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THE INFLUENCE OF FAMILY, SCHOOL, AND THE ENVIRONMENT ON MENTAL HEALTH OF STUDENTS

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Abstract

Like adult disorders, most student adolescent psychiatric problems are now regarded as multifactorially determined; both genetic and environmental factors play a role in their development. This article provides an overview of some of the key environmental elements in that equation. The focus here is on the more general issues that arise when considering the effect of environmental influences on the onset or persistence of psychopathology in students during their early ages.

Key words: *Nature and nurture, Risk variables and risk mechanisms, Multiple stressors, Mental Health*

INTRODUCTION

As in all aspects of student mental health, a developmental perspective is crucial when considering environmental risks. Key sources of environmental influence change with age, and the meaning and impact of events will vary with the student's stage of cognitive, emotional, and social development. In infancy and early childhood, the family is the central source of environmental influences, charged as it is in most societies with prime responsibility for the care, nurture, and socialization of the young. As students develop, so

their social worlds expand; student care and school settings take on increased importance, as do relationships with friends and peers. Throughout, each of these proximal contexts is shaped by influences from the wider culture and society. Any comprehensive assessment of a student's environment needs to take each of these types and levels of influence into account.

In addition, students's responses to adversity vary in important ways with their age and developmental stage. Separations from caregivers, for example, may cause relatively little distress in the first 6 months of life, before specific attachments have been formed, or after about 4 years, when students's cognitive competencies enable them to cope more successfully—provided they are adequately prepared. Cognitive development also affects responses to bereavement. Before 4 to 5 years of age, students do not have a full concept of death as being permanent. As a result, very young students respond to bereavement as they would to any distressing separation, and the grief reactions more typical of adult bereavement do not emerge until later in development. The major biological and social changes of adolescence highlight other developmental issues. Sensitivity to life events and stressors may alter in adolescence, and the impact of normative events such as changing schools varies with pubertal stage. Examples of this kind could easily be multiplied. As they emphasize, the impact of environmental adversities always needs to be examined in the light of a student's specific developmental stage.

NATURE AND NURTURE At one time, links between adverse experiences and studenthood disorder were assumed to run in just one direction. More recently, it has become clear that the situation is more complex. Students are not simply passive recipients of experience; they influence, as well as being influenced by, those around them, and they play an active role in constructing and interpreting their social worlds. Even very young infants influence the nature of their interactions with caregivers, and students's capacities for shaping and selecting their experiences increase as they mature. The temperamentally difficult student is likely to evoke more negative responses from parents; when parents themselves are under stress, or find it hard to maintain consistency, troublesome student behaviours can play a key role in fuelling harsh or punitive responses. Delinquent

adolescents may seek out delinquent peers, who further encourage their antisocial activities. Associations between environmental factors and disorder often involve complex reciprocal patterns of effects.

Some of the evocative effects of students's behaviour will reflect heritable traits. The advent of behaviour–genetic studies in student mental health has provided important insights into environmental as well as genetic risks. Genetic analyses have shown, for example, that many ostensibly 'environmental' factors include some element of genetic mediation.Parents provide students with their environments and also with their genes, so that in biologically related families, nature and nurture are inevitably interwoven. Musical parents will encourage their students to enjoy music, buy them a violin, and may also pass on musical talents. In a similar way, antisocial parents may rear students in hostile and punitive environments, provide models of antisocial behaviour, and also pass on genes that predispose to disruptive behaviours. Genes and environments will often be correlated in this way; research is only in the earliest stages of disentangling their effects.

In addition, genetic studies suggest that for most student psychiatric disorders, non-shared environmental influences—experiences that make students in the same family different from one another, rather than more alike—are generally more significant than shared effects. Conduct disorders may be an exception here; in relation to other disorders, however, the most salient environmental influences may lie in student-specific risks such as scapegoating or differential treatment within the family, in siblings' differing perceptions of 'family-wide' events, or in experiences outside the family, at school, or with peers.

Finally, genetic factors may contribute to a differential sensitivity to environmental risks. Research has consistently shown marked individual differences in students's responses to all but the most severe forms of psychosocial adversity. As yet, reasons for these differences are not well understood. They may reflect variations in the severity of exposure; individual differences in resilience or coping strategies, or in environmental sources of protection; or variations in vulnerability. In practice, this may result in only subgroups of students being at risk. Genetic predispositions constitute one source of such vulnerability,

with genes and environments interacting to increase some students's sensitivity to environmental stress.

