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Persecutory delusions and the self: An investigation of implicit and explicit self-esteem

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ABSTRACT

Persecutory delusions are proposed to be a defence against low self-esteem reaching conscious awareness (Bentall, Corcoran, Howard, Blackwood, & Kinderman, 2001). Key predictions of this proposal are that individuals with persecutory delusions will have lower implicit self-esteem and equivalent levels of explicit self-esteem compared to healthy controls. This study aims to test the predictions regarding implicit and explicit self-esteem in people with persecutory delusions. Of 22 people screened for persecutory delusions, 16 were recruited to the study. 20 healthy control participants were recruited. The Implicit Association Test was used to measure implicit self-esteem and the Rosenberg self-esteem scale was used to assess explicit self-esteem. Positive and negative self and other schemas were also assessed using the Brief Core Schema Scales. People with persecutory delusions had positive implicit self-esteem, comparable to that of the control group. Explicit self-esteem was lower for the persecutory delusion group, but was associated with increased depression and anxiety. Negative self and other schemas were higher in the clinical group. The results do not support the contention that persecutory delusions defend against negative self-representations and low self-esteem reaching conscious awareness. Non-defensive cognitive models are discussed as an alternative way of understanding persecutory delusions.

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1. Introduction

Persecutory delusions are characterised by the belief that others intend psychological, physical or social harm to the self (Freeman & Garety, 2000). Cognitive models have therefore focused on beliefs about the self and others, in order to understand the formation and maintenance of persecutory delusions. The attribution self-representation model proposes that individuals with persecutory delusions have latent negative beliefs about the self, and that the persecutory delusion provides a defence against low self-esteem reaching conscious awareness (Bentall, Corcoran, Howard, Blackwood, & Kinderman, 2001). To date the research evidence supporting this contention is inconclusive (Garety & Freeman, 1999), which is partly due to methodological difficulties measuring implicit self-esteem. The focus of this study is on the investigation of implicit and explicit self-esteem in people with

persecutory delusions, in order to test the defensive hypothesis, as well as overcoming some of the methodological problems in the assessment of implicit self-esteem.

1.1. Cognitive theories and self-esteem

People with persecutory delusions are predicted to have low implicit self-esteem (Bentall et al., 2001). Implicit self-esteem is defined as an automatic and non-conscious evaluation of the self (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). Bentall et al.'s attribution self-representation model predicts that people who are vulnerable to persecutory delusions make external-personal attributions (blame other people) for the occurrence of negative self-referent events. Through attributing blame to others for negative events the individual's conscious self-view (or explicit self-esteem) remains positive, while negative self beliefs and low implicit self-esteem remain latent. This is the defence. Persecutory delusions are hypothesised to be maintained through cyclical links between attributions and self-representations. While attributing blame to others for negative events would preserve explicit self-esteem, this process would also lead to internal representations of others as malevolent and hostile, and a higher likelihood of making future external attributions for negative events. This process maintains

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the delusion. Key predictions of this model, therefore, are that there will be a discrepancy between implicit and explicit self-esteem, specifically that implicit self-esteem will be low in comparison with explicit self-esteem, and that people with persecutory delusions will have a tendency to attribute blame to others, and view others negatively.

Studies investigating explicit self-esteem in persecutory delusions have found inconsistent results. Some report low explicit self-esteem (Bowins & Shugar, 1998; Freeman et al., 1998; Green et al., 2006; Smith et al., 2006), whereas others report positive explicit self-esteem in comparison to people with depression and healthy controls (Candido & Romney, 1990; Lyon, Kaney, & Bentall, 1994). Bentall et al. (2001) argue that this is due to the fluctuating nature of attributions and self-representations. There may be times when blaming others for a negative event is not possible due to situational factors (e.g. there is no other person to blame), and therefore negative self-esteem reaches conscious awareness. Fluctuations in explicit self-esteem (Thewissen et al., 2007) and attributional style (Bentall & Kaney, 2005) have been demonstrated in people with persecutory delusions. However, there is no evidence demonstrating that they fluctuate together. If persecutory delusions do not provide a complete defence against low implicit self-esteem reaching conscious awareness, then the results of studies investigating explicit self-esteem alone are difficult to interpret in relation to this model. A discrepancy between low implicit and relatively high explicit self-esteem would be expected according to this model. However, the size of the discrepancy may vary when the persecutory delusion only provides partial protection.

