

Why Psychosis is not *All* Bad



1. Hypothesis

Whilst mental illness is distressing and debilitating, psychosis may not be all bad. Elements of the delusional experience might provide pragmatic benefits to those experiencing them, protecting them from other more distressing states.

2. Defining delusion

Delusion is normally understood in terms of false belief held with conviction (American Psychiatric Association. DSM-5 Task Force, 2013).

3. Background

Qualitative research methods employing a full phenomenology can bring us closer to understanding what some mental illnesses are like. This in turn might have implications for research, stigma and therapeutic intervention.

4. Methodology

A research protocol and supporting documentation was developed and submitted for National Health Service (NHS) ethical approval and local NHS trust Research and Development (R&D) approval at two local trusts in the Midlands. NHS research collaborators were asked to identify potential participants with active delusions. Once a patient had agreed to participate, formal consent was sought and two subsequent interviews were undertaken. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. In the first interview the research participant was asked to talk about her history and the onset of her problems. In the second interview the participant was asked to talk about what her current experience is like. A short demographics questionnaire was also completed. The two interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed using Phenomenological methods.



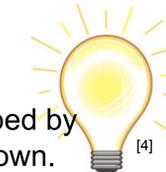
This is a work in progress and the transcripts of two participants inform these results.

Some literature relating to the protective nature of delusion was also interrogated.

4. Literature



- “Humankind cannot bear too much reality.” (Eliot, 1935)
- The ‘self enhancement bias’ suggests that being slightly (sub-clinically) delusional might be good for your mental health (Sharat, 2012)
 - Delusions might prevent a person from acknowledging ego-dystonic unbearable facts (McKay et al, 2005)
 - Delusion formation can provide meaning (Roberts, 1991)
 - Delusions might be biologically adaptive (Mishara & Corlett, 2009).
 - Klaus Conrad’s ‘aha’ moment (Mishara, 2009) and the resolution described by Karl Jaspers (1997) enable relief from the perplexing nature of the unknown.
 - Persecutory delusions might defend a person from acknowledging low self-esteem (Lyon et al, 1994)
 - Delusions might have epistemic benefits which restore agency (Bortolotti, 2015)
 - Delusions can occasionally be life-enhancing and positive (Fulford & Jackson, 1997)



5. Empirical Findings

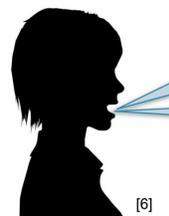
“Right, if I say something bad about myself and God will cry and say ‘no that’s not right’... because God loves me. He even got me to write down that I love myself.”

“... I’d already been through a bad time, took an overdose, everything and then all of a sudden... I felt better after I’d prayed.”

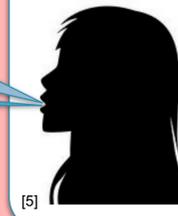
“I certainly don’t feel suicidal... I did before, I truly did. In fact I popped 400 pills on the table...”

“If that man hadn’t phoned at the police station... Because I heard that conversation... and I thought oh... somebody is on my side, somebody does believe me. I scooped all those pills up and put them in the bin...”

Alison



Barbara



7. Next Steps / Discussion

- Analysis of further research participant transcripts
- Joint article (with Professor Lisa Bortolotti) to be prepared for project PERFECT using empirical evidence from this research
- If some symptoms are understood as helpful or protective this might have implications for further research, stigma and therapeutic intervention.

6. Analysis

Barbara:

After the breakdown of Barbara’s marriage she has strong negative thoughts and feelings about herself as well as guilt relating to personal decisions she made in her marriage. Her new delusional schema enables her to believe that God will love her whatever she does or has done in the past and will never let her do anything that she couldn’t live with. She knows this because God has told her directly. This prevents her from being overwhelmed by guilt.

Her strong negative thoughts and feelings about herself and feeling devastated by her husband leaving threatened to overwhelm her. She had attempted suicide and one might describe her as severely depressed at this stage. Barbara’s new (delusional) way of seeing the world – as God’s chosen one, exempt from being ‘bad’ prevents her from a downward spiral of self-criticism and negativity, depression and perhaps suicide.

Alison:

Alison’s stress and concern about the neighbours and the police caused her to contemplate suicide. Her ‘voices’ appear to save her from this course of action. She believes that she ‘hears’ a phone conversation between her next-door neighbour and a police officer where the officer believes Alison’s version of events and is critical of the neighbour. She is relieved and feels there is hope if the police are ‘on her side.’ She decides not to take an overdose.

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Images:
[1] <http://resets.org/what-interview-transcription/>
[2] <http://www.elephantjournal.com/2011/06/10-obstacles-to-sane-spirituality-or-10-portals-beyond-new-age-delusion-part-one-the-dance-of-psyche/delusions/>
[3] <http://www.monkeymedia.com.au/why-distress-rates-suck>
[4] <https://wellingtonsoup.org/2012/08/14/so-wellington-whats-the-big-idea-tell-us-down-at-the-ideas-farm/lightbulb/>
[5] & [6] <https://clipartfest.com/categories/view/2cf040524e6a992ee797710f12a1ef3ea5a98cb6/talking-head-clip-art.html>