Psychoanalytic Approaches to Psychosis

.......... and Reality !!!

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Aims

1) Compare aspects of the mind in
   a) Psychosis
   b) Non-psychosis

2) Differentiate
   a. “Going psychotic” (losing one’s mind)
   b. “Being psychotic” (a psychotic ‘recovery’ i.e. Freud’s patch)

3) Briefly: some applications of psychoanalytic understanding of psychosis
Definitions of psychosis

Psychiatry

Classifies psychosis by the presence or absence of certain phenomena

It is deliberately a-theoretical (ICD and DSM)
Psychodynamics classifies psychogenic psychosis: (eg in stress /vulnerability psychosis)

- According to phenomena that have an unconscious intention in relation to problematic psychological realities

- The word intention implies that psychogenic psychosis has a psychological function or purpose (but not an UCS thought intention)
Becoming psychotic

• In **Non-psychotic** aspects of mind the intention is to **integrate and coordinate realities**

• In **Psychotic** aspects of mind the intention is to **dispense with certain realities**
Going psychotic
An example of an acute psychotic fragmentation would be of a person who suddenly experienced their arms coming off and disappearing out into space further and further away to ‘infinity’.

Reconstruction later revealed that the person had an impulse to attack someone with a knife who had ‘stolen’ the limelight from her.

The person had a history of committing such assaults in similar situations.

This example fits the definition of ‘going psychotic’ have an unconscious purpose or intention (and one can see the ‘sanity’ in the madness).
Either sudden onset, or a very longstanding situation (projective tendencies)
Disconnected from reality testing,
Subject to primary process activity

Subject to secondary processes, reality orientated (relatively speaking)
A crucial point about the disconnection from the integrating mind or ego is that the disconnected (unwanted) part can then be more subject to distortions of the primary processes of the unconscious.

By this I mean to non-reality processes such as those that lead to the manifestations of dreams: turning into the opposite, condensation, the negation of time, wish fulfilment etc etc. This accounts for the plethora of phenomena in the content of psychosis but the reside of personally meaningful issues.

Diagram 11 indicates the importance of the ungoing nature of the relationship between the non-psychotic and psychotic parts of the person (Bion et al)
Dissociative psychosis

• ..........then my arm detached itself from me and went off all by itself down the ravine, shooting left and right, I ran after it, waiving at it to wait with my other arm, but it did not want to, it mocked me.............

(Littell, J. 2009 The Kindly Ones).
The previous slide illustrates how complicated it can be to disentangle projective processes in psychosis as the psychosis often finds a convenient hook in the outside world to hide the fact of projection from and the boundary confusion.
The Stress Vulnerability Model

Assessment of all mental health issues especially useful in psychosis

What are the particular real personal vulnerabilities that make what particular real stresses threatening?

It is important to think in both vulnerability and current stresses in terms of quality and quantity
What do I mean by stressful realities?

A) **External material** realities and it’s ‘laws’ – how external reality ‘behaves’ (time, day/night, gravity, social norms, how another person has actually behaved)
B) INTERNAL REALITIES

THE PSYCHOTIC MIND AIMS TO ‘DISPENSE’ WITH ANY REALITY or ITS PRECURSORS IF PROBLEMATIC

- Painful feelings
- Unbearable memories
- Unwelcome aspects of self
- A too condemning conscience (superego)
- Unwelcome body realities, sexual, aggression, ageing, dependency
- Unwelcome perceptual information
- All these issues in a current relationship context

HENCE THE PLETHORA OF PHENOMENA IN PSYCHOSIS
The psychotic mind tries to **dispense with** any of these realities (if they are ‘too much’):

– So that realities are not suffered!!

– Clearly not always completely successful  ---→
In non-psychosis the person suffers from these internal realities.

For example:

- PTSD memories
- Conflicts mental states
- Consequences of loss feelings
- Self-esteem issues more feelings
- Personality and that of others.
- Conscience (eg Guilt)
The mind and the brain

**Organic** factors interfere with the mind’s job of integrating realities:

- Mind altering ‘street’ drugs and prescribed medication
- Endocrine disorders
- Tumours, dementias, brain damage
- Biochemistry
Developmental factors leading to vulnerability (ie not only genes)

• Earlier experience impacts on the brain / mind’s development

• The brain / mind’s capacity to manage quantities of affect

• Determine whether integration or expulsion occurs
In dreams and in psychosis

Something (physical or psychological) makes itself felt as a potential problem:

The unconscious primary processes create a solution and does not differentiate the representation of the solution from its perception in external reality (eg hallucination)

The hungry baby conjures up the breast
The baby hallucinates a solution to its hunger, it believes it is being fed ….. For a while!
Examples

Changing external reality (1)

• Physiotherapist *suffers* from low *self esteem*

• Scared no-one will ever marry him (chronic condition!)

• Started to change internal and external reality (using projective mechanisms),

• Enacts belief he could *cure* his chronic patients with eg Parkinson’s disease

*Note: the motivation is to break the link with his low self-esteem - manic defence*
Projection of Reality of the sexual or aggressive self

A nun had difficulties accepting herself as having a sexual self

Experienced more and more complex delusions of machinery trying to find ways to infiltrate her with ‘dirty’ sexual images
Psychotic suspension of reality of harsh superego

• Complaint of recent onset of distressing voices – calling her a slut

• No relevant history given (breaking links protecting from realities)

• But the reality was: she had actually slept around or had thoughts of doing so.

    Her superego had become disconnected and projected (the ‘external’ critical voices)
Anorexia (An example of being psychotic)
Uses of psychoanalytic ideas

• A less fuzzy way of using the word psychosis

• To help professionals and family members understand and manage their own experiences in the face of those with psychosis (differentiating their counter-transference from their transference)

• Making contributions to formulations: a way of enriching understanding many situations in therapeutic work especially enriching the stress vulnerability model of psychosis

• A way of thinking about prevention

• In formal psychoanalytically orientated therapies, whether individual, family, group or therapeutic community
Evidence base

• Individual supportive psychodynamic psychotherapy:
  – The Danish National Schizophrenia project (DNS II): Prospective, comparative, longitudinal, multicentre study of psychodynamic psychotherapy of first-episode psychosis.
    • Harder et al: Psychiatry: Interpersonal and Biological Processes, 2014;77(2):155-68

• Psychodynamic Family Interventions are compatible with NICE guidance
  – Psychosis: Psychodynamic work with families,
    Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy, 25:01, 75-91.
    Brian Martindale & Judith Smith (2011):

• Individual Psychodynamic Psychotherapy Of Schizophrenia: Empirical Evidence for the Practicing Clinician
Further reading

Advances in Psychiatric Treatment (2013)

The psychodynamics of psychosis

Brian Martindale & Alison Summers
vol. 19, 124–131 doi: 10.1192/apt.bp.111.009126

Using psychodynamic principles in formulation in everyday practice

Alison Summers & Brian Martindale
vol. 19, 203–211 doi: 10.1192/apt.bp.112.010181

Supportive psychodynamic psychotherapy for psychosis

Bent Rosenbaum, Brian Martindale & Alison Summers
vol. 19, 310–318 doi: 10.1192/apt.bp.111.009142

The Psychotic Wavelength

Richard Lucas 2009, Routledge

Lecture on You Tube by Darian Leader

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OF8-9w2bPDw&feature=youtu.be