

Depression and life events

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Introduction

In discussing some clinical aspects of life event research, some concepts such as change, context and time dimension would seem to be of fundamental importance. Supposed or definable relationships between events and human behaviour are possibly crucial in the interpretation of the results of research. In the section on 'Consequences of stress research' the emphasis is mainly placed upon study of the form which life event scales should take and some results of the relevant research. Finally, a number of applications will be mentioned separately, chiefly in a clinical connection and directed at depressive behaviour.

Why are life events meaningful for the psychiatrist?

It is already half a century since Freud (1) with his impressive descriptions of the mourning process made us all aware of the fact that an event occurring within an individual life can produce pathogenic consequences.

By means of psychometric methods such as a schedule of recent experiences (SRE) developed by Holmes and Rahe (2) our understanding of the importance of psychosocial interaction has been considerably broadened. It became apparent how concrete the relationship between certain changes in a life and psychic behaviour can be (3 a, b).

There is a general consensus of opinion despite the many queries in this area that life events, especially when they occur close together or simultaneously, represent an increased risk of psychic disturbance. Now, what are the important factors to look for when studying life events.

1. The method of assessment must be concise and easy to use. The text must be simple and clearly expressed without any ambiguity. The interview list must be easy applicable in practice and not require a long or specific training in its use.
2. The events consist of regularly occurring situations, such as job difficulties, contacts with new colleagues, problems in upbringing, and marital problems. In contradistinction to facts such as a war, for example. This can lead to the

justifiable conclusion, that stress is a fairly general and daily occurrence.

3. The accurate description of the theoretical concept with the practical example of stress, in the form of time related events, allows further study of the connection between health and sickness.
4. Using a quantitative assessment, the individual adaptation grade can be replaced by a global interpersonal valuation. The degree of subjective impact, for example, can be assessed by establishing a grading for the objective impact.

What does a life event study depend on. The study of life events is globally based on the following principles.

- a. The specific moment of change is of significance, when stress is assumed to exist (i.e. on the universal level).
- b. There are events such as moving house, which in the presently studied culture do not affect people very differently, if age and sex are taken into consideration (i.e. on the cultural level).
- c. When events of the same level of significance, e.g. illness in the family, are included in the investigation, the stress causes are kept identical (i.e. on the social level). That is not significantly related to the actual event being scored.

If we still further analyse the above mentioned principles, which in combination form a stress model, we are confronted with the following aspects.

1. Stress is defined as the effect of the external surroundings on the organism, at the same time the stressors or stress factors are considered, both conceptually and analytically, to be totally independent of the individual studied, who has been simply exposed to the events and their related circumstances.

It is obvious that this definition of stress with the implications which go with it, must be taken into account when the results of an investigation are interpreted. The significance of the character of events is assumed to lie in the properties of the occurrences themselves, and not in the dynamic interchange between the individual and life events. This approach, as described by Lazarus and Cohen (4), denies any differences between individuals

as to the degree to which stress is experienced as the result of independent events.

2. The model described, assumes a direct connection between life events and the type of behaviour being studied. Such a vision deliberately ignores any possible involvement of psycho-social processes in the interaction between the events and the symptomatology. This is why we come across so few considerations of the personal way, in which individuals react to life events in the earlier research literature (5).

3. Stress is almost exclusively studied at the individual level, which is why the possible connection between events and social structures and processes is not incorporated into the investigation. Moreover, life events are more or less implicitly regarded as chance findings, so that the significance of individual choice or responsibility receives little attention from the investigator.

Summarizing, it is clear that the above mentioned stress model has some quite striking limitations for research purposes.

1. Personal characteristics do not play a main role in the study.
2. The present model is based on a direct connection between life events and behaviour.
3. Stress is not studied as a socially related phenomenon.

Thus, it is not surprising that present-day criticism of life event research is principally based on the aspects mentioned.

