The Experience of Psychosis: Fragmentation, Invalidation and Spirituality.
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The Experience of Psychosis: Fragmentation, Invalidation and Spirituality.

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Co-supervisor: Dr Nick Argyle

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Abstract

This study is a qualitative investigation into the subjective experience of psychosis as expressed by clients of a first episode psychosis service in psychotherapy sessions. Fifteen participants, already engaged with the author in his clinical role, were recruited for this study. Recordings were made of psychotherapy sessions where participants' subjective experience of psychosis was being discussed as part of the normal course of therapy. Sixty two recordings were made in total, with a mean of 4.1 recordings with each participant.

Transcriptions of recordings were made by the author and analysed using Grounded Theory. Commonalities in the data were identified and sorted into categories. Relationships between these categories were explored. Initial analyses yielded 103 distinct categories, which were subsumed under the general headings of Storytelling and Authoring, Causes of Psychosis, Descriptions of Psychotic Experience, Impact of Experience, Responses to and Coping with Experience, Spirituality, and Māori Issues. Subsequent analysis yielded three theoretical constructs which capture the essence of the subjective experience of psychosis: fragmentation – integration, invalidation – validation, and spirituality.

Fragmentation – integration relates a sense of a loosening (or, less often, tightening) of connections and associations between aspects of experience, and applies to the personal and interpersonal domains. Validation – invalidation refers to the sense of having (or not having) confidence in one's ability to accurately perceive or construe experience and to convey this to self and others. Spirituality refers to an inclination to view the experience of psychosis, or aspects of it, in terms of a broad framework of meaning pertaining to how the individual views his or her relationship with the universe.

Findings from this research indicate that those who experience psychosis are eager to explore the meanings of their experience and are competent at reflecting on this experience based on their own subjective experience. Important contributions to our understandings of psychosis can be made by those who have such first-hand acquaintance with psychosis. Theoretical, research, clinical and training implications of this research are discussed.

Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to those who agreed to participate in this research. In particular, I appreciate their generosity in being willing to share their stories with me. I hope my analysis of these stories remains true to their unique nature and reflects my respect both for the stories themselves and the generosity of the individuals who shared them.

I also want to express my deep thanks to my supervisor, Dr John Read, whose encouragement for this research has been invaluable. Your support and enthusiasm for this research helped me get through those times when I struggled to see the value in what I was up to. Thanks for that sustenance. Similar thanks go to Dr Nick Argyle, co-supervisor, whose thoughtful comments on this research project at various stages along the way helped me look at things a bit differently, and drew my attention to areas I might otherwise have overlooked. Thanks to both of you for the commitment you have shown to this research project.

I am also grateful to the support shown for this research by Auckland District Health Board, and for my colleagues in the community mental health centre where I work, in particular my immediate colleagues in the First Episode Psychosis team.

Thanks also to Jerome for being Jerome.

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Abbreviations used in this thesis

ADHB Auckland District Health Board
APA American Psychiatric Association
BPS British Psychological Society
CMHC Community Mental Health Centre
ECC Essentially Contested Concept
EM Explanatory Model
FEP First Episode Psychosis
HBM Health Belief Model