



Review article

Paranoia and self-concepts in psychosis: A systematic review of the literature



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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present study was to review systematically, research exploring the relationship between self-concepts and paranoia in psychosis. A literature search was performed by two independent raters in relevant databases (MedLine, PsychInfo and Web of Science) and articles meeting the inclusion criteria were cross-referenced. Following scrutiny according to inclusion criteria, 18 studies were selected for review. A narrative synthesis of findings, in which methodological variability is discussed, is presented relative to three key areas: the nature of the relationship between paranoia and self-concepts; the association between paranoia and discrepancies in self-concepts; the nature of the relationship between paranoia and self-concepts when other, dimensional aspects of these constructs are taken into account. The systematic literature review indicated relatively consistent findings, that paranoia is associated with more negative self-concepts when measured cross-sectionally. Results are somewhat more mixed in regards to research on paranoia and self-concept discrepancies. Studies investigating dimensional aspects of self-concepts and paranoia yield findings of particular interest, especially in regards to the association indicated between instability of self-concepts and paranoia. Limitations in research and of the present systematic review are discussed. Clinical and theoretical implications of findings are outlined and possible directions for future research are suggested.

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1. Introduction

A number of authors have theorized as to how an individual's self-concept (including both self-esteem and self-schemas) may relate to the formation and maintenance of persecutory delusions. Early psychoanalytic theories suggested that paranoia served a defensive function (Freud, 1911; Colby et al., 1971). In line with this thinking, Bentall, and colleagues posited that individuals with paranoia generate other-blaming, externalising, causal attributions for negative self-referent events, to prevent negative underlying self-representations from entering consciousness (Bentall et al., 1994). The model predicts positive conscious self-concepts and latent negative implicit self-esteem. Conscious or explicit self-concepts are evaluations of the self within in the individual's awareness and they are commonly assessed using self-report questionnaires. Implicit self-concepts refer to automatic and habitual evaluations of the self that happen on a non-conscious level, of which the individual is unaware (Greenwald and Banaji, 1995; Bosson et al., 2000). In the case of individuals presenting with paranoia, the "paranoia as defence" hypothesis (Bentall et al., 1994) means measurement of implicit self-concepts is considered problematic as the individual is posited to be motivated to prevent underlying negative self-concepts from reaching awareness. Measures that have been used in the past included variants of the emotional Stroop task (Williams et al., 1996), assessment of memory biases (e.g. number of positive and negative self-descriptive words remembered on task) and more recently, reaction times on computerised tasks where words related to the self are paired with positive and negative words (Greenwald et al., 1998; Greenwald and Farnham, 2000).

Drawing on features of self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987), the defence theory also posits that discrepancies exist between other representations of the self, namely those of actual and ideal self and one's believed views of others about the self. Paranoia is proposed to reduce self-actual and ideal discrepancies whilst widening discrepancies between actual-self and believed views of others about the self.

This area is considerably complex. Self-representations in patients with persecutory delusions have multiple dimensions. It has been proposed that there are different types of self-worth (Beck, 1983) and that currently paranoid patients may derive self-worth through autonomy (individual achievement) rather than connectedness and interactions with others (sociotropy) (Ouimette et al., 1994). Robson (1989) proposes that different measures may tap into different aspects of self-concepts with varying specificity and Gilbert et al. (2004) suggest that global measures, such as the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) may not adequately capture the sense of hatred and disgust that some people have for themselves and recommend measurement of positive and negative self-concepts individually. Furthermore, Freeman (2007) proposes that specific negative beliefs about the self and others (schemas), rather than self-esteem per se, may be a more stable indicator of self-concept and a stronger predictor of paranoia than self-esteem (Fowler et al., 2006; Smith et al., 2006).

