

ARC Fest Information

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PhD Title: What does it mean to age well with bipolar disorder?

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Theme: Health and Care Across the Life Course

Project Summary

Bipolar disorder is a severe chronic mood disorder that is characterised by marked episodes of elation (mania and hypomania) and depressed mood alongside disruptions to behaviour and thought that cause a significant impairment to people's quality of life (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Whilst there now a growing amount of existing literature exploring people's experiences of living with bipolar disorder in adult populations, the evidence base surrounding bipolar disorder in older adult populations is sparse (Depp & Jeste, 2004). This is important, as growth in the worlds older population has reached unprecedented levels and the number of older adults with severe mental illnesses such as bipolar disorder is expected to rise dramatically over the next several decades (Jeste et al., 1999). Despite this, there is limited knowledge about the experiences and needs of older adults with bipolar disorder, meaning that the services and treatments offered are potentially inappropriate and ineffective for this population (Sajatovic & Blow, 2007). Older adults with BD are a particularly vulnerable group, as in addition to chronic mental health difficulties, they experience frailty, isolation, loss of independence, and cognitive decline (Sajatovic et al., 2006). Long-term use of mood stabilising medication can also cause renal failure, hypothyroidism and weight gain, creating further health disparities (Depp & Jeste, 2004). Because of this, further research is needed to help inform person centred care and reduce the health inequalities faced by this group.

This PhD project aims to better understand the preferences, priorities and presenting needs of older adults with bipolar disorder in order to reduce the inadequate, disparate, and sometimes unsuitable care that this group currently receives. To address these aims, two empirical studies will be conducted. Study one will involve completing five focus groups (4-6 participants in each group) before introducing a method called photo elicitation in which 20 participants are invited to use cameras to take photographs of aspects of their lives that are important to them, and represent 'aging well' or 'not well'. Following this, these 20 participants will be asked to complete individual interviews in which their photographs will be used as prompts for discussion. This study will be used to answer research question 1: What does ageing well with bipolar disorder mean to service users? Study two will involve 20 new service users and members of their care team in the NHS. These participants will be interviewed using an approach called biographical narrative analysis to explore changes in their care needs using timeliness of events and transitions across the lifespan. With the participants consent, information from their care coordinator and clinical records will be used as prompts for discussion in order to provide rich and detailed information. This study will be used to answer research question 2: What are the changing care needs of older adults with bipolar disorder as they enter later life?