Risk variables and risk mechanisms

Identifying environmental factors that show links with students's adjustment is only the first step in understanding how they function to increase the risk for disorder. A variety of different mechanisms has been proposed here. Some may run through the effects of stress on the biological substrate. Exposure to aggression and hostility may influence students's cognitive processing, leading to the development of negative cognitive sets and attributional biases. In a related way, disrupted early attachments are argued to affect the psychological structures needed for later relationship formation. Adverse experiences may lead to direct increases in negative emotionality, disruptive behaviours, and impulsiveness, or to negative interactional styles that impact on social relationships. And finally, stress may affect students's self-concepts, or compromise their coping skills in ways that increase the risks for disorder. Any given environmental risk may be associated with a number of risk mechanisms, and the processes involved in the persistence of disorder may differ from those involved in its onset.

FAMILY INFLUENCES

Early development in the family

As students progress from the complete dependence of infancy to increasing independence, they need stable and secure family relationships to provide emotional warmth, responsiveness, and constructive discipline. In infancy, much attention has centred on the development of attachment relationships. The influential work of Bowlby and others has shown that infants are social beings from very early in development, and that a student's need to be attached to others is a basic part of our biological heritage. Infants become increasingly socially responsive over the first 6 months of life. At 6 to 8 months of age they begin to form selective attachments to particular individuals; they seek proximity to these attachment figures if distressed or frightened, and protest if the person they are attached to leaves. In evolutionary terms, these behaviours function to provide protection for the infant, and to reduce anxiety and distress.

Almost all infants—even those neglected or maltreated by their carers—develop attachment relationships of this kind. Their quality varies, however, depending on characteristics of the parent, the student, and the mesh between the two. Infants who have received sensitive and responsive care tend to show secure attachment patterns; they use caregivers as a base for exploration, and, although distressed by brief separations, greet caregivers positively on reunion and can be quickly comforted. Insecure attachments are more likely to develop when parents themselves are stressed or unsupported, and are unresponsive to their students. Two main types of insecure attachment have been identified: avoidant attachments (associated with rejecting or highly intrusive parental care) and resistant–ambivalent patterns (associated with inconsistent or unresponsive parenting). More recently, a third disorganized category has been described. This seems especially associated with parental behaviours that are frightening, unpredictable, or abusive. When infants' presumed source of safety is also a source of fear, they show a variety of contradictory behaviours after brief separations, and often appear confused, depressed, or apprehensive.

Attachment theorists argue that the quality of these early relationships may have long-term implications. Though not entirely resistant to change, infants' attachment patterns do tend to be stable over time. Some of this stability may reflect continuity in the quality of family care. In addition, attachment theory proposes that early attachment experiences are internalized in internal working models of self and others, that function as templates for future relationship formation. Students who have experienced responsive early care come to expect others to be caring and reliable; those who have been ignored or rejected develop less positive expectancies of others, of relationships, and of themselves. Later in development, new relationships may be created in line with these expectancies. Although many aspects of these models await confirmation, securely attached infants are known to go on to be more sociable and co-operative in their social relationships, and to show more positive affect and self-esteem. Insecurely attached infants show less positive relationships, and are at some increased risk for psychopathology. In addition, both ICD-10 and DSM-IV recognize two varieties of attachment disorders: non-attachment with emotional withdrawal, typically associated with abuse, and non-attachment with indiscriminate sociability, most usually

observed when students have been exposed to repeated changes of caretaker. Although as many as 40 per cent of infants receive insecure attachment classifications, these more severe forms of attachment disorder are rare.

Separation and loss

Since attachment processes are so central to students's early social and emotional development, much attention has been given to the impact of separations from attachment figures. The effects of bereavement in studenthood, and the implications of separations associated with adoption and with foster and residential care are examined in later chapters. Less permanent separations are undoubtedly distressing for students, but it is now known that their longer-term impact need not be severe, and depends on a variety factors. The age of the student, the quality of prior relationships, the way the separation is managed, and the quality of subsequent care all seem central to effects. Single hospital admissions, for example, are not generally associated with any increased risk for psychiatric disorder. Multiple admissions may be, especially if one of the separations occurred in the toddler period. This increased risk is more marked in discordant families, suggesting that effects are mediated through an adverse impact on later family relationships.

