The future of Social Psychiatry

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Abstract

It has been suggested that psychiatry as an academic and medical discipline is in crisis. In many countries, it is difficult to recruit young psychiatrists, and the profession struggles to show what specific skills they have. For more than 30 years, there has been hardly any progress in developing more effective treatment methods. Subsequently there is a debate about the future of psychiatry with suggestions to focus on neurosciences.

The presentation will argue that it is essential for psychiatry to embrace social psychiatry as central to its thinking and practice. This involves social values, social approaches to care, and a social perspective in research.

Concepts of social psychiatry are not new. Yet, the future cannot be a mere reference to successful periods in the past. So, how can we build on what has been achieved and advance the field? What may be the new ideas and the new approaches?

The presentation will argue that future social psychiatry may be guided by three general principles: 1) that mental distress is understood as a phenomenon on a continuum of potential behaviours in a given social context (rather than a dichotomous biomedical illness); 2) that changes to the social context, e.g. in families and communities, influence experience and behaviour; and 3) that personal and community resources are primarily available in social relationships.

Pursuing these ideas may require a radically different description of mental distress and a new terminology. Risks and benefits will be outlined, and potential research approaches briefly discussed.