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Strengths and limitations of the social defeat hypothesis of non-affective psychosis.

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Background: The social defeat hypothesis (2005) posits that the experience of subordinate position or outsider status leads to sensitization of the mesolimbic dopamine system and places the individual at an increased psychosis risk. It may explain the increased risks for migrants, city residents, individuals with a low IQ, a history of childhood trauma and/or hearing impairment.

Aims: 1. To review epidemiological and neuro-receptor imaging studies that tested the hypothesis; 2. To discuss criticisms raised; 3. To evaluate the social disadvantage and cultural distance hypotheses.

Method: Literature review.

Results:

1. Epidemiological studies have shown increased risks for other excluded groups: homosexuals and individuals with autism. Neuro-receptor imaging studies have demonstrated dopamine sensitization among non-psychotic individuals with hearing impairment, a history of childhood trauma or migration.
2. Criticism concern (i) the impossibility to measure the experience of defeat and (ii) reverse causality: defeat could be the consequence of a genetic disorder in neurodevelopment, already present before the onset of psychosis. The first point is valid, because individuals tend to give socially desirable replies. Consequently, the hypothesis is based on group comparisons. The second point is less adequate, because it is unlikely that the genes that contribute to a defective neurodevelopment also code for migration, urban upbringing, hearing impairment, etc.
3. A strength of the social disadvantage hypothesis is the possibility to measure the relevant phenomena (e.g., low level of education, unemployment). A limitation is that these phenomena can also be the consequence of disease. The operationalization of cultural distance (i.e., self-assessment of language competence) is not convincing. The social disadvantage-cultural distance hypothesis does not explain the ethnic density effect, because migrants in ethnic dense areas are more disadvantaged and less fluent in the dominant language than other migrants.

Conclusion: the social defeat hypothesis provides a link between epidemiology and biology.

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