Increases in maternal employment have prompted extensive research on the impact of alternative studentcare early in students's development. Recent evidence shows that studentcare per se is neither a risk nor a benefit for the development of infant–mother attachment. It can, however, be important for particular groups of students. Specifically, high-quality studentcare is associated with more secure attachments among students whose mothers are less sensitive to their needs, while poor-quality care, more than minimal amounts of care, or more than one care arrangement in the first 15 months leads to less secure attachments in that same group. Later, high-quality studentcare is associated with better language comprehension and school readiness, and with fewer behaviour problems.

Family relationships and parenting

Many other aspects of family life and relationships, and of parenting styles and behaviours, have been examined for their impact on students's development. Research on families emphasizes the complexity of family relationships; each dyadic relationship is influenced by

other relationships in the family, and normative transitions in family life—the birth of a sibling, or mother starting work—reverberate to affect all family members. Relationships with parents and siblings change as students develop, and both these, and specific aspects of parenting, may impact on risks for disorder. In general, these reflect four broad themes:
discordant dysfunctional relationships between parents, or in the family system as a whole;
hostile or rejecting parent–student relationships, or those markedly lacking in warmth;
harsh or inconsistent discipline;
ineffective monitoring and supervision.
Within this broad pattern, differential treatment of siblings is known to increase conflict between students, and may have important implications for psychopathology. In addition, outcomes are markedly poorer when students face multiple family-related risks.

Family life can also provide important sources of protective influences for students facing life events and other stressors. Cohesion and warmth within the family, the presence of one good relationship with a parent, close sibling relationships, and the nature of parental monitoring and supervision have all been found to show protective influences of this kind.

Parent and family characteristics

Psychopathology in parents is associated with increased risks of emotional and behavioural problems in students. Recent estimates suggest that as many as 60 per cent of the students of parents with major depression will develop psychiatric problems in studenthood or adolescence, and their risks of affective disorder are increased fourfold. Psychosis, alcohol and drug abuse, and personality disorders in parents are also associated with increased risks of disorder in offspring, and parental criminality is a strong risk factor for conduct problems and delinquency.

In most instances, these links reflect a complex interplay between genetic and environmental effects. In terms of environmentally mediated risks, disorder in parents is frequently associated with disturbed marital relationships, which can impact on students's functioning in a variety of ways. In addition, parental psychopathology may impair parenting capacities. Depressed mothers, for example, are less sensitive and responsive to their infants, and attend less, and respond more negatively, to older students. Alcohol and

drug abuse and major mental disorders in parents may impair parenting in more wide-ranging ways. When parents are antisocial, effects may also be mediated through the endorsement of antisocial attitudes and social learning.

Maternal age is associated with a risk for conduct problems, with very young mothers being markedly more likely to have students who show disruptive and delinquent behaviour problems. In part, these associations reflect the educational and social disadvantages that predict very early parenthood; in part, the poor social conditions and lack of support faced by many young mothers; and in part, less than optimal parenting styles. Delinquency is also associated with large family size, especially with having a large number of brothers. Once again, the more proximal risks involved here are likely to be complex; parental supervision may be less effective in large families, and opportunities to 'learn' from delinquent siblings higher. In addition, antisocial parents tend to have larger families, so that risks may be genetically mediated in part. Beyond this, family size shows few consistent links with studenthood disorder. Only students are not at increased psychiatric risk, and share with other first-borns some small advantages in terms of cognitive development. Birth order also appears to have few implications for behavioural adjustment, although youngest students show some increased rates of school refusal.

Changing family patterns

Recent decades have seen massive changes in the pattern of many students's family lives. The most obvious markers are the dramatic increases in rates of divorce, single parenthood, and step-family formation. In the years immediately after the Second World War, just 6 per cent of British couples divorced within 20 years of marriage. By the mid-1960s that figure had increased fourfold; recent estimates suggest that almost 40 per cent of all marriages begun in the 1990s will eventually end in divorce. On these projections, approaching a fifth of all 10-year-olds, and over a quarter of 16-year-olds, will experience the breakdown of their parents' marriage in studenthood or adolescence. For most, this will be followed by a period in a single-parent household; for a substantial minority, further family transitions will mean that they become part of a step family. In the early 1990s, almost one in five students in the United Kingdom lived with a separated single parent or in a step family. In the United

States, divorce rates are higher, and the proportions of students in lone-parent and step families are commensurately larger.

