EXAMPLE of a summary paper 3: Critical review

“Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and General Psychopathology in Children and Adolescents Following a Wildfire Disaster”

Introduction

McDermott, Lee, Judd, and Gibbon (2005) examined a school community after a major wildfire to examine the prevalence of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The event provided the opportunity to explore a disorder that is not well-understood. There are numerous incidents that cause posttraumatic symptoms but it is not well explained if there are biological or purely environmental causes. It is interesting how a person can be exposed to a bad situation one and from that time on struggle to live a cognitively and behavioral stable life. It is scary to contemplate that one event can have such a drastic effect on one’s life. McDermott et al.’s (2005) study did not provide sufficient information regarding PTSD. They provided three primary symptoms and explained how it is a form of anxiety due to trauma that involves flashbacks, avoidance of stimuli associated with the event, and sleeping problems. Wildfires have traumatized a majority of the children in this Australian community. The authors provide evidence that the children exhibit PTSD symptoms at home with their parents and at school with their peers. This is plausible as the event would lead to abnormal behaviors in all environments. It is important that the authors provide evidence that the children’s behavior is affected due to the wildfires and not for some other developmental or other environmental reason (such as a movie all watched at school).

Method

McDermott et al. (2005) gathered children from grades four through twelve, six months after the fire had occurred in the community. The authors utilized two screening questionnaires that examined PTSD, general behavior and social interaction. Unfortunately, there were uneven
samples from each of the grades, where there were only twelve kids from twelfth grade and over forty from fifth grade. It is supposed that children from younger grades may respond differently to the event compared to older children due to changes in coping patterns. Younger children would be expected to be emotionally immature and not be able to cognitively understand the effect of the wildfires. It could be argued that the fires would have either a greater effect (more upset) or less of an effect (lack of understanding) on younger children. Therefore, this uneven sample might lead to a biased conclusion. The authors provided the reliability for each questionnaire, and while the scores were high, they were not excellent. Caution is needed in the interpretation of the results as findings might change if tested repeatedly. It would be interesting if the study was repeated at different time intervals in order to examine changes in symptoms and could provide information regarding the strength of the effect of the traumatic event.

Results

McDermott et al. (2005) found that about one-half of the students suffered from PTSD, and nine percent had the most severe symptoms. This may not be surprising given the younger age of the sample may be unable to deal with the emotion of the event. Also, since many questions only had a “yes/no” format, it is not surprising that younger children would be biased to provide more “yes” responses than no in order to please the researcher. The researcher’s questionnaire that examined general behavior and social interaction suggested that most of the children had high levels of emotion. This would be expected if PTSD exists in this sample, so therefore supports their PTSD questionnaire. On the other hand, it could suggest that the students just happen to be more emotional, and that their personality traits provide evidence for what appears to be a disorder.

Discussion
The findings for McDermott et al. (2005) may be biased. It would have been beneficial if the authors had split students into groups: those that were exposed to the fire event and those that only knew others that had been directly affected by the fire. According to McDermott et al. (2005) kids that felt threatened were in close proximity, and had higher rates of PTSD, but these analyses were not conducted directly. A major limitation of the study was that not all of the kids at the school participated in the study. Therefore, the results of the population may differ. Another limitation was the time at which the study was performed: six months after the event. Different time intervals would provide information regarding the levels of stress when closer or farther from the actual event. However, the results were made stronger by the inclusion of the general behavior measures. This allowed the understanding of the general state-of-mind of each individual participant. This particular event is also an interesting choice. While many PTSD studies examine shootings or other violent acts, the fires still provided an opportunity to examine a devastating event without the problems that may exist with memory and violence.

Conclusion

PTSD is an interesting disorder as much research is still needed to understand the symptoms and prognosis. The current study still does not provide any information regarding the source of the disorder: genetics or environment. It could easily be argued that it is due to more environmental causes, but a genetic underpinning could be required at a base level. It would be beneficial to find interventions in order to combat the symptoms of the disorder. Any type of therapy would be beneficial to help assuage the anxiety and fears of the children so that they can lead a more normal life. Future research could examine the effect on different aged-populations. It would be of interest if children of different ages up to older adults are affected differently by traumatic events. Would the fires be as stressful and feared by adults compared to the children of
the community? Future research also needs to study the areas of the brain that are involved in this disorder. Finally, it is of interest if it is possible to “erase” any memory of the trauma.

Reference


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Chapter 14: Disorders