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Review

A systematic review and meta-analysis of 'Systems for Social Processes' in eating disorders

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ABSTRACT

Social and emotional problems have been implicated in the development and maintenance of eating disorders (ED). This paper reviews the facets of social processing in ED according to the NIMH Research and Domain Criteria (NIMH RDoC) 'Systems for Social Processes' framework. Embase, Medline, PsycInfo and Web of Science were searched for peer-reviewed articles published by March 2013. One-hundred and fifty four studies measuring constructs of: attachment, social communication, perception and understanding of self and others, and social dominance in people with ED, were identified. Eleven meta-analyses were performed, they showed evidence that people with ED had attachment insecurity ($d = 1.31$), perceived low parental care ($d = .51$), appraised high parental overprotection ($d = 0.29$), impaired facial emotion recognition ($d = .44$) and facial communication ($d = 2.10$), increased facial avoidance ($d = .52$), reduced agency ($d = .39$), negative self-evaluation ($d = 2.27$), alexithymia ($d = .66$), poor understanding of mental states ($d = 1.07$) and sensitivity to social dominance ($d = 1.08$). There is less evidence for problems with production and reception of non-facial communication, animacy and action.

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The two major diagnostic systems for mental disorders, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders (DSM) and the International Classification for Diseases (ICD), are based primarily on diagnostic categories. However problems with diagnostic boundaries, which are based on signs and symptoms of illness, may not accurately reflect the underlying pathophysiological mechanisms of dysfunction. This may slow the development of new treatments targeting underlying pathophysiological mechanisms (Insel et al., 2010).

1. NIMH Research and Domain Criteria project

The National Institute of Mental Health's (NIMH) Research Domain Criteria (RDoC) project was developed as a new approach to classifying psychological disorders using the dimensions of observable behaviours and brain functions (http://www.nimh.nih.gov/research-priorities/rdoc/nimh-research-domain-criteria-rdoc.shtml). The ultimate aim of the NIMH RDoC is for "*advances in genomics, pathophysiology, and behavioural science to inform diagnosis in a meaningful way*". At present, the NIMH RDoC has been refined and developed to provide a framework covering genomics, neuroscience and behavioural science in guiding the classification of patients for research with the aim of building a research foundation to inform clinical diagnosis and treatment. The NIMH RDoC outlines a matrix, the rows in the matrix represent the functional construct of interest, which are grouped into superordinate domains. The columns denote particular units of analysis (e.g., genes, molecules, cells, circuits, behaviour and self-reports). Thus an integrative, multi-systems perspective is used as a template to describe the psychopathology of mental illness (Cuthbert and Insel, 2013). Psychopathology is conceptualised in terms of dysfunction of kind and degree in a particular system. The aim is to specify the neural systems that sub-serve primary behavioural functions that the brain has evolved to carry out (Morris et al., 2013). A synthesis of the literature according to the domains within this framework may provide an insight into the underlying psychopathology.

2. NIMH RDoC of interest in eating disorders (ED): social processes

Problems with social and emotional functioning have been implicated in the development and maintenance of eating disorders (ED) and have thus been included in explanatory models of these illnesses (Schmidt and Treasure, 2006; Treasure et al., 2012; Treasure and Schmidt, 2013). Several published reviews describe problems with social processing among people with EDs (e.g., Arcelus et al., 2013; DeJong et al., 2013; Nowakowski et al., 2013; Oldershaw et al., 2011; Rieger et al., 2010; Zucker et al., 2007), with particular attention devoted to studies on attachment (e.g., Ardovini, 2002; Astrachan-Fletcher et al., 2008; Kuipers and Bekker, 2012; O'Kearney, 1996; O'Shaughnessy and Dallos, 2009; Tasca et al., 2011; Tetley et al., 2013; Ward et al., 2000; Zachrisson and Skarderud, 2010). These studies suggest that people with ED show impaired social and emotional functioning. In its present form, the NIMH RDoC outlines 'Systems for Social Processes' as one of the five domains of functioning. Presented in Table 1 are the 4 constructs and 9 subconstructs and their definitions. 'Social Dominance' is a fifth construct, but is not defined.

3. Aim

The overall aim is to begin a process to describe and integrate the fundamental genetic, neurobiological behavioural, environmental, and experiential components of ED. The aim of this study is to conduct a systematic review and meta-analysis of the literature related to the psychopathology of ED based on the constructs/subconstructs within the NIMH RDoC domain of 'Systems for Social Processes'. It is important to outline at this point that the NIMH RDoC criteria remain under refinement at this point and thus the definitions of constructs and sub-constructs are somewhat fluid at present. Domains thought to investigate social processes in mental health research were not all easy to define with respect to ED. Some domains were particularly difficult to operationalise and we had several consensus meetings (page 9, under study selection), as pointed out throughout this review.

4. Method

4.1. Literature search

The electronic databases Embase (1974-present), Medline® (1946-present), PsycINFO (1806-present) using Ovid and Science Citation Index Expanded (1900-present), Social Sciences Citation Index (1956-present) and Arts & Humanities Citation Index (1975-present) using Web of Science® were searched to identify relevant articles written in English in peer reviewed journals during available years of publication to March 2013 (week 4) following the PRISMA guidelines (Moher 2010).

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