Editorial

Linking Mind and Brain: Psychology and Neurobiology, and the Importance of Meaning

New research in this issue presents work on understanding and measuring psychological and neurobiological functioning, and an intervention to help siblings of seriously mentally ill adolescents. Additional articles remind us of the importance of meaning and the role it plays in therapeutic intervention.

Measuring Reflective Functioning

The concept of reflective functioning has been a major advance in both psychoanalytic and developmental theory. Drawing on much earlier work by pioneers such as Bowlby, as well as concepts such as the observing ego and empathy, it has been embraced by developmental psychologists and psychotherapists for its ability to explain psychopathology as well as to underpin psychotherapy-specifically mentalization-based therapy. It has been particularly useful in explaining borderline and narcissistic personality disorders. The ability to measure this function has given additional weight to its importance, but existing measures tend to be lengthy and impractical for routine use in clinical settings. In this issue, a group of colleagues from Québec, Canada, in collaboration with Peter Fonagy in London, report their work on measuring reflective function in adolescents using a self-report instrument, the Reflective Functioning Questionnaire for Youth (RFQ-Y). Duval, Ensink, Normandin, Sharp and Fonagy tested the RFQ-Y in a community-based sample of 533 adolescents and young adults, comparing it with established assessment tools (the Child Behaviour Checklist, the Borderline Personality Features Scale and the Pathological Narcissism Inventory) to assess validity. They were able to identify three factors that were correlated with problematic styles of mentalizing associated with increased risk of psychopathology in general, as well as difficulties like narcissism in particular. The authors conclude that self-report measures like the RFQ-Y are potentially helpful for understanding and identifying problematic mentalizing, the measurement of which has implications for clinical intervention.

The Impact of Major Depressive Disorder on Brain Function

Groundbreaking advances in neurobiology, exciting as they are, have not necessarily lead to corresponding advances in psychology and psychotherapy. The one exception to this has been the understanding of the immaturity of the adolescent brain, which has had a major effect on social policy, for example with regard to driving laws, or punishment for youthful offenders. Recognition that untreated schizophrenia is accompanied by progressive brain changes that in turn are associated with deteriorating functioning has fueled efforts toward early intervention. Other advances that still await translation are the finding that psychotherapy is accompanied by measurable changes in brain functioning, and trauma during childhood is associated with changes in the amygdala and hippocampus.

Of all psychiatric conditions, major depression is the greatest contributor to morbidity and mortality in the second decade of life. (Kassebaum et al., 2017).

The need to understand better how it affects brain function is urgent. The work of Elisea De Somma and colleagues in Canada provides preliminary evidence that untreated major depressive disorder affects hippocampal function in young adults. Noting that the hippocampus is important in recollection memory, a cognitive domain that is often impaired in depressed adults, they used functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) to assess hippocampal activity during a verbal memory task in 11 subjects with MDD and...
compared them to healthy age-matched controls. Interestingly, in this study the subjects did not differ from the controls with regard to their memory function, but did differ with respect to hippocampal function, suggesting the possibility that changes in hippocampal function might be an early stage in the development of memory impairment secondary to recurrent major depressive episodes. Another reason to emphasize early intervention and treatment.

**Studying Helicopter Parenting**

The term helicopter parenting, used to describe the behavior of parents who are overly involved in their children’s lives and overly controlling, has received considerable attention in the news media and popular press, as well as on college campuses. Accounts in the popular press describe parents as calling colleges to discuss their children’s grades or contacting prospective employers, even going on interviews with them. It is widely believed that helicopter parenting interferes with the development of independence and resilience and could have long-term effects on the achievement of developmentally appropriate milestones. Rigorous research on the effects of helicopter parenting on the development of young adults has been limited, however. There have been some studies linking it to decreased well-being, anxiety, depression and increased use of prescription drugs. Co-authors Sinead Reilly and Maria Semkovska were interested in exploring whether the negative impacts of helicopter parenting might result from its effects on resilience. They studied a group of 208 college students in Ireland and found correlations between self-reported symptoms of depression and perceived parental over involvement. The relationship was partially mediated by effects on resilience. While it is difficult to conclude from this correlational study that the helicopter parenting caused the students’ depression, as it may have been a response to it, it seems likely that there is probably a circular effect. Further research is clearly needed to elucidate this complex phenomenon.

**Siblings of Adolescents Hospitalized for Psychiatric Illness—Forgotten Family Members**

The well siblings of children and adolescents who have psychiatric illness are a group that has generally been neglected by traditional mental health services. There is a sizeable body of literature on the negative impact of having a mentally ill sibling—much of which reflects adults’ reflecting on how they have been affected (see for example, Marsh & Dickens, 1997). Adults often report feeling they missed out on their childhood, feeling they had to put their own needs aside as the family focused on the ill sibling. Few studies have looked at children and adolescents, and even fewer have reported on interventions. Emily Rubin and colleagues in Massachusetts describe an innovative program for the caretakers and siblings of children and adolescents who are hospitalized for psychiatric illness. The program included a structured support group for the siblings and a psycho-educational group for caregivers that enabled them to share their stories and learn coping skills. Parent mentors facilitated the caregiver groups, which were aimed at helping the caregivers support the siblings and understand how they were affected by the index patient’s mental illness. In assessing the siblings’ reactions, they found, not surprisingly that siblings often felt a sense of shame and stigma to the point that they were afraid to invite other friends to their homes. Half could not remember ever having talked to a supportive adult about their sibling. They expressed a sense of confusion as well about what was going on with their sibling. Both parents/caregivers and siblings who participated benefitted from the program. Caregivers reported gaining useful parenting strategies to better support the siblings, an increased understanding of the impact of mental illness on siblings, a reduction in feelings of isolation, and improved access to resources. Siblings reported feeling relieved and better understood, learning new coping skills, and finding validation and support through sharing their experiences in a group setting. The program has been expanded to include additional facilities and certainly deserves to be replicated.

**A Developmentally Informed Approach to Treatment for Adolescent Offenders**

In their clinical perspective, Alfio Maggiolini and Virginia Suigo, colleagues from Italy who have done clinical work and research in juvenile delinquency for over 20 years, present an overview of theory and
research on antisocial behavior and describe an approach that incorporates a developmental understanding of delinquent youth with a psychoanalytically informed perspective on treatment. Using a case example, they demonstrate the importance of understanding the meaning of individual adolescent’s delinquent behavior and working with the adolescent to help him or her see this as well. They do not deny the importance of a multi-modal approach but argue that such approaches often focus on control of the adolescents’ behavior and that a focus on containment alone is inadequate.

REFERENCES