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Research On Protective Factors In Five Resilient Women Who Grew Up With A Parent Suffering From Bipolar Disorders

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Abstract

This study aims at exploring internal and external protective factors in resilient subjects, who lived with a parent suffering from a mental illness, using the analysis of the family drawing and the semi-structured interview.

Five mental healthy adult women, from 20 to 43 years old, who lived with a father or a mother with bipolar disorders, have participated in the study. Family drawing when they lived with both parents whose one was mentally ill, was used in case of participants.

In the family drawings, among the *internal protective factors*, three of the five subjects showed a character strength and a good emotional maturity. The two others showed either inhibition or introversion as defence mechanisms. Among the *external protective factors*, we observed a closer relationship with the healthy than the mentally ill parent in two of the five drawings, a closer relationship with a sibling than the parents in two other drawings. These results corroborate the protective factors reported in the semi-structured interviews and were the most predominant. These results are congruent with those in the literature.

Thus, the family drawing is a relevant and original tool given its projective feature to investigate and evaluate the weight of the protective factors in the offspring of mentally ill parents.

Keywords: protective factors, resilience, adult offspring of parent with bipolar disorders, family drawing.

1 INTRODUCTION

The studies about the children of mentally ill parents are generally focused on children with mental disorders or at risk. As Rutter and Quinton (1984) noticed in their four-year-follow-up study on the children of parents who are mentally ill: one third of the children has persistent disorders, one third has temporary disorders, the last third has neither emotional nor behavioral disorders. But, we know very little about the last third, those children who are resilient.

2 PROBLEMATIC

The present study aims at exploring internal and external protective factors in resilient subjects who lived with a parent suffering from a mental illness, and have the ability to maintain in a good mental health despite the environmental circumstances.

3 METHODOLOGY AND POPULATION

Five mental healthy adult women, from 20 to 43 years old, and who lived with a father or a mother with bipolar disorders, participated in the study.

Family drawing when they lived with both parents whose one was mentally ill, was used in case participants, as complementary tool to semi-structured interviews.

The latter aimed at highlighting the point of view of adult offspring who grew up with a parent suffering from a mental illness, and exploring internal and external protective factors, which helped the subjects to maintain in a good mental health, compared to those in the literature.

The family drawing was chosen to emphasize the quality of the links between the adult offspring and their family members.

4 RESULTS

The results were partially obtained from the analysis of the subjects' family drawings. The other part was obtained from the semi-structured interviews.

The internal protective factors:

They are reflected by the general quality of the drawing and the behavior of the subject during the test. These concern the character strength, the emotional maturity, the self-image and the relationship to another of the subject. Three of the five subjects showed a character strength and a good emotional maturity. The two others showed either inhibition or introversion as defense mechanisms. These features identified in the drawings replicated the internal protective factors reported in the semi-structured interviews and were the most predominant. Moreover, the generational difference is well integrated. This is present in four of the five drawings. However, the gender difference is less well represented. Three of the drawings have no gender characteristic.

Other protective factors appeared in the semi-structured interviews such as the independence, the ability to reach out to others, interest in learning.

The external protective factors:

The family unit is part of both internal and external protective factors. The family drawings of the five women included all the family members of their real families. The parental couple was drawn at first for four of the subjects. The fifth subject drew first herself surrounded by her siblings, then she drew her parents. The parents have a parental role in all the drawings. They are represented at first compared to the offspring and/or were drawn taller. The offspring conserve their child place despite their carer role for three of the five subjects. The distance or the closeness between the characters reflects the quality of the links between family members. We observed a closer relationship with the healthy than the mentally ill parent in two of the five drawings, a closer relationship with a sibling than the parents in two other drawings. This observation corroborates some of the external protective factors already identified in the semi-structured interviews. Others were found as well such as the support from adults outside the family and/or peer support, information about the mental illness.

5 DISCUSSION

The results obtained through the family drawings showed that the mental illness of a parent doesn't alter the family composition. The subjects' drawings match their real family composition. The generational difference is well integrated but the gender difference is, however, less well represented in the drawings. We can suppose that the mental illness of a parent affect the sexual identification of the offspring, which can be explored in a further study. Living with a parent suffering from a mental illness doesn't affect the places and the role of each family member for these five women. The parents have a parental role. The offspring can take a carer role and conserve their child place, which is in line with the results found in the literature [1, 2].

Some protective factors found in the family drawings are congruent with those in the literature: the presence of a healthy parent [3], a close relationship to a parent or a member of the family [4], the family cohesion [5]. The peer support [6] and information about the mental illness are also mentioned in the literature [7]. Among the external protective factors, the family appears to be the principal environmental protective factor, before school environment and community, which is to be further explored. We think that the stigma of the mental illness impedes the family members to talk about it outside the family. The mental illness of a parent generates suffering among the relatives, including the subjects of this study, but this is also what explains their bonds. The weight of the protective factors relative to the interactions between the members of the family has to be further explored.

The results of the present exploratory study cannot be generalized because the sample is limited and the participants were all women. Further studies can be conducted using a larger sample, including men and women, with parents suffering from with a multiple range of mental illnesses and not limited to bipolar disorders.

6 CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to identify the presence of internal and external protective factors in five resilient women who grew up with a bipolar parent. The family drawing, with its projective feature, is a

relevant and original tool that allows us to achieve this goal. Such a tool may be used to investigate and evaluate the weight of the protective factors in the offspring of mentally ill parents.

The internal and external protective factors do exist in the children of parents suffering from mental illness. The combination of data from the semi-structured interviews and those from the projective tests shows that for these five women, the protective factors are to be drawn, first, within the family itself. This family is a resilience element associating both internal, i.e. specific to the subject, and external protective factors, which are primarily associated with the family dynamic.

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