

Introduction to mental health science part 1

Supporting document



Document name: Session 1, Section 1.2, Activity 2, Extracts (News Items)
Document date: April 2018
Copyright information: Used under license
OpenLearn course: Introduction to Mental Health Science Part 1
OpenLearn url: www.open.edu/openlearn/ocw/mod/oucontent/view.php?id=72270
External url (Extract 1): www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/03/28/mental-illness-mostly-caused-by-life-events-not-genetics-argue-p/ (Accessed April 2018)
External url (Extract 2): www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-3513134/Depression-triggered-life-traumas-not-genes-Experts-warn-money-spent-researching-biological-factors.html (Accessed April 2018)

EXTRACT 1

Mental illness mostly caused by life events not genetics, argue psychologists

by Sarah Knapton, Science Editor, The Telegraph
28 March 2016 • 7:47pm

Mental illness is largely caused by social crises such as unemployment or childhood abuse and too much money is spent researching genetic and biological factors, psychologists have warned. Over the past decade funding bodies like the Medical Research Council (MRC) have spent hundreds of millions on determining the biology of mental illness.

But while there has been some success in uncovering genes which make people more susceptible to various disorders, specialists say that the true causes of depression and anxiety are from life events and environment, and research should be directed towards understanding the everyday triggers.

Peter Kinderman, Professor of Clinical Psychology at the University of Liverpool, told BBC Radio 4's Today programme: "Of course every single action, every emotion I've ever had involves the brain, so to have a piece of scientific research telling us that the brain is involved in responding emotionally to events doesn't really advance our understanding very much. And yet it detracts from the fact that when unemployment rates go up in a particular locality you get a measurable number of suicides. It detracts from the idea that trauma in childhood is a very very powerful predictor of serious problems like experiencing psychotic events in adult life, so of course the brain is involved and of course genes are involved, but not very much, and an excessive focus on those issues takes us away from these very important social factors".

Almost half of adults will suffer from a mental health condition at some stage in their life and more than a third of GP surgery consultations are due to mental problems. One in four people have been diagnosed with some type of mental health problem - most commonly depression. In addition, 18 per cent said they had suffered from such illness, but never been diagnosed. The UK now has the seventh highest prescribing rate for antidepressants in the Western world, separate figures show, with around four million Britons taking them each year - twice as many as a decade ago. Yet the MRC spends just three per cent of its research budget funding studies into mental illness, most of which goes towards genetics or neuroscience.

Prof Richard Bentall, also of Liverpool University added: "It's a tragedy actually. The UK Medical Research Council is one of the biggest funders of medical research in the UK but if you look at the things that they fund, by far the majority are things like brain scanners or gene sequencing machines,

almost none of it is going towards understanding psychological mechanisms or social circumstances by which these problems develop. It is impossible to get funding to look at these kind of things.”

The MRC said it was currently refreshing its strategic plan and was hoping to increase the amount of money allocated the mental health studies. “I think it has been a longstanding debate, the issue of nature versus nurture, and the MRC needs to make sure it funds the research which is going to have the most impact wherever it comes from,” said Dr Rob Buckle, Head of Regenerative medicine at MRC. “The issue here is that mental health is a very complex issue and the fundamental thing is to get a better understanding of the causes and progression of mental illness. We would like to spend more of our budget on mental health research and we totally accept this is interdisciplinary and involves neuroscientists and psychiatrists and social scientists and we do fund work around social impacts on mental health.”

However other scientists argued that finding out the root causes of mental illness could prove beneficial to the greatest numbers of people. Dr Jeff Barrett, who is working on uncovering the genes behind mental illness at the Wellcome Trust’s Sanger Institute said: “If we understand the fundamental biology of the disease it might be relevant in developing new ideas for therapies that are applicable to a wide range of patients. So if by doing studies like this we can strongly implicate one area of biology it gives a new lead for drug companies to try to develop new therapies.”

EXTRACT 2

Depression is ‘triggered by life traumas NOT genes’

Experts warn too much money is spent on researching biological factors

Psychologists warn too much is spent on researching biological factors

Experts say mental illness is mostly caused by life events and social crises

Said money should be redirected towards understanding everyday triggers

by Tammy Hughes, for the Daily Mail

published 23:53, 28 March 2016; updated 14:08, 29 March 2016

Too much money is spent researching biological factors for mental illness when it is mostly caused by life events, psychologists have warned. Funding bodies such as the Medical Research Council (MRC) have spent hundreds of millions on genetics and the biology of mental illness with limited success and not enough on understanding social factors. Although scientists have discovered genes that make people more susceptible to certain disorders, experts say that the real causes of depression and anxiety are social crises such as unemployment or childhood abuse. They say that money should be redirected towards understanding everyday triggers.

Speaking on Radio 4’s Today programme Peter Kinderman, Professor of Clinical Psychology at Liverpool University, said: ‘Of course every single action, every emotion I’ve ever had involves the brain, so to have a piece of scientific research telling us that the brain is involved in responding emotionally to events doesn’t really advance understanding very much. It detracts from the idea that trauma in childhood is a very, very powerful predictor of serious problems like experiencing psychotic events in adult life, so of course the brain is involved and of course genes are involved, but not very much, and an excessive focus on those issues takes us away from these very important social factors.’

Mental health issues cost Britain £70billion a year according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. The think-tank said mental health was the cause of 40 per cent of 370,000 new claims for disability benefit each year. Almost half of all adults will suffer from a mental health condition in their lifetime and one in four people have been diagnosed with some type of mental health problem, most commonly depression. Despite this, the MRC spends only 3 per cent of

its research budget on mental health. And most of that goes towards understanding genetics or neuroscience.

Professor Richard Bentall, who also works at Liverpool University, said: 'It's a tragedy actually. The UK MRC is one of the biggest funders of medical research in the UK but if you look at the things that they fund, by far the majority are things like brain scanners or gene sequencing machines, almost none of it is going towards understanding psychological mechanisms or social circumstances by which these problems develop. It is impossible to get funding to look at these kinds of things.'

The MRC said it was hoping to increase the amount of money allocated to studies into mental illness. Dr Rob Buckle, of the MRC, said: 'I think it has been a long-standing debate, the issue of nature versus nurture, and the MRC needs to make sure it funds the research which is going to have the most impact wherever it comes from. 'The issue here is that mental health is a very complex issue and the fundamental thing is to get a better understanding of the causes and progression of mental illness. 'We would like to spend more of our budget on mental health research and we totally accept this is interdisciplinary and involves neuroscientists and psychiatrists and social scientists and we do fund work around social impacts on mental health'.

DEPRESSION IS NOT GENETIC [BOX]

Genes are not the key in determining whether a person will suffer from depression according to recent research from Northwestern Medicine study.

- * Environment is a major factor, and nurture can override nature.
- * When rats genetically bred for depression received the equivalent of rat 'psychotherapy,' their depressed behaviour was alleviated.
- * And, after the depressed rats had the therapy, some of their blood biomarkers for depression changed to non-depressed levels.
- * The study also found genetic influences and environmental influences on depression likely work through different molecular pathways.
- * Rats bred for depression and rats that were depressed due to their environment showed changes in the levels of entirely different blood markers for depression.
- * Being able to differentiate between the two types of depression eventually could lead to more precise treatment with medication or psychotherapy.