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Phenomenology and Social Agent Representation in Psychosis: A Welcome Integration

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Poletti and colleagues (in press) raise the important issue of a careful phenomenological approach in understanding the experience of psychosis in their helpful commentary on our recent article (Bell et al., 2017). To summarise their main concern, they argue that the breadth of subjective and inter-subjective experience in psychosis cannot be reduced to cognitive-perceptual misapprehensions of illusory social agents. This is something with which we wholeheartedly agree.

Our aim was to take a core phenomenological feature of psychosis (the presence of illusory social agents) and show how this is not sufficiently addressed by current approaches to social cognition, and suggest how paradigms in social cognition needs to be rethought to capture the full range of typical and atypical experience in this domain. Consequently, we argue for an additional focus on how social agents are represented and deployed in social cognition, alongside the traditional focus on social information processing.

We are aware that we are not doing phenomenology in the philosophical tradition to which the authors refer (and, indeed, to which they have contributed a great deal themselves) but it is striking to us that the cognitive science of psychosis gives so little consideration to phenomenology that one of the most central features – social experience – is virtually absent from the explanatory focus of our cognitive and neurocognitive theories.

However, we very much welcome a more integrative approach to formal phenomenology. For us, the experiences that Poletti and colleagues highlight are central to this issue. One question their work raises for us is why the experience of illusory social agents tends to emerge from the alterations in intersubjective experience and attunement that Raballo (2017), Fuchs (2015), and Raballo and Krueger (2011) describe. This suggests a progressive disturbance of social cognition where intersubjective instability is eventually re-cohered into 'best fit' social explanations that appear as illusory social agents.

Perhaps where we differ from Poletti et al. is that we suspect that the appearance of illusory social agents in people with psychosis across a range of background states may be a guide to commonalities at the social cognitive and neurocognitive level, despite considerable differences in other aspects of the experience. However, we consider this a hypothesis, rather than a conclusion.

Finally, to clear up a slight misreading, we are keen not to be reductive nor encourage researchers to move away from the traditional focus on self-other attributions, but hope to complement existing approaches. Indeed, our aim is expansive rather than reductive and we fully agree with the authors that a phenomenologically-informed cognitive science is key to this objective and essential for our future understanding of psychosis.

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