



FOCUS ON RESEARCH

Developing valid models of psychopathology experienced by adults with learning disabilities

Researchers

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Aim

To examine dimensions of symptoms relevant to mental ill-health (psychopathology) experienced by learning disabled adults, and to test their validity.

Project Outline/Methodology

Robust statistical methods were used to model dimensions of symptoms relevant to mental ill-health. Data was gathered using a standardised questionnaire. Initial models were produced using data collected from 457 participants in Glasgow. The validity of the initial models was tested with data collected from a separate sample of 274 participants in North Northamptonshire. Correlations between dimensions were examined. The adults had mild-profound learning disabilities.

Key Results

Initial models with four and five dimensions were derived, and were both found to have acceptable fit to the validation dataset. The five dimension model was preferred as it had a better fit and excellent clinical validity. The five dimensions were labelled: *depressive, anxiety, cognitive decline, affect dysregulation-problem behaviour (AD-PB)* and *psychosis*. Some instability of the *psychosis* dimension was attributable to the need for participants to have good verbal communication to rate the items in it. Although dimensions were separate, there were moderate-strong associations between all the dimensions, particularly the AD-PB, depressive, and anxiety dimensions.

Conclusions

This novel study has derived a valid five-dimension statistical model of symptoms of mental ill-health. It should improve diagnostic

practice, and further our understanding of problem behaviours, which are commonly experienced by the learning disabled adult population.

What does this study add to the field?

Methodological improvements on previous studies modelling symptoms of mental ill-health experienced by learning disabled adults include the:

- use of best-practice statistical methods,
- demonstration of validity using a second dataset,
- examination of dimension correlations.

Problem behaviours were related to, but distinct from depressive and anxiety psychopathology.

Implications for Practice or Policy

This study will improve the diagnosis of mental ill-health in learning disabled adults in clinical practice. The results refute the previously proposed inclusion of problem behaviours in diagnostic criteria for depressive disorders, with important treatment implications. The instability of the psychosis dimension highlights problems reliably diagnosing psychosis in non-verbal learning disabled adults.

Where to next?

Future statistical modelling studies should further examine the complex relationship between problem behaviours and other types of symptoms of mental ill-health. Studies to examine dynamic changes in symptoms over time are also needed.

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