In addition, there has been a lack of clarity in operationalisation of persecutory delusions in research, making comparison of findings more problematic (Freeman and Garety, 2000). Other aspects of paranoia, such as preoccupation, duration, stability, content, degree of conviction, implausibility and associated distress are variable. In regards to content, Trower and Chadwick (1995) have proposed two distinct forms of paranoia: "Poor Me" (PM) paranoia, thought to involve defensive processing and the other, "Bad Me" (BM) paranoia, thought to reflect a perception of the self as bad. Whilst both individuals with PM and BM paranoia believe they are being persecuted, individuals with PM paranoia

blame others for mistreatment and see themselves as victims whilst individuals with BM paranoia see persecution as deserved and blame themselves. More positive conscious self-concepts would be expected in individuals with PM paranoia. However, evidence to support this categorisation has been regarded weak (Bentall et al., 2001; Freeman, 2007).

Garety and Freeman (1999) critically reviewed research investigating the relationship between self-esteem and paranoia and concluded that outcomes were inconsistent. They concluded a lack of support for defensive processing but acknowledged difficulty in interpreting results due to methodological limitations. Freeman et al. (2002) argue against defensive conceptualisations, seeing paranoia as building on negative views of the self and associated emotional processes. They propose that low self-esteem, in combination with cognitive biases (such as jumping to conclusions), theory of mind deficits and attributional biases, acts as both a vulnerability and maintaining factor for persecutory delusions, which further confirm negative evaluations and heighten emotional distress. This model predicts paranoia to be associated with both low implicit and explicit self-esteem.

More recently, Bentall et al. (2001) have redressed their model of persecutory delusions to include dynamic and fluctuating aspects of paranoia. The new model incorporates contextual factors in which persecutory delusions do not provide a complete defence against low implicit self-esteem reaching awareness, as well as instability of self-esteem (Kernis, 1993) and of psychiatric symptoms (Tschacher et al., 1997).

In order to address the reported equivocal research findings outlined and to weigh evidence for revisions to the model of Bentall et al. (2001) the present paper systematically reviewed research in this area. Some authors note a distinction between different kinds of self-esteem (e.g. global self-esteem and specific self-evaluations) (Brown et al., 2001; Kernis, 2003). However, to give an overall picture of trends in findings in relation to self-concepts and paranoia, we used a broad definition of self-concept, counting global self-esteem, self-worth, specific self-evaluations and implicit self-esteem. Findings are discussed in relation to three key areas: (1) the relationship between paranoia and self-concepts; (2) the association between paranoia and discrepancies in self-concepts; (3) the relationship between paranoia and self-concepts when dimensional aspects of these constructs are taken into account.

2. Methods

2.1. Search strategy and selection criteria

Articles were identified through a literature search in PsychINFO, Web of Science and MEDLINE for the period January 2001–2012. Combinations of the following keywords were used: *parano**, *persecut**, *psychosis*, *psychotic*, *schizophrenia*, *delusion**, *self**, *schema**, *belief**, *self-esteem*, *self-esteem*, *self-representation*, *self-concept*, *self-consciousness*, *representation*, *concept*. Searches were adapted for the different databases with Boolean operators 'AND' and 'OR' and performed independently by two reviewers. Additional references were retrieved by cross-referencing of selected articles. Disagreement was resolved through discussion relevant to the inclusion and exclusion criteria.

The inclusion criteria were: (1) articles published in English 2. That the study comprised adults diagnosed with psychosis according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders or International Statistical Classification of Disease criteria 3. That studies were published between the year 2001 and the search date (19th October 2012). This year (2001) was chosen as it followed critical reviews of the literature by Garety and Freeman (1999) and Bentall et al. (2001) and revisions to the model of persecutory delusions proposed by Bentall et al. (2001). Studies were excluded if they focused on a non-adult population (< 16 years old) or a sub-clinical/prodromal psychosis population.

2.2. Method of review

A review of the literature was performed as recommended in the Prisma statement (Moher et al., 2009). The electronic search yielded 2481 hits. The review

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