

Persecutory delusions: reminiscence of ancestral hostile threats?

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Abstract

Recent studies suggest that both the form and the content of persecutory delusional beliefs may reflect pathological exaggerations of evolved psychological mechanisms for dealing with social threat recognition. Here, we tested the hypothesis first put forward by Walston et al. [*Evolution and Human Behavior* 19 (1998) 257–260] that sex differences in the content of persecutory delusions reflect divergent ancestral hostile social threats, in a prospective study of two samples of German and Russian patients with delusions of persecution. Deluded men and women differed significantly in their attributions of perceived threats. The majority of men felt persecuted by groups of hostile strange males, whereas women projected their paranoid fears onto familiar people of their social environment, largely irrespective of psychiatric diagnosis or cultural background. In contrast to our predictions, however, both men and women with persecutory delusions were most frightened of physical violence. Fear of sexual coercion was only present in a small number of patients. In sum, this study is largely supportive of the hypothesis that the content of persecutory delusions reflects ancestral hostile threats. © 2006 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Persecutory delusions; Ancestral threats; Sex differences; Cross-cultural comparison

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1. Introduction

Persecutory delusions have repeatedly been interpreted as the consequence of an evolved psychological mechanism of social threat recognition gone awry. Whereas the formal aspect of delusional beliefs of persecution has been linked to specific mistakes in inferring the intentions of other individuals (Charlton & McClelland, 1999) and to heightened vigilance toward threat perception in facial expressions of emotion (Green & Phillips, 2004), it has been suggested that the content of persecutory delusions could reflect threats from the human ancestral environment that differ for men vs. women: Walston, David, and Charlton (1998) proposed that women would project such delusional beliefs of being threatened onto female conspecifics, because for women, it was vital to cooperate with other nonkin women to build social support networks (Essock Vitale & McGuire, 1985). For men, by contrast, potential ancestral threats might have lain in marauding bands of strange males, because, due to strong resource competition between unrelated communities in ancestral human environments, men formed coalitions to defend territory and engage in warfare (Wrangham, 2004).

In support of this proposal, Walston et al., (1998) found that women suffering from persecutory delusions felt threatened by familiar persons, whereas the majority of deluded men feared persecution by strangers. However, the sample size was fairly small, ratings were made in retrospect, the study did not examine the nature of the perceived threat (e.g., physical violence, sexual coercion, or ostracism), and there was no cross-cultural comparison, which could provide further evidence in favor of the hypothesis of pathologically distorted human universals for dealing with social threat detection in psychiatric disorders associated with persecutory delusions (Brown, 1991).

In the present prospective study, we sought to address these open questions. Specifically, we hypothesized the following: (1) Men with persecutory delusions project their threat perception onto groups of strange males. (2) Deluded women feel persecuted by persons from their familiar social environment (both men and women). (3) Physical violence including death is the predominating nature of perceived threat in deluded men. (4) Women's fears focus on physical violence or sexual coercion if threatened by males, and ostracism if threatened by other females. (5) In light of the arbitrariness of categories of current diagnostic systems (i.e., *DSM-IV* 4th edition, American Psychiatric Association, 1994), these findings are expected to be independent of psychiatric diagnosis. (6) The anticipated sex differences are cross-culturally similar.

2. Methods

Patients admitted to the Center for Psychiatry, Psychotherapy, and Psychosomatics, University of Bochum, Germany, were screened for the presence of delusional beliefs of persecution. Sixty-four cases with persecutory delusions were identified and examined using a semistructured interview. The interview addressed patients' demographic variables (age, sex, and marital status) and the predominant nature of the perceived threat (physical violence, sexual coercion, ostracism, or loss of social status), the number of persecutors (single persons

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