Parental divorce

There is now extensive evidence that divorce is associated with negative consequences for students.Psychological and behavioural distress are common, especially in the period immediately following divorce; more severe disturbance is not. Boys in particular are at increased risk for conduct problems; anxious and withdrawn behaviours are less consistently found. Educational attainments and motivation are often compromised, and subsequent relationships may also be affected. As they approach adulthood, students of divorce move into close relationships earlier than their peers, but also experience higher risks of relationship breakdowns. The educational consequences of divorce seem most strongly influenced by socio-economic factors. Behavioural and social outcomes are more closely related to parental discord and distress, and to the effects of family breakdown on parenting.

Events both before and after the separation seem central in understanding these effects. Longitudinal studies, for example, have shown that students in divorcing families often show disturbed behaviour well before their parents separate. Exposure to the discord and conflict that frequently precede divorce thus seem to be key components of risk. After separation, problematic relationships between parents may continue, and the parents' own distress may compromise their capacity to respond sensitively and consistently to their students's needs. Many families face a sharp decline in economic circumstances after divorce, and for many students their parents' separation may involve house moves, school changes, and many other disruptions to their established social networks. Each of this constellation of factors may contribute to subsequent outcomes.

A variety of different mechanisms may contribute to these effects. In addition to disrupted attachments, some adverse consequences may flow from modelling, with students imitating the discordant or aggressive interactions they observe within the family. Stress may impair students's capacities to regulate emotional responses, or to develop appropriate coping strategies. In a rather different way, parental discord may disrupt the quality of parenting, affecting the consistency and quality of discipline, increasing the likelihood of

harsh disciplinary methods, or leading to arguments over discipline that directly involve the student. Finally, the affective quality of parent–student relationships may also be compromised by parental stress, and by 'spillover' effects from strains in other relationships.

Single parents and step families

Research on the effects of growing up in single-parent and step families illustrates the complexity of family-related influences. Overall, students in single-parent and step families show higher mean levels of emotional and behavioural problems than those in non-divorced two-parent families; they also have an increased probability of health problems and educational underachievement. But there are also marked differences within each family type, and associations between the quality of mother–student relationships and students's adjustment is similar across family settings. In addition, single-parent and reconstituted families often differ from stable two-parent families in a plethora of other ways; in particular, they are much more likely to face economic pressures, poor social support, and higher levels of maternal depression. Once these variations, and the degree of negativity in family relationships are taken into account, family type per se shows few consistent links with students's adjustment.

Peer influences

Beyond the family, relationships with peers are now recognized to provide a unique and essential contribution to students's social, emotional, and cognitive development. Students show an interest in their peers very early in life, and growing cognitive abilities and language skills lead to increasingly complex and co-ordinated interactions across the preschool years. By the end of this period most students have at least one reciprocated friendship. In studenthood and adolescence, peers take on increasing importance; in middle studenthood, more than 30 per cent of students's social interactions are with peers, and adolescents are estimated to spend more than twice as much time with peers than they do with parents or other adults. The functions of friendship change with development, expanding to encompass companionship and stimulation, help and sharing, social and emotional support and intimacy.

With friends and peers students acquire skills, attitudes, and experiences that contribute to many aspects of their adaptation. By the same token, students who have poor social skills, or who are rejected or neglected by peers, are at risk of a range of adverse outcomes including poor school performance, school drop-out, and psychiatric disorder. Social rejection may increase students's feelings of loneliness, reduce supports that can buffer against stressors, and also mean that isolated students miss out on important social learning experiences. Since many students with psychiatric disorders also show difficulties in relationships with peers, processes of this kind may well compound their problems. In adolescence, affiliations with behaviourally deviant peers have attracted particular interest as correlates of conduct disorder and delinquency. Here, reciprocal influences have been demonstrated; aggressive disruptive students are more likely to associate with deviant peers, but relationships with peers also show an independent effect on both the onset and persistence of delinquency.

School context and experiences

School life forms a further central aspect of students's social worlds. Schools are charged with key roles in the socialization of students and adolescents, and school life brings its own particular demands and challenges. Starting and changing schools are significant, sometimes troublesome, events for students; although most young students adapt well, a significant minority show some disturbance when they start school, and both attainment levels and self-perceptions are affected for many young adolescents after the transition from primary to secondary school. Tests and examinations rank high on students's lists of fears, and levels of psychological distress are elevated at times of major examinations. Although fears of this kind are not generally severe, they do show links with clinically significant symptoms. Bullying is a further problem especially linked with the school context. Self-report surveys suggest that over 15 per cent of young students experience some bullying at school, mostly unknown to parents or teachers. Although rates fall with age, up to 5 per cent of adolescents continue to face bullying in secondary school. Not unexpectedly, bullies typically show aggressive personality patterns across a range of relationships. Persistently victimized

students also have identifiable characteristics, with histories of anxious insecure behaviours and social isolation often beginning before they started school.

