Mental health and culture

What do parents believe about their child's problems? SAMANTHA HARDINGHAM

AN interesting study by Yeh and colleagues (Child and Adolescent Services Research Center, San Diego) examined parental beliefs about why their children experience mental health problems. The study aimed to highlight beliefs held by different cultural groups that may create help-seeking behaviours that do not include consulting the health services about their child's problems.

An impressive sample of 1338 children between 6 and 17 years old, who met the criteria for having mental health needs, were selected from five public sector services – drugs and alcohol, child welfare, juvenile justice, mental health, and school services for children with serious emotional disturbances. The children came from four ethnic backgrounds, African American (AA), Latino, Asian/Pacific Islander (API) and non-Hispanic White (NHW). Their parents were provided with a semi-structured questionnaire, which identified varying beliefs of why children develop a mental illness, divided into biopsychosocial, sociological and spiritual beliefs.

Analyses showed many significant cultural differences in the beliefs held. For example, AA parents were more likely than other ethnic groups to cite physical causes for their child's problems. This group, along with the API group, were also seen to report prejudice as a cause, and were less likely to endorse family issues and trauma as factors. Interestingly, another strong belief held by the AA group was that the American culture was to blame for their child's difficulties.

API and Latino parents were significantly less inclined than NHW parents to endorse physical causes, personality, relational issues, family issues and trauma. But, in contrast to the other groups NHW parents were more likely to believe in biopsychosocial causes for their child's problems. There were no significant variations between groups regarding spiritual issues.

An extension of the study could benefit from including more specific ethnic groups, or a UK population. But, as the authors suggest, the beliefs seen in this study are likely to be having a significant effect on the help-seeking behaviour of parents in each ethnic group, affecting their use of biopsychosocially oriented health services. This should be considered in the development of child and adolescent mental health services teams.

Yeh, M., Hough, R.L., McCabe, K., Lau, A. & Garland, A. (2004). Parental beliefs about the causes of child problems: Exploring racial/ethnic patterns. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 43*, 605–612.

■ *Samantha Hardingham is an assistant psychologist in Nottingham.*

Even more brief

JON SUTTON *reports from the latest BPS journals.*

Misinformation encountered socially (in this case via discussion with a confederate following a video of a simulated crime) is significantly more misleading than such misinformation encountered in a non-social (e.g. written) form. (LCP, September)

Eyewitnesses may be particularly susceptible when faced with friendly interviewers who warn them about giving potentially misleading information. Abrupt interviewers may make people more aroused and direct their attention to the task. (LCP, September)

When assessing sex offenders, viewing-time measures could be an alternative to penile plethysmography. The authors propose the use of computer software to create images from scratch, meeting contemporary legal and ethical requirements. (LCP, September)

Arachnophobes scan the room while watching TV more than non-phobics and, perhaps not surprisingly, look more when a live Chilean rose tarantula is introduced to the room. Looking reaches its peak when the spider is by the 'safety stimulus', or door. Exposure treatments should try to reduce environmental scanning. (BJCP, September)

A battery of cognitive tests has been compiled to screen out people unable to drive following brain injury, alleviating the need for an on-road assessment. It was 92 per cent accurate in predicting a fail on-road, but needs to be used with caution for older drivers. (BJCP, September)

When asked how it would feel to outperform friends, females report more negative reactions than males. They also believed that their same-sex friends would have more negative reactions. (BJDP, September)

Parental reports of child health at the ages of three and six predict depressive symptoms 12 and 17 years later. (BJDP, September)

Children with high scores on the avoidance dimension of the Separation Anxiety Test experienced greater difficulty understanding maternal false beliefs relative to those of an unfamiliar adult female. (BJDP, September)

Children with moderate learning difficulties in special schools had more positive self-perceptions of their educational abilities than such children in mainstream schools. (BJEP, September)

❏ *Subscriptions to BPS journals are £17 for members and £12 for student members. See www.bps.org.uk/publications/journals.cfm.*

Suicide and the media

CLAIRE BLACKBURN *reports on influences on self-harm and suicide in young people.*

SUICIDE is currently a high-priority issue for the Department of Health. Some research has suggested that suicidal behaviour can be significantly influenced by media sources such as newspapers and films. In particular, there is evidence to suggest that children learn about the act of suicide and form concepts surrounding it following exposure to media influences.

Zahl and Houghton from Warneford Hospital in Oxford decided to investigate this further by conducting a pilot study to examine the influences of the media on suicidal ideation and behaviour in people aged between 17 and 25. Twelve patients who had recently deliberately self-harmed were asked questions on how they had first learned about suicide or self-harm, the impact of stories presented in the media, roles of music and the internet, and the effect of the media on the formation of images relating to self-harm.