The necessity of implicating context dependent variables in the analysis of life event research results

The beginning phase of stress research emphasized prediction of the incidence of illness from knowledge of life events. In modern life event research, emphasis has been placed on analysing the correlations between events and illness. Finally, the question of how such relationships ought to be interpreted within their context is all the more pressing. What is the role of environmental factors, of personal or creative properties?

By 'context' is meant the degree of integration of life events in the time

dimension. It is closely related to psychological and social circumstances, through which the significance of events in relation to personal and group considerations can be further studied.

Most attempts at research base the significance of context on the construction scores, and, the evaluation of life events scales. Our experience with the setting-up and application of a self assessment method along side an interview approach, is an example of such an attempt. The investigation, which was carried out in order to determine which of the two methods was most applicable clinically and for research (6, 7) showed that the context between the events, the individual and the surroundings, for which the self assessment method provided scores, did not produce results which differed essentially from the interview method (see Table 1). What was remarkable, and is of significance from the context view-point, is that more exits were detected by the interview method.

Paykel et al. (8) have defined exits as events which have to do with departures from the social environment of the individual, e.g. deaths.

Paykel et al. (8) also found significantly more exits were experienced by depressive subjects than in the control group.

The reason why our finding (6), is remarkable, is that using a totally different research design, i.e. the comparison of two different assessment methods in clinical practice, significantly more exits were detected by one method than by the other, namely the interview approach (9). Our explanation for this, is that events with an acute character such as the irreversible loss of a beloved person – short term effects often insufficiently anticipated in apparently vulnerable individuals – are more likely to be denied in a self assessment test than in an interview. On the other hand, process-related events such as family and marital problems have long term effects and are more possible to anticipate in the case of vulnerable subjects.

Scoring was unhindered by either method, although there was a slight tendency for greater detection by selfassessment than by interview.

Consequences of stress research

The scales described are useful methods for predicting behaviour patterns, because they assume the most elementary life events to be stress inducing. Birth, marriage, divorce, dismissal and death are the nucleus around which other events come to play an important role in our day to day existence. In practice where the struggle lies is in:

1. A selection of occurrences from all those, which affect the majority of the population under investigation.
2. The evaluation of the degree of sensitivity distress existing in the majority of the members of such a group.

The first of these problems is mainly concerned with how to group events and is connected with the question of how events tend to occur in various socio-cultural norms and walks of life and how they are represented within the life cycle. The necessary selection from a collection of standard events for the formation of a life events scale, assumes a constant availability of context dependent variables, independent of the various settings and groups. This is therefore a somewhat problematical task. Dohrenwend (10) reported that responses to an enquiry among community residents (New York), as to which of the more recent major events have interrupted or altered the normal life routine, showed surprisingly little overlap when compared with a standard life events checklist. From this can be concluded that, in the case of checklists specific for a given population or setting group, such as for children (11) or college students (12) it is even more essential to pay attention to the factor context, when analysing or interpreting the results. An equally interesting development in stress research is the assessment of context, together with the stressfulness of life events. The initial life event research, such as that carried out by Holmes and Rahe (2) measured the degree of stress by the amount of adaptation or alteration, demanded by each event. This was based on standard estimations, obtained by event weightings which are based on assessments made by third persons, who have not actually experienced the reported events

themselves. Thus, the estimations of the amount of stress were made and collected by people who were not exposed to the events.

A more fundamental consideration is the movement away from the pure definition of stress in terms of change, towards the further analysis in evaluation of as yet unestablished context dependent variables. An example of this is the testing of the common sense assumption that more undesirable an event the more stress it will provoke (8, 13).

Other examples concern the stress laden factors of a contextual nature such as the extent of controllability (locus of control) and the degree of anticipation (14).

The question, of course, remains as to whether the characteristic features of context sensitivity mentioned, are inherent in the nature of events and can be considered separately from the broader personal and social context, in which things just happen.

