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Self-management of psychosis: exploring the interplay of linguistics, semiotics, and social support

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Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to provide individuals with additional resources to manage their condition by conducting a critical analysis of psychosis. Classical philosophers like Plato and Aristotle studied the idea of "signs," and semiotics is now associated with it. The term "signs" and its relationship with the "signified" form the basis of interpreting and comprehending the world on a linguistic level. However, theorists and researchers in mental health often disregard the similarities between people's extreme states and instead focus on speculating about the nature of psychosis. The emphasis should be on effective treatment, such as psychotherapy, and measuring distress tolerance to changes in "signs", as the active disease process moves towards greater chaos and instability. By doing so, researchers can gain new insights into how each person's unique experience shares commonalities, leading to a deeper understanding of the condition.

Keywords: Psychosis, schizophrenia, recovery, self-management, semiotics

Introduction

While the term "universal" implies a common effect or applicability to all cases, the diversity of signs remains constant. Changes in a person's system of signification frequently cause psychotic symptoms. Gearing *et al.* (2014) ^[8] found that highly adherent adolescents experiencing first-episode psychosis shared identifiable temporal phases, which can guide interventions that align with the family's efforts to understand and manage their condition and promote recovery.

Psychosis symptoms can be an adaptive coping mechanism in response to life adjustments (Polanco-Roman *et al.*, 2016) ^[28], but how the body compensates for changes can also be maladaptive. Coping responses to stress can be categorised into three types, and research validates the DSM-5 hierarchy of defences from psychotic to immature to mature, which predicts psychosocial adjustment and reduces the risk of developing posttraumatic stress disorder after severe combat (Vaillant, 2022) ^[30].

Initial psychotic symptoms are more systematic before becoming more disruptive and difficult to follow as symptoms worsen, and therapists can measure the rate of change in a person's system of signification to introduce measures to symptoms before they become uncontrollable (Devoe *et al.*, 2019; Hartley *et al.*, 2013; Merrett *et al.*, 2016) ^[5, 11, 20]. As brain tissue becomes more damaged, neurons and their pathways become misaligned, leading to dysfunctional signals to and from the brain (Cannon, 2015) ^[3].

In understanding the complexity of psychosis, it is crucial to consider the cultural and social factors that might influence an individual's experience of their symptoms. Various cultural beliefs and practices can shape how individuals perceive, express, and cope with their psychotic symptoms, which may impact the effectiveness of interventions and treatment plans (Morganstein & Ursano, 2020) ^[22]. Therefore, incorporating cultural competence and sensitivity into therapy can improve outcomes and promote recovery for individuals from diverse backgrounds.

Marder (2023) ^[17] stresses the importance of assessing safety risks and the level of care indicated during the initial management of patients with psychosis, considering collateral information obtained from family members, psychosocial supports, and other providers.

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Treatment typically involves antipsychotic medication and psychosocial interventions, and taking into account these factors can help patients and their families better understand and manage their condition and progress towards recovery (Breitborde *et al.*, 2017) ^[1].

Clinical significance

Understanding the experience of psychosis is crucial, and measuring and analysing the linkages between symptoms would be clinically significant. Such analysis would provide insight into the correlation between sign linkage and an individual's experience of psychosis. Therefore, in order to better grasp the complex relationships between symptoms, it is important to consider the role of various neurobiological, cognitive, and emotional factors in the development and maintenance of psychosis (Muddle *et al.*, 2022) ^[24]. These factors can interact with one another, potentially leading to the emergence of specific symptom clusters or exacerbating the severity of particular symptoms. Understanding these interactions could help clinicians develop more targeted and personalised treatment approaches for individuals experiencing psychosis (Maj *et al.*, 2021) ^[16].

Psychosis symptoms can exist in unique and complex harmony along a spectrum, sometimes working together and other times in isolation. Numerous variables, such as triggers, age, and developmental circumstances, have an impact on a person's symptoms over time and can increase their intensity. However, each case of psychosis is unique, and current clinical treatments may not adequately address the disorder's individualistic impact.

