Living with parental depression

NICOLA ANN COGAN describes her research into children’s understanding.

Concern about the potentially chaotic and disruptive implications of living with a depressed parent has led to extensive research focusing on the adverse consequences for children. Most notably, studies have reported that such children are at increased risk of diagnosable psychopathology, as well as of impairments in cognitive, emotional, social and school functioning. The extent to which children are affected by parental depression may be dependent on their understanding of the condition. Yet, little research has explored the importance, the effect can be made to resemble them statistically. So if you’re a parent of a depressed child, you may have noticed that they seem to like people who resemble them, even if via a shared surname. This ‘implicit egotism’ operates when similar others automatically, and unconsciously, activate people’s positive associations about themselves.

An archival study established that people with the five most common surnames in the US were more likely to marry others with the same surnames. So, for example, across three southeastern states of the US between the dates of 1900 and 1920, there were 198 marriages between people who were both called Smith, and 125 marriages between people both called Jones, but only 48 Smith–Jones matchings. Across the five names the matching effect was significant to \( p < .001 \). Other archival research found that people were more likely to marry others who shared the first few letters of their first names, or shared their first or last initials.

In a new study exploring the understandings and experiences of children (aged 12–17 years, mean age 13.8) affected by parental depression (affected children), comparisons were drawn with the perspectives of children of ‘well’ parents (comparative children), using a semi-structured interview schedule. While stigmatising attitudes towards people with depression were evidenced in many of the comparative children’s narratives, they were absent from the affected children’s accounts. Although the affected children did not explicitly discuss how they felt stigmatised as a consequence of their parents’ depression, they demonstrated an awareness of negative societal reactions towards their parents. Many of the affected children described how they refused to invite friends home because of their fears of being ridiculed or bullied. They were also very protective of their parents and tried to conceal their family situation from other people, including their friends and schoolteachers.

Perhaps one of the most striking findings to emerge from the analysis was the children’s request for information about depression. Very few of the affected children had been consulted by a health professional and informed that their parent had depression. In most instances, they had to trust their own judgements or rely on their parents or an older sibling informing them. Children who had received information about their parents’ depression described how it had helped them to understand and cope better with their family situation.

Psychoeducational resources and destigmatisation campaigns directed at the wider community may be significant in reducing some of the social and attitudinal barriers facing families affected by depression.


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Not immune to media messages

Briony Pulford reports.

SEE yourself as a truly independent thinker, unaffected by the news? Believe advertisers are wasting their money because you just glaze over during the break? Think again – new research suggests that adverts, violent films, and so on, may be affecting our attitudes far more than we actually believe they do.

Karen Douglas and Robbie Sutton (Keele University) investigated the third-person effect – the belief that others are far more influenced than ourselves by socially undesirable media messages, such as advertising, pornography, offensive music and ‘ideal’ female images. The effect has been found to predict endorsement of censorship.

The study went beyond previous research, as it attempted to measure actual self–other differences, rather than just the perceived differences in persuadability. Douglas and Sutton measured baseline attitudes and perceptions of others’ attitudes and then, after being exposed to the messages on social issues, participants (a) rated their own current attitudes, (b) recalled their pre-message attitudes, (c) rated others’ current attitudes and (d) retrospectively rated others’ pre-message attitudes.

Different messages were used in three experiments, two ‘socially undesirable’ – ‘the right to keep and bear arms’, and ‘the myth of fossil fuel use and global warming’ – and one ‘socially desirable’ – ‘the truth about fossil fuel use and global warming’. Even when positive messages were used, people underestimated the amount their own attitudes had changed. The participants were not overestimating how much other people were being persuaded by the message; estimates of how much the other people’s attitudes had changed were fairly accurate. It appears that it is our own previous attitudes that we do not accurately report – we perceive that attitude change occurs for other people, but not for ourselves.

This may happen because people judge their previous attitudes to be similar to their current attitudes, but they don’t do this when judging other people. When the message was a socially desirable one, the participants did perceive that their own attitudes had changed a bit, but they still underestimated the extent to which change had occurred.

The authors say that their results ‘imply that people may not be able to accurately report their previous attitudes’ and that therefore self-reports of abilities and knowledge may also not be completely reliable, thus ‘questioning the utility of retrospective pre-testing as a tool for assessing change’.

The other implication is clear: if you don’t want to be persuaded, turn off the message. If you choose to listen, beware: you won’t fully realise that you’ve been influenced as much as you have!


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Here’s a sample from the Society’s free Research Digest, by the editor Christian Jarrett. To join over 10,000 others, e-mail subscribe-rd@lists.bps.org.uk.

OUT OF SIGHT IN THE MIND

Evidence from brain imaging suggests the human brain is flexible; that the visual part of a blind person’s brain can be recruited for non-visual tasks. But imaging can’t show that activity in a given brain area is actually doing anything – it could just be coincidental, aberrant activity. Amir Amedi’s (Hebrew University, Jerusalem) team used transcranial magnetic stimulation (TMS) to temporarily ‘knock out’ the visual cortex (area VI) of nine people blinded early in life, while they performed a verb-generation task, to see what effect it had. If their performance was impaired, it would suggest their visual cortex was actually playing some functional role in language. Nine age-matched sighted participants served as a control.

Participants heard a noun (e.g. ‘apple’), received a short train of TMS, and then had five seconds to say a matching verb (e.g., ‘eat’). When the blind participants received TMS to their visual cortex, or to their frontal cortex, they made significantly more errors than when they thought they were receiving TMS but weren’t.

Most of their mistakes were meaning-related (e.g., ‘jump’ to ‘apple’) rather than spoken errors (e.g., ‘eap’ to ‘apple’). By contrast, the sighted participants only showed increased errors when they received TMS to their frontal cortex.

In the early-blind, the emerging picture is that …the early retinotopic (visual) areas… are recruited to a network… processing higher-level cognitive functions (i.e. including language), the authors said. ‘These findings offer further insights into critical periods and the limitations of cross-modal plasticity in the adult human brain, issues of great potential interest for human neurorehabilitation’.


Weblink:
Journal: www.nature.com/neuro
Author: tinyurl.com/4eovm
More on TMS: www.biomag.hus.fi/tms/

TURN TO THE DARK SIDE

Contributions sought for a special feature

We would like to publish a collection of articles on ‘the dark side of psychology’ – theory or research that has been or could be used for nefarious or morally dubious means. Not so much ‘dark’ areas that psychology seeks to understand, such as psychopathy; more evidence and ideas from psychology that have found their way deliberately or otherwise, into questionable applications. We are also interested in the ethics surrounding such work, and whether the situation is changing.

We are looking for a variety of lengths and formats: normal articles, interviews, debates, etc. Please e-mail the editor first, on jonsut@bps.org.uk, with suggestions or summaries of proposed contributions. Deadline is 7 March.

See www.thepyschologist.org.uk for tips on writing for us and plenty of reasons why contributing can be beneficial for you.