Based on certain criteria it is possible, for instance, to construct a rough scale of events. A car accident, for example, is usually less easy to anticipate and therefore less easy to control than the start of a career.

There are also events such as loss of a job or departure of a colleague which play a more ambiguous role. Without knowledge of the personal significance of the event, it is rather difficult to place it in a more closely definable context.

Change, of itself, we now given to understand is no longer considered to be the life event property which generates the most stress. Moreover, the formulation of life events scales in terms of objective stress grades, representing options rooted exclusively in the environment, becomes increasingly complicated.

At the same time attempts to explore such contextual factors reveal two more limitations of a current life events model. On the one hand, the implicit assumption exists, that events occur at random and that the incidents are separate and time related. Also each separate life event dimension or property (changes, whether desired or not, the controllability, or the possibility of anticipation etc.) would, by

itself, be sufficient for determining the extent to which stress and the effect of life events have influenced the individual's health.

Therefore the opinion has arisen in recent years, that the majority of events do not occur by chance and are not signaled, nor are received or accepted in this way.

In some cases particular events are more the consequence of behaviour. In other situations occurrences can to a certain extent begin spontaneously.

Life events, depression and some contextual aspects

If we accept the idea that life events do not occur at random, then we have to ask ourselves under what conditions and circumstances they do occur. Furthermore, our search for a discovery of the necessary conditions, should provide us with more information about life stress, than would the knowledge that various expressions of stress can be considered as pure symptomatological manifestations.

Gersten et al. (15), based on a research into precursors of behaviour disturbances in children, claimed that life events are of only indirect etiological significance and are probably the result of long term causal problems, which furnish further information. The problems are in the nature of low financial economic status, punishing or perpetually quarreling parents, a sick parent, and so on.

An investigation among a group of depressive middle class women led to results which pointed in the same direction (16, 17).

Brown and his co-workers, studying which circumstances increased the pathogenic effects of a particular event, found the following vulnerability factors to be relevant.

1. Loss of the mother before the age of 11 years.
2. The presence of three or more children below the age of 14 years.
3. A poor marital relationship.
4. Unemployment.

Several reviewers have pointed out that life events account for approximately 10% of the variance of affective disturbance (18, 4). Brown and Harris (19) argue that the

correlation between life events and depression will always be small, because stress (and so life events) is so much commoner than depression.

Brown et al. (20) have developed the concept of 'brought-forward time'. This is a minimum estimate, under given assumptions, of the amount of time that the onset of a depressive period was brought forward by an event. The 'brought-forward time' does not translate very easily into real terms and it is not immediately apparent what a high or low value would be.

Paykel (21) has argued for the more standard epidemiologic index of 'relative risk'. This magnitude indicates the extent to which a given, presumably pathogenic, factor (i.e. life event) increases the risk that a given disease becomes manifest. He calculates, on the basis of his own results and those of others, that after the experience of an exit, the risk of developing a depression is increased at least sixfold.

Cooke and Hole (22) stress the importance of using the attributable risk in the population* and give values from published studies ranging from 29% to 54%.

It is argued by Bebbington et al. (23) that this mentioned relationship between life events and psychiatric disorder particularly in cases of depression, arises because this relationship is stronger in these mild cases (of the general population studied), in comparison to the more severe ones who ask for psychiatric help. Cooke (24) showed that life events had very different effects among the different population groups.

Because of the still unanswered question, in to what extent life events do play a more directive role in clinical cases of depression we have made a clinical trial with a population of depressive patients.