Like families, schools differ in their atmosphere and social climate, and these variations show an independent impact on students's academic progress and behaviour. Individual schools vary considerably in rates of students's academic progress, and also in levels of classroom disruptiveness, truancy, and risks of delinquency. In part, these variations reflect differences in initial pupil intakes. In addition, they show systematic links with organizational characteristics of schools. Schools with more positive outcomes are characterized by purposeful leadership, constructive classroom management techniques, an appropriate academic emphasis, and consistent but not oversevere sanctions. In relation to behavioural outcomes, the composition of pupil groupings may also be influential. Young students are more likely to become aggressive if placed in highly aggressive classes, and risks of delinquency are increased in secondary schools where intakes include large proportions of less able students. For some severely disadvantaged groups, however, schooling may offer an important source of positive experiences. Experimental studies of preschool programmes, for example, have shown important long-term gains in terms of reduced risks of delinquency and unemployment many years after participants left school.

WIDER SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL INFLUENCES

Poverty and social disadvantage

Poverty and social disadvantage are most strongly associated with deficits in students's cognitive skills and educational achievements. In the behavioural domain, disruptive behaviours also show links with family poverty. Effects appear to be more marked for boys than for girls, and seem to be stronger in studenthood than in adolescence. Intermittent hardship is associated with some increased risk for conduct problems, but the impact is most marked for students in families facing persistent economic stress. Most current evidence suggests that these effects are indirect. Poverty imposes stress on parents, and reduces the supports available to them; these in turn increase the risks of harsh or coercive parenting, and reduce parents' emotional availability to their students's needs. Some studies suggest

that relative deprivation—the perception that one is disadvantaged by comparison with others—may be more important than income levels per se.

Neighbourhood and community contexts

Rates of studenthood disorder vary in different neighbourhoods and communities. Early British studies suggested that risks of disorder were doubled in an inner-city area compared with an area of small towns. Urbanization is frequently associated with increased risks of disorder, and rates may be especially high in chronically disadvantaged inner-city neighbourhoods. In early studenthood, many of these effects seem to be indirect; neighbourhood disadvantage increases stress on families, and these in turn largely account for associations with students's difficulties. In severely disadvantaged settings, however, even quite young students may be directly exposed to community violence, and in adolescence, neighbourhood influences may be mediated through associations with delinquent peers. Evidence from the United States, for example, shows that risks of youth violence are increased in neighbourhoods in which drugs are readily available, where adolescents are exposed to models of adult crime and racial prejudice, and where perceptions of community disorganization are high. Peer influences may be central in mediating these effects.

Multiple stressors: For many students, exposure to these differing types of adversity will covary. Stressed families frequently live in poor neighbourhoods, where schools are under pressure and peer groups deviant. Early epidemiological findings suggested that isolated single risks have relatively little impact on disorder, but that rates rise sharply when risk factors combine. More recently, studies have shown that student, sociocultural, parenting, and peer-related risks each add uniquely to the prediction of behaviour problems. In addition, the total number of risks a student faces explains further variance in outcomes.

CONCLUSION: Finally, it is important to consider how psychosocial risks may impact on overall levels of disorder. There is now clear evidence that rates of many adolescent disorders—including depression, suicide, alcohol and drug use, and delinquency—have risen since the Second World War. Since it is implausible that changes in the gene pool could occur so rapidly, environmental risk factors must be implicated. Some of these may

overlap with risks for individual differences in disorder, but others may be quite distinct. Based on an extensive review of available evidence, Rutter and Smith concluded that a variety of factors are likely to be implicated:

1.increased rates of family breakdown, with their associated effects on the disruption of relationships and exposure to conflict and discord;

2.a change in the meaning of adolescence, with prolonged education and economic dependence on parents occurring alongside increased autonomy in other spheres;

3.a possibly increased disparity between young people's aspirations and the opportunities available to meet them;

4.increased alcohol consumption and illegal drug use;

5.changing social attitudes to acceptable behaviour, possibly enhanced by influences from the mass media. Other specific factors may affect rates of juvenile crime. In particular, the increasing commercialization of youth culture, providing more goods to steal, may have coincided with diminished surveillance and increased situational opportunities for property crime

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