Over the past 30 years, researchers have studied the notion that a longer duration of untreated psychosis (DUP) leads to poorer outcomes. Howes *et al.* (2021) ^[12] conducted an umbrella review of available meta-analyses and a random-effects meta-analysis of primary studies, which found that longer DUP is associated with more severe symptoms and lower chances of remission in patients with various types of psychosis. These findings suggest that DUP is an important prognostic factor at first presentation and can predict clinically relevant outcomes over the course of the illness.

It may also be useful to explore the impact of environmental factors on the development and manifestation of psychotic symptoms. Social stressors, such as interpersonal conflicts, social isolation, and discrimination, have been shown to increase the risk of psychosis onset and worsen symptom severity (Jester *et al.*, 2023) ^[13]. Understanding the interplay between environmental factors and symptomatology can help clinicians develop more holistic treatment plans that address the social and emotional needs of individuals experiencing psychosis (Cosgrave *et al.*, 2021) ^[4].

Forging new treatment pathways ahead

The otherworldly nature of psychosis often emerges due to the need for individuals to adjust or make a life course correction (Larrauri, 2023) ^[14]. Psychosis symptoms may be maladaptive bodily coping mechanisms that shift our perception and help us tolerate change without feeling or thinking intensely about the situation. While disturbing when symptoms become too intense, psychosis can be best managed with medication, therapy, support, and education.

It is important to recognise that various therapeutic approaches may be more effective for different individuals, depending on their unique experiences, symptoms, and needs. Personalised treatment plans, which take into account

the specific challenges faced by each person, can provide more effective support and foster better long-term outcomes. In Moritz *et al.*'s (2022) ^[23] review, four cognitive approaches for treating schizophrenia are examined, each taking a metacognitive perspective but focusing on different components of metacognition. Meta-analytic evidence supports the efficacy of CBT and metacognitive training, while single studies support the effectiveness of MERIT and metacognitive therapy. Encouragingly, this suggests that a range of cognitive and metacognitive interventions have the potential to improve outcomes for individuals with psychosis, highlighting the importance of continued research and innovation in treatment options.

O'Connell *et al.* (2021) ^[26] carried out a meta-analysis of 23 selected articles to identify barriers and facilitators to the implementation of early intervention in psychosis (EIP) programmes. The research revealed three key domains – system, services, and staff, with funding and collaboration strength being the most common subdomains. Understanding these challenges and enablers before implementation is crucial for increasing the likelihood of a program's success, stability, and longevity within local and national contexts.

Managing psychosis requires a personalised approach that considers each individual's unique needs and challenges. While medication, therapy, support, and education are all essential components of treatment, it is also crucial to understand and address barriers to the implementation of early intervention programmes. Continued research and innovation in treatment options, as well as a focus on collaboration and funding, can help ensure better outcomes for individuals with psychosis. By working together to develop effective and accessible interventions, we can help individuals with psychosis live fulfilling and productive lives.

Identifying psychosis and seeking help

Psychosis is a condition characterised by a group of interrelated symptoms, and individuals with schizophrenia often experience a lack of insight and self-awareness regarding their disconnection from reality, known as anosognosia. Others with psychosis may be aware of their distorted perception of reality but find it challenging to recognise when something is wrong due to delusions and cognitive distortions. While rare cases of stabilisation without professional help and medication exist, most individuals require immediate psychiatric intervention to prevent symptom intensification. Therefore, it is crucial to seek help from a mental health professional if you notice changes in your thinking that may indicate psychosis (Santos & Relajo-Howell, 2020) ^[29]. Once diagnosed, it is important to self-evaluate how psychosis affects your ability to function and work with your treatment team to address the blocked and broken aspects of your thinking and cognitive functioning (Wilkerson *et al.*, 2022) ^[31].

In 2011, McCarthy-Jones *et al.* performed a meta-synthesis of 97 peer-reviewed qualitative studies on psychosis. They identified four themes that highlight the loss and regaining of basic human needs: "losing", "identifying a need for, and seeking, help", "rebuilding and reforging", and "better than new: gifts from psychosis". These themes have important implications for clinical practice and future research, as they demonstrate that the experience of psychosis is more than just hallucinations and delusions.

