:

To re-appraise and refine our proposed sociodevelopmental model of psychosis.

Abstract Text:

Background

There is strong evidence that a range of adverse socio-environmental exposures, particularly during childhood, increase risk for psychoses (across the spectrum). In synthesising these findings, we have previously proposed a sociodevelopmental pathway, in which exposure to social adversity, over the life course, explains why some develop a psychotic disorder. We have further hypothesised that a higher prevalence of these exposures among some minority ethnic groups and in some northern European cities may, partly at least, underlie the elevated rates of psychotic disorder observed in these populations.

Aim

To re-appraise and refine our proposed sociodevelopmental model of psychosis.

Method

Literature review and analysis of data from recent population-based incidence and case-control studies of first-episode psychosis.

Results

Evidence has continued to accrue implicating various forms of social adversity in the occurrence of psychotic experiences and disorder. Alongside this, strong evidence has emerged suggesting plausible biological (i.e., via dysregulation of the HPA axis and dopamine system) and psychological (i.e., via effects on social cognition) mechanisms that may mediate social adversity and psychosis. Our analyses of data from recent population-based incidence and case-control studies of first-episode psychosis suggest some degree of specificity for adverse experiences involving severe hostility (including discrimination), threat, and violence. These findings fit with other studies, including of mechanisms (e.g., animal models that link hostility and threat with dysregulation of the dopamine system; psychological models that suggest exaggerated appraisals of threat underlie several psychotic experiences).

Conclusion

Developing evidence continues to support a sociodevelopmental pathway to psychosis and further suggests a critical refinement: that what is specific for psychosis is exposure to severe hostility. Higher levels of exposure to hostility, threat, and violence, especially against a background of disadvantage, may explain higher rates of psychotic disorder among some minority ethnic populations.

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