In a clinical investigation (25) we tried to establish the relationship between the number of events and the different types of depression. Obviously, the diagnostic labelling of the degree of depression was of importance. Brown and Harris (17) used the so called category concept, whereas

* (this indicates the maximum percentage of psychiatric cases that can be directly attributed to the experiences of life events)

Paykel (26) usually employed the dimension concept in the recognition of depressive behaviour. Therefore, we felt it would be interesting to find out how a contextual approach to the psychopathological diagnosis could influence the significance of life events. The clinical population was divided according to the DSM-III (see Table 2 and 3) as follows:

Major depression (n = 14) and dysthymic disorder (n = 14). Atypical depression (n = 8), bipolar depression (n = 6), psychotic disorder, most schizophrenics (n = 6), and a remainder who were unclassifiable. There was a control group of patients, not suffering from a depressive or psychotic disorder (n = 8). Among the control group were three eating disorders, two adjustment disorders, one hypochondriac and one general anxiety disorder and one conversion disorder. We also used the self assessment scale and the interview method. Preliminary findings from the data so far collected are:

1. Life events hardly ever occur in the 12 month period preceding the diagnosis of a major depressive episode.
2. In the case of other depressive disorders, recent life events are often recorded.

Contextual influences, such as threat, clinical picture, and effort after meaning (i.e. the search for an explanation of the complaints) were taken into account during the research procedure.

Although we have no need in this discussion, to go further into the possible relationship between life events and psychic behaviour, we feel it pertinent to state, that we ought to be much better informed, concerning the context and the full significance and duration of the overall effect of occurrence per se.

In connection with this kind of study, Surtees and Ingham (27), have presented a particular viewpoint. This takes into account the complexity of the vicissitudes, but also takes into consideration in addition to the effects of life events and circumstances, time aspects with all their psychosocial implications. They found, that the threat, which can accompany every

life event, loses significance with the passage of time. On the other hand, they assert that the clustering of various events and their occurrence within a context of continuous ill tidings, brings additive and interactive stress processes with it. This is presumed to affect not only the degree of stress, but also the global snuffing out of the threat of force.

We can regard this model as an example of a research design, based on contextual perspectives. It is a frame work within which the possible connections between stress variables can be studied and clusters of factors within particular time limits can be placed, whereby psychological explanations can be arrived at.

The work of Brown and Harris (17), shows very obviously the value of research into the different types of contextual characteristic features, when the stress concept and the effects of stress are to be defined. Instead of avoiding the personal significance of events for the individual patient, they explicitly applied a method of acting. They measured the significance of the particular event in each case by further analysing multiple contextual aspects of separate life events. Taken into consideration were the extent to which the event was anticipated and the available amount of social support. There appeared to be two features, which played a role at the beginning of a depression.

1. The time variable, defined in terms of a short versus a long term threat with which life events are accompanied. Only events with a long term fairly serious form of contextual threat, appeared to have any significance in the development of depression in the group of women studied.

2. Typical were events which were principally those, accompanied by more threatening characteristics in which interpersonal loss was experienced. Others (8, 1, 28), have established that the most virulent life events are mainly those experiences with a clear threatening or irreversible detachment of social contacts. As far as social contacts are concerned, the subjective feeling of social support has been shown by life event research to be an important contextual feature (29).

Our own research (30) has clearly shown,

that persons who belong to a hobby-club have a lower anxiety state score. The more people they know in the neighbourhood the lower the anxiety states score, thus the lower the depression score and the more cheerful the mood. The more friends a person has, the less gloomy his outlook (see Table 4).

The subjectively experienced social support (B1-2) does not relate to the degree of anxiety and depression. Although these data do not by a long way indicate where all the relevant clues lie, as far as the influence of events on depressive behaviour is concerned, it is obvious, that evaluation of the significance of social context can be considered to have been shown to be a component of modern life event research.

In conclusion, I want to summarize briefly

the points on which, in my opinion, the emphasis in present-day life event research is placed.

1. The precise relating of life events, time aspects and the psychological and social implications involved in the interpretation of research results.
2. The discovery of new sources of socially related behaviour characteristics, particularly the further specification of personal qualities and vulnerability criteria, through which events can produce pathogenic effects.
3. The continuation of research into social support variables and their function in the life event stress model.
4. Last but not least, an improved liaison between the questions arising from clinical research, and measuring methods, applied to social factors.

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