Moreover, previous works have shown that the experience of psychosis is not uniform and may vary depending on cultural factors. For example, a study conducted by Luhrmann *et al.* (2015) ^[15] found that individuals with schizophrenia in the United States are more likely to experience auditory hallucinations that are hostile and derogatory, while individuals in India and Ghana experience more positive voices that provide guidance and comfort. This highlights the need for cultural sensitivity and the inclusion of diverse perspectives in the development of treatment plans.

Additionally, it is essential to understand that medication and therapy may not be enough to address the social and environmental factors that contribute to the development and maintenance of psychosis. Social factors such as poverty, discrimination, and social isolation have been identified as significant contributors to the onset and course of psychosis (Morgan *et al.*, 2010) ^[21]. Therefore, treatment plans should also include interventions that address these social factors, such as vocational rehabilitation, social skills training, and family therapy.

While psychosis is a complex and challenging condition, early intervention and a personalised approach to treatment can lead to improved outcomes. It is important to seek help from a mental health professional if you or someone you know is experiencing symptoms of psychosis. Treatment plans should be tailored to address each individual's unique needs and challenges, including cultural and social factors. By working together to provide comprehensive and compassionate care, we can help individuals with psychosis live meaningful and fulfilling lives.

Self-monitoring psychosis

Psychosis is a condition characterised by a group of interrelated symptoms, and individuals with schizophrenia often experience a lack of insight and self-awareness regarding their disconnection from reality, known as anosognosia. Others with psychosis may be aware of their distorted perception of reality but find it challenging to recognise when something is wrong due to delusions and cognitive distortions. While rare cases of stabilisation without professional help and medication exist, most individuals require immediate psychiatric intervention to prevent symptom intensification. Consequently, it is crucial to seek assistance from a mental health professional if one notices changes in their thinking that may indicate psychosis. Upon diagnosis, it is important to evaluate the impact of psychosis on an individual's ability to function and collaborate with the treatment team to address impaired thinking and cognitive functioning.

Self-management and monitoring of psychotic symptoms

In the absence of consistent access to therapy or counselling, self-management and monitoring of psychotic symptoms may prove essential for recovery. Engaging in regular mindfulness practices and self-reflection can help individuals identify changes in behaviour that may indicate worsening psychosis. Attending to one's external environment and seeking feedback from friends, allies, and peers can also facilitate an assessment of one's thinking quality. If others express concerns about an individual's speech or thought quality, it is advisable to alert the prescriber or therapist. This self-reflective process can be complex and may necessitate changes in thinking; hence,

spacing oneself is essential. Rather than concentrating on every detail, individuals should observe their thinking patterns over the course of a day or week. Questions such as whether one communicates effectively and whether their behaviours align with their goals and actions can be posed (Merlino *et al.*, 2023) ^[19]. The answers to these questions can provide insight into the efficacy of one's interactions.

Propose that a specific type of self-monitoring bias (i.e., misattributing imagined actions with performed actions), accompanied by high confidence in this judgement, may be a risk factor for the subsequent development of a psychotic disorder.

Additional stressors faced by individuals experiencing psychosis can exacerbate symptoms and render them unmanageable. While a gradual shift in perception may initially appear welcome, if stressors persist, detachment can increase, leading to a sharp departure from reality. For those whether they are adapting to life on the streets or contending with significant losses, coping mechanisms can render their reality more manageable. However, as psychosis activates, the mind ceases to function optimally, and symptoms can become overwhelming, rendering life unrecognisable and distant.

Despite efforts to self-manage psychosis, a complete "break" from reality may occur. In such instances, effective communication with family members and medical professionals is crucial. As stress exacerbates symptoms, it is best to communicate when one can focus easily and articulate vital information about their treatment.

Reflecting on past experiences can assist individuals in determining how to accomplish tasks with minimal risk of harm. By gaining education and understanding the mechanisms of psychosis, maintaining regular connections with medical professionals and peer support, and prioritising safety, individuals experiencing psychosis can be better prepared for unexpected events and navigate breaks from reality more successfully.

Risks and hazards

Social support can play a pivotal role in aiding individuals to mitigate the impact of psychosis on their lives (Ogwuche *et al.*, 2020) ^[25]. Family members, friends, and peers may provide emotional, informational, and practical assistance to those experiencing psychosis, which can contribute to the reduction of symptom severity, improvement of treatment adherence, and the promotion of recovery. Moreover, social support networks may assist individuals in identifying and coping with stressors that potentially exacerbate psychotic symptoms.