The results revealed that the majority of participants reported being affected by a media story, and four even reported that a story triggered them to self-harm. Stories presented visually through TV programmes or films were found to have more influence than those presented mainly textually in magazines and newspapers. Music was found to influence self-harming in patients who frequently self-harmed, although others reported therapeutic effects of music.

The authors admit that the study is limited as it involved a small number of patients and no controls. They suggest that clinicians assessing patients who self-harm should be aware of possible negative and also positive media influences on suicidal behaviour, and incorporate information about this into treatment.

Zahl, D.L. & Hawton, K. (2004). Media influences on suicidal behaviour: An interview study of young people. *Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapy, 32*, 189–198.

■ *Claire Blackburn is an assistant psychologist at Prestwich Hospital, Manchester.*

The join the Society's free Research Digest service, send a message to subscribe-rd@lists.bps.org.uk.

Here's a sample, by the Digest editor **CHRISTIAN JARRETT**.

MOVING WORDS...

When we hear a sentence, we actually simulate its meaning in our mind. That's the implication of a study by Rolf Zwaan and colleagues at Florida State University.

Eighty-two students were shown pairs of photos. Their task was to indicate as fast as possible whether the second photo of each pair displayed the same object as the first photo, shown moments earlier. The researchers were most interested in the photo pairs that depicted balls, but other 'filler' pairs showed all sorts of objects.

In the photo pairs depicting balls, the second photo showed either a slightly bigger or a slightly smaller version of the same ball shown in the first photo – as if the ball were now respectively closer or further away from the observer.

Before each photo pair, the students heard a sentence like 'You tossed the beach ball over the sand toward the kids' or 'The kids tossed the beach ball over the sand toward you'. The students were much quicker at recognising that both photos in a pair showed the same ball when the meaning of the sentence they'd just heard, matched the size difference between the balls. For example, they were quicker if the sentence described a ball being thrown away, and the second photo depicted a smaller ball.

This suggests the thoughts triggered by the sentence were more compatible with the perceived size discrepancy between the balls, allowing a quicker response. 'Words can move mental representations', the authors said.

Zwaan, R.A., Madden, C.J., Yaxley, R.H. & Aveyard, M.E. (2004). Moving words: Dynamic representations in language comprehension. *Cognitive Science, 28*, 611–619.

Weblinks:
freud.psy.fsu.edu/~zwaanlab/
www.sciencedirect.com/science/journal/03640213

Syllabus advice: [AQA spec A]: A2 module 4, cognitive psychology, language and thought; [AQA spec B]: AS module 2, cognitive psychology, language and thinking; [SQA adv higher]: cognitive psychology, theoretical explanations and research evidence in cognitive psychology, language and thinking.

... FROM THE DIGEST EDITOR

The Society's free Research Digest is one year old this month. Since its inception over10,000 people have subscribed, and we've sent out bite-sized reports on over 130 intriguing studies.

The Digest is aimed primarily at A-level and undergraduate students, but schoolteachers, researchers and practitioners have been signing up too (see our feedback page at *tinyurl.com/3njap*). Indeed, it's all too easy for psychologists to get bogged down in their own specialist areas; part of the thinking behind the Digest was that it could help people keep abreast of psychology as a whole, via a fortnightly e-mail update.

Psychology is famously all-encompassing, delving into every corner of our lives. I hope I've captured some of that breadth in the studies covered so far, taken from the journals of our eight participating publishers. Scintillating doesn't necessarily go hand in hand with quality, but I've tried to strike the right balance and, when in doubt, opted for those studies that will get people talking about psychology and that are relevant to the A-level syllabus.

One of the most gratifying aspects of producing the Digest has been the way some subscribers have thought of ways to use the service to enthuse others about psychology. Craig Roberts, Head of Psychology at Totton College, has set up a forthcoming Psychology Plus course based around the Research Digest (see *tinyurl.com/3aejy*). Students will sign up to the Digest, and research and write their own reports of new psychology studies. Look out for the very best of these appearing in future issues of the Digest.

Anyone, anywhere can receive the Research Digest – you don't have to be a member of the Society. So please spread the word and get your friends and colleagues to sign up by sending a blank e-mail to *subscribe-rd@lists.bps.org.uk* (and then answering the confirmation request). And if you'd like your students to have the chance to write for the Digest, then contact me on the address below. Let's aim for 20,000 subscribers by our second birthday!

Christian Jarrett (christian.jarrett@virgin.net)