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A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCES DURING THE PRE-PSYCHOTIC PERIOD

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ABSTRACT

Psychosis typically emerges after a heterogeneous range of premonitory symptoms. This has been labelled the ‘pre-psychotic period’ (PPP). Emotional disturbances are prominent features of this state and have shown to be risk factors for psychosis. The present study had two interrelated aims: to explore in-depth the experiential nature of the emotional changes that occur during the PPP; and to examine whether there are similarities between these pre-psychotic emotional changes and the concept of delusional atmosphere. Twelve men experiencing first-episode psychosis with delusional thought content were recruited for the study. Information regarding their emotional experiences during the PPP was gathered using a semi-structured interview format. Corroborating information about observable changes in the men’s behaviour during the PPP was also gathered from a family member or friend of theirs who had close contact with them during this time. The data was analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis. A variety of strong emotional changes were reported during the PPP, including depression, anxiety, anger, and guilt, as well as love and happiness. Negative emotions were prominent during this time, but positive emotions were also found to be a feature of this state for some people. Overall, the PPP was characterised by an increase in distress over time. Features of delusional atmosphere that were evident during the PPP included: experiences of derealisation and the environment feeling different; anxiety and confusion and a drive to find and explanation for the changes that were being experienced; and a sense of apprehension that something significant was about to happen. The relevance of these findings to researchers and clinicians working in this area is discussed.
To my wife, Lorena

In loving memory of my mother, Clare,
who loved me enough to teach me standards
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ..................................................................................................................... ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ................................................................................................. iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS ................................................................................................. v
LIST OF TABLES .......................................................................................................... viii
LIST OF FIGURES ........................................................................................................ ix
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW ..................................................1
CHAPTER TWO: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO PSYCHOSIS ................................. 8
  Defining Psychosis ..................................................................................................... 8
  Epidemiology ............................................................................................................ 9
  Course ...................................................................................................................... 12
  The Symptoms of Psychosis ................................................................................... 12
    Delusional Beliefs .................................................................................................. 13
    Perceptual Disturbances ...................................................................................... 14
    Catatonia and Other Disturbances in Motor Functioning and Volition ............ 15
    Formal Thought Disorders ................................................................................... 16
    Emotional Disturbances ...................................................................................... 17
    Disturbances of Consciousness ......................................................................... 19
  Summary .................................................................................................................. 20
CHAPTER THREE: THE PRE-PSYCHOTIC PERIOD ............................................. 22
  Incidence .................................................................................................................. 22
  Duration ................................................................................................................... 23
  Course ...................................................................................................................... 24
  Symptomatology ...................................................................................................... 26
  The Prominence of Emotional Disturbances During the Pre-Psychotic Period ... 30
  Summary .................................................................................................................. 33
CHAPTER FOUR: THE ROLE OF EMOTIONAL DISTURBANCES IN THE
DEVELOPMENT OF PSYCHOSIS ............................................................................. 35
  Dynamic Theories .................................................................................................... 35
  Defence Theories ..................................................................................................... 37
  Direct Theories ........................................................................................................ 39
  Freeman and Garety’s Multifactorial Model of Psychosis .................................... 41
  Summary .................................................................................................................. 49
CHAPTER FIVE: DELUSIONAL ATMOSPHERE ..................................................... 51
  Jaspers’ Account of Delusional Atmosphere ......................................................... 51
  Subsequent Accounts of Delusional Atmosphere ............................................... 55
  Experiential Accounts of Delusional Atmosphere .............................................. 57
  A Conceptual Summary of Delusional Atmosphere ........................................... 59
  Summary .................................................................................................................. 61
CHAPTER SIX: THE PRESENT STUDY ................................................................ 62
  Research Aims ........................................................................................................... 62
  Research Design ...................................................................................................... 64
  Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis .............................................................. 66
The Features of Delusional Atmosphere That are Consistent With the Emotional Changes That Occur During the PPP ................................................................. 135
  The Spatial Component of Delusional Atmosphere ................................................ 135
  The Affective Component of Delusional Atmosphere .............................................. 137
  The Temporal Component of Delusional Atmosphere ............................................ 138
Limitations ................................................................................................................. 139
Recommendations for Further Research ................................................................. 142
Recommendations for Clinicians ............................................................................ 143
Summary .................................................................................................................... 145
APPENDIX A .............................................................................................................. 149
APPENDIX B .............................................................................................................. 153
APPENDIX C .............................................................................................................. 155
APPENDIX D .............................................................................................................. 157
APPENDIX E .............................................................................................................. 160
APPENDIX F .............................................................................................................. 165
APPENDIX G .............................................................................................................. 167
APPENDIX H .............................................................................................................. 172
REFERENCES .......................................................................................................... 174
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1
Symptomatology of the Pre-Psychotic Period..........................................................27

Table 2
The Most Commonly Reported Symptoms of the Pre-Psychotic Period Listed in
Descending Order of Frequency.................................................................28

Table 3
DSM-III-R Prodromal Symptoms of Schizophrenia..............................................30

Table 4
Experiential Accounts of Delusional Atmosphere During the Pre-Psychotic Period........58

Table 5
A Conceptual Summary of Delusional Atmosphere...............................................60

Table 6
Pre-Psychotic Emotional Experiences Reported by Each Participant.....................86
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1
The Interpretative Themes Drawn From the Participants' Accounts of the
Pre-Psychotic Period..............................................................84

Figure 2
The Interpretative Themes Drawn From the Acquaintances' Accounts of the
Pre-Psychotic Period..............................................................108