Leading Article

The spectrum of schizophrenia

Malcolm P.I. Weller

Friern Hospital, Friern Barnet Road, London N11 3BP, UK.

Schizophrenia is a subset of psychosis but includes more besides, and this additional domain excites contention; a domain that has expanded and shrunk according to prevailing preferences. The subtle boundaries of this non-psychotic domain are important in many practical ways, including forensic and community psychiatric care issues. The subset of psychosis is easier to define and most diagnostic schemes concur on this, universally according Schneider's symptoms of the first rank a central place (although clinical skill has to be exercised in probing for psychotic phenomena and assessing the responses, such as differentiating between hallucinations and pseudo-hallucinations). Disagreements rest, in part, on how long these psychotic symptoms should have been present for the diagnosis to be certain.

There is hesitancy in describing brief lived psychoses as schizophrenia, and the term thereby comes to denote a chronic disorder. Such brief lived illnesses have been variously termed schizophreniform, cycloid psychosis, bouffée delirante, and a number of syndromes allegedly limited to specific cultures, such as amok and spirit possession or bouffée delirante aigue. Despite the implication that these terms describe transient states different from schizophrenia, these conditions tend to reappear as indubitable schizophrenia and to be found in family members of schizophrenic probands.

The prodromal symptoms of schizophrenia are likely to be difficult to recognize for what they are. Kraepelin described affective and neurotic symptoms as sometimes representing manifestations, whilst 'The general trend of volition and also the higher emotions might form the first point of attack.' Bleuler described a related situation; 'Where only the basic symptoms are visible, we speak of schizophrenia simplex (the primary dementia of earlier authors). It is usually a case of a dementia in the sense of schizophrenia that increases gradually in the course of decades. The anamnesis invariably indicates that the disease has been mistaken for years; it was a latent schizophrenia.' This concept of latent schizophrenia has been ridiculed as nonsensical and the ability to recognize such a state has been doubted, but there are many who feel they have seen similar situations to those that Bleuler described in characteristic oddities of personality and, whilst hesitating to be emphatic, often believe that they are dealing with a case of evolving schizophrenia in which the symptoms have not yet crystallized sufficiently to justify the term. The implications of diagnosing schizophrenia are such that there will be considerable hesitancy in voicing suspicions that one may be witnessing such a developing situation, particularly in young people who are inevitably passing through periods of difficult adjustment, yet who represent the group in whom the onset is particularly likely.

Hoch & Polatin emphasized that neurotic symptoms are common in evolving schizophrenia in Western culture. The possibility of later schizophrenia in neurotic conditions had been noted by Jung in his correspondence with Freud, 'I have often had cases that passed with apparent smoothness from hysteria or obsessional neurosis straight into D. pr.' (dementia praecox), and the same relationship is emphasized in follow-up studies.

Some researchers claim an overlap between borderline and schizotypal personality disorder, with common features to the characteristic premorbid disposition of schizophrenics, and others argue for separate disorders with differing outcomes. In the most recent third edition of the American Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-III) the two terms are defined separately, schizotypal personality disorder being characterized by suspicious, paranoid attitudes, sensitivity to criticism, ideas of reference, poor rapport, and odd ways of communication. The DSM-III criteria for borderline personality disorder, in its typical unambiguous but unweighted way, that has been uncharitably referred to as the Chinese menu...
approach, require at least four of the following — impulsiveness, self-damaging acts, unstable interpersonal relationships, intolerance of being alone, empty and bored and identity disturbance, the last seeming more akin to schizophrenia and the first to psychopathy.

Genetics

Bleuler observed on a number of peculiarities in the relatives of his schizophrenic patients, which stopped short of frank schizophrenia but seemed to represent minor features of the disease. Kraepelin similarly observed that 'not infrequently one learns further that among the brothers and sisters of the patient there are found striking personalities, criminals, queer individuals, prostitutes, suicides, vagrants, wrecked and ruined human beings, all being forms in which more or less well-developed dementia praecox may appear.' (p.234) Similar observations have continued to be made, with an excess of borderline conditions in the first degree relatives, whilst some relatives have 'clearly schizoid or paranoid personalities as well as others characterized by schizoid features and serious emotional disorders . . .

Kendler et al. confirmed the higher incidence of schizotypal personality disorder in the biological relatives of adopted-away schizophrenics found by Kety et al. using a methodology that met criticisms of earlier studies but pointed out that there is some circularity in the arguments, in that the DSM-III concept of schizotypal personality derived from an examination of the case summaries of the biological relatives of the adopted-away schizophrenics in the extended family study of Kety et al.

These same personality deficiencies are found as prodromal features of later schizophrenia. Psychopathic features also occur, emphasizing a relationship between the two conditions, which have other biological features in common and psychopathy is over-represented in the families of schizophrenic probands. If these non-schizophrenic individuals with allegedly schizophrenic spectrum traits are included in statistical comparisons the genetic transmission of schizophrenia is more convincing.

The relatives of schizophrenics are at greater risk than a random population of developing schizophrenia, the risk being proportional to the degree of consanguinity. Where a family history is absent sporadic cases of schizophrenia betray evidence of brain damage. A recent familial study, in which the probands were followed-up over a long period and in many cases personally interviewed by the researchers, showed that brief lived schizophreniform psychoses, schizoaffective psychoses and psychotic affective illness betrayed a schizophrenic pattern of inheritance.

Organic findings

In view of these genetic findings it is of great interest that, in addition to certain personality factors which are allegedly detected in the apparently unaffected first degree relatives, claims have been made that they betray cognitive dysfunction and formal thought disorder on objective tests.

Neurological abnormalities similar to those found in schizophrenics have also been found in their apparently, unaffected first degree relatives, initially found as eye tracking dysfunction but more recently apparent in a battery of conventional neurological tests suggesting that the neurological signs in schizophrenia are unlikely to be entirely consequential on current or past medication. The extent of the dysfunction is modestly, but significantly, associated with the degree of thought disorder.

Treatment

Neuroleptic treatment of schizotypal personality disorder produces a perceptible improvement, but is poorly tolerated and also produces modest improvements in borderline disorders, as evaluated in a double blind trial. The improvement produced by neuroleptics typically includes improvement in depression and anxiety, and Goldberg et al. also found improvement in obsessive-compulsive problems, suggesting that these are components of the total complex, rather than independent features, particularly since the tricyclic antidepressant, amitriptyline, seemed to produce a deterioration in some patients.

Conclusion

As far as we can tell it would seem that the concept implicit in the words of Lewis & Piotrowski that 'a little schizophrenia is schizophrenia' can be extended to a little schizophrenia-like phenomena might well be schizophrenia, whether considering inheritance, brief lived psychotic episodes, or personality characteristics.

The organic findings in the spectrum disorders, and even in the apparently unaffected blood relatives, imply that these disorders are medical illnesses. The possibility that low doses of antipsychotic medication may be helpful should be kept in mind and such an approach can prove very rewarding; a vivid demonstration of this is described elsewhere.

Acknowledgements

I thank Friern Hospital library for considerable help.
References