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Externalizing and personalizing biases in persecutory delusions: The relationship with poor insight and theory-of-mind

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Abstract

The presence of externalizing bias (EB) for negative events together with personalizing bias (PB) (a bias to blame others rather than circumstances) may jointly constitute a vulnerability to develop persecutory delusions (PDs). Whereas EB purportedly serves to defend a vulnerable self-concept by avoiding negative self-attributions and might therefore exacerbate poor insight, PB may reflect cognitive deficits, including theory-of-mind impairment. We investigated these proposals in 34 schizophrenic patients with a history of PDs and 21 healthy controls. Patients with moderate- to severe-PDs and patients without a current PD showed excessive EB which was, surprisingly, absent in patients with mild persecutory delusions (mild-PDs). That EB might wax and wane with fluctuating delusional intensity was interpreted in accord with a new dynamic model of attribution self-representation cycles [Bentall et al., 2000. PDs: A review and theoretical integration. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 21, 1143–1192]. As predicted, EB exacerbated poor insight. However, counter to predictions, theory-of-mind impairment did not increase PB, which was

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marked in all participants, whether clinical or non-clinical; instead, theory-of-mind impairment was also correlated with poor insight. Our findings indicate multiple pathways to poor insight, one of which is a theory-of-mind difficulty, impairing the capacity to simulate other perspectives for the purpose of critically evaluating one's own beliefs and circumstances.

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Introduction

Advocates of a two-factor explanatory framework for delusions propose a distinction between the factors that trigger an initial implausible thought (and thus contribute towards explaining the thematic content of a particular delusion) and the factors that explain the uncritical adoption of an implausible thought as a delusional belief (Davies, Coltheart, Langdon, & Breen, 2001; Langdon & Coltheart, 2000). The recent Garety, Kuipers, Fowler, Freeman, and Bebbington (2001) model of psychosis is generally consistent with this approach. For example, these authors propose that the route to psychosis begins with a precipitating environmental and/or neurobiological event that disrupts cognitive processes¹ leading to anomalous experiences. These anomalous experiences trigger a search for explanatory hypotheses (e.g. the experience of hearing voices prompts the initial thought “some invisible entity is speaking to me”) and the full psychotic break with reality occurs when sufferers generate and adopt as a delusional belief an externalizing misattribution (e.g. “God is speaking to me”) rather than self-correcting with an internal attribution (e.g. “something wrong with my mind is causing me to hear voices”). It has been proposed that an extreme self-serving attributional bias may contribute towards a failure of this type in persecutory-deluded (PD) people.

The earliest version of this account was the defensive attribution model of persecutory delusions (PDs; Bentall, Kinderman, & Kaney, 1994). According to this account, people who are prone to develop PDs harbour latent negative self-beliefs and subconsciously defend against the activation of such beliefs by avoiding self-blame for negative events. The cost is an externalizing misattribution concerning the cause of negative experiences and a paranoid world-view of other people as perpetrators of harm. More recently, Bentall (2001) has noted that a defensive avoidance of self-blame for negative events is not sufficient to explain the generation of other-blaming delusions, since not blaming anyone, or simply putting events down to unknown circumstances or chance, would satisfy the same defensive function. Bentall et al. (Bentall et al., 2001; Kinderman & Bentall, 2000) have therefore proposed that two distinct attributional biases—an *externalizing* bias (EB) (blaming others or circumstances rather than oneself when negative events occur) and a *personalizing* bias (PB) (blaming others rather than circumstances)—need both be present to constitute a vulnerability to PDs.

A substantial literature supports the role of an excessive EB in PD formation. For example, numerous studies have used the Attributional Style Questionnaire (ASQ; Peterson et al., 1982) to demonstrate that depressive individuals attribute the cause of negative events to themselves and

¹In delusional disorder, the precipitating event may be an affective disturbance rather than cognitive disruption.

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