Despite efforts to self-manage psychosis, a complete dissociation from reality might still transpire. In such instances, effective communication with family members and medical professionals is imperative. Stress only serves to exacerbate symptoms; thus, it is advisable to communicate when one can focus and articulate essential information about their treatment.

However, despite all the efforts to self-manage psychosis and minimise the risk of dissociation, there are times when a complete dissociation from reality may still occur. This can be a frightening and overwhelming experience, not only for the individual but also for their loved ones. In such situations, effective communication with family members and medical professionals becomes crucial. It is important to avoid stress and anxiety, as these can exacerbate the

symptoms (Girdhar *et al.*, 2020) ^[9]. Therefore, it is advisable to communicate when one is in a calm state of mind and can articulate essential information about their treatment. By reflecting on past experiences, individuals can also determine how to accomplish tasks with minimal risk and be better prepared to navigate dissociations from reality successfully.

Reflecting on past experiences may enable individuals to determine how to accomplish tasks with minimal risk. Armed with education and an understanding of psychosis's inner workings, coupled with regular connections to medical professionals and peer support, and an emphasis on safety, those experiencing psychosis may be better equipped to handle the unexpected and navigate dissociations from reality more successfully.

Social support plays a critical role in mitigating the impact of psychosis on individuals' lives. Social support can come from family members, friends, peers, or support groups (Gouse & Kline, 2023) ^[10]. Emotional support involves providing a listening ear, empathy, and validation of the person's experiences. Informational support can come in the form of education about psychosis, treatment options, and the resources available. Practical support includes help with daily activities, transportation, and medication management. These forms of support can contribute to the reduction of symptom severity, the improvement of treatment adherence, and the promotion of recovery.

Additionally, social support networks can assist individuals in identifying and coping with stressors that may exacerbate psychotic symptoms. Identifying and addressing triggers can help individuals learn to manage and reduce the severity of their symptoms. For example, if social situations trigger symptoms, developing coping strategies or avoiding such situations may be helpful.

Although individuals may attempt to self-manage their psychosis, it is essential to communicate effectively with family members and medical professionals (Eweida *et al.*, 2022) ^[6]. Effective communication can help reduce stress and ensure that individuals receive the appropriate care and support they need. Stress can exacerbate symptoms, so it is advisable to communicate when one can focus and articulate essential information about their treatment.

Reflecting on past experiences and developing strategies to manage symptoms can be beneficial (Palmer-Cooper, 2023) ^[27]. Education about psychosis and an understanding of its inner workings can help individuals better navigate dissociations from reality. Regular connections with medical professionals and peer support can provide ongoing guidance and support. An emphasis on safety is also important in managing psychosis, and individuals may benefit from safety planning and crisis intervention training.

Conclusion

A variety of factors, including genetic, environmental, and neurobiological influences, can contribute to psychosis, a mental condition. Its complexity necessitates a multidisciplinary approach to treatment, incorporating both medication and psychological therapies. In addition, cultural and social factors may also play a significant role in the development and expression of psychotic symptoms, highlighting the need for culturally sensitive care.

Early intervention is crucial to mitigating the negative effects of psychosis and improving long-term outcomes. Research has shown that early intervention services can

significantly reduce the duration of untreated psychosis, leading to better outcomes in areas such as symptom reduction, social and occupational functioning, and quality of life.

Personalised therapy is another critical component of effective psychosis treatment. Each individual's experience of psychosis is unique, and as such, treatment plans must be tailored to their specific needs. Personalised therapies may include cognitive behavioural therapy, family interventions, or social skills training, among others.

Education is also an essential element of effective psychosis treatment, particularly in helping individuals understand and manage their condition. Psychoeducation can help individuals recognise and cope with their symptoms, improve their insight into their illness, and promote greater self-efficacy in managing their condition.

To improve the lives of those suffering from psychosis, there must be ongoing research and innovation in treatment options. This includes the development of new medications and psychological therapies as well as the refinement of existing treatment approaches. By investing in research and innovation, we can work towards better outcomes for individuals with psychosis and reduce the burden of this complex condition on individuals, families, and society as a whole.

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