There are methodological difficulties with assessing implicit self-esteem, as people with persecutory delusions will be motivated to prevent negative self-esteem reaching conscious awareness according to the attribution self-representation model (Garety & Freeman, 1999). Therefore, methods used to assess implicit self-esteem will be needed to penetrate this defence. Measuring implicit self-esteem has been problematic in research on persecutory delusions. Lyon et al. (1994), and Kinderman (1994) attempted to measure implicit self-esteem in people with persecutory delusions using an implicit measure of attributional style and an emotional stroop task. However, in both studies the measures chosen may not have been accessing implicit self-esteem. The studies are described below.

Lyon et al. (1994) compared a group with persecutory delusions and a group with depression, using the Pragmatic Inference Test to assess implicit attributional style, and an explicit measure of attributional style. They proposed that attributional style reflects self-representations; this idea is based on findings which show that people with negative self-representations tend to make internal attributions for negative events and external attributions for positive events, whereas people with positive self-representations make internal attributions for positive events and external attributions for negative events. On the explicit measure, people with persecutory delusions made more external attributions for negative events (they blamed others), and made more internal attributions for positive events. However, on the implicit measure, people with persecutory delusions responded similarly to the depressed group, making internal attributions for negative events and external attributions for positive events. Lyon et al. reported this as evidence for implicit negative self-representations and explicit positive self-representations in people with persecutory delusions. Although an implicit–explicit discrepancy was demonstrated, as Garety and Freeman (1999) argue, the discrepancy was in attributional style, and does not necessarily indicate levels of self-esteem.

The emotional stroop task is another paradigm that has been used to measure implicit self-esteem (Kinderman, 1994). Participants named the colour of positive, negative, and neutral

personally descriptive words. The assumption behind this task is that words with emotional salience will produce slower response times because they will interfere more with responding. People with persecutory delusions and depression responded more slowly to negative words than healthy controls. This indicated that the negative words had higher emotional salience for both patient groups. However, it does not necessarily follow that higher emotional salience for negative words, indicates low implicit self-esteem. There may be other reasons why negative words were more emotionally salient (e.g. increased levels of depression), not only due to possible low implicit self-esteem.

In this study, Kinderman (1994) also used an explicit measure of self-esteem, where participants had to rate the words used in the stroop task on how well they described the self. The group with persecutory delusions endorsed more of the positive words than the group with depression; however, there was no difference between the groups in numbers of negative words endorsed. Kinderman suggested that this was evidence for higher explicit self-esteem, and an overall implicit–explicit discrepancy in self-esteem in the group with persecutory delusions. However, Garety and Freeman (1999) disagree and argue that as the group with persecutory delusions did not differ from the depressed group on the numbers of negative words endorsed, and both groups endorsed more negative words than the healthy control group, that the results do not necessarily indicate positive explicit self-esteem for the group with persecutory delusions. It is difficult to come to firm conclusions about the importance of this study as a test of the attribution self-representation model, because the measure employed may not have tapped self-esteem, and because the discrepancy between implicit and explicit measures was not convincing.

In summary, although the study by Lyon et al. (1994) demonstrated a discrepancy between implicit and explicit attributional style for people with persecutory delusions, neither Lyon et al.'s nor Kinderman's (1994) study provide good evidence of low implicit self-esteem in people with persecutory delusions, as it is questionable whether the paradigms actually measured implicit self-esteem. A more robust test of the attribution self-representation model requires a better measure of implicit self-esteem. The present study uses the Implicit Association Test (IAT), because it is the most appropriate measure of implicit self-esteem currently available (Bosson, Swann, & Pennebaker, 2000).

1.2. *Implicit association test as a measure of implicit self-esteem*

The self-esteem Implicit Association Test (SE-IAT) measures the strength of implicit associations between target concepts (“self” or “other” words) and attribute concepts (“positive” or “negative” words) (Greenwald & Farnham, 2000). The assumption is that when stimulus words are presented, respondents will be quicker to react when target and attribute concepts that share the same response key are cognitively related. Participants with higher implicit self-esteem should respond more quickly when self and positive words share one response key. In healthy populations a consistent positive bias has been demonstrated (Greenwald & Farnham, 2000; Jordan, Spencer, Zanna, Hoshino-Browne, & Correll, 2003). The SE-IAT has also been used with clinical groups; people with depression (Cai, 2003; De Raedt, Schacht, Franck, & De Houwer, 2006), and social anxiety (Tanner, Stopa, & De Houwer, 2006).

In comparison with a number of other implicit measures, the self-esteem IAT is the most reliable (Bosson et al., 2000). The IAT therefore, may be the best currently available measure of implicit self-esteem, overcoming some of the previous methodological difficulties cited above, and it may provide a more accurate picture of implicit self-esteem in people with persecutory delusions. In addition, the IAT reduces self-presentation bias (Egloff &

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