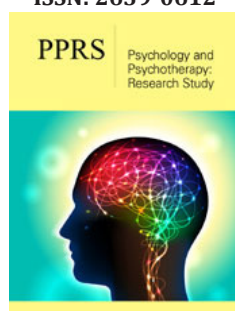


Introducing Oloudenia: A Novel Psychopathological Framework for Ambivalence in Psychosis

ISSN: 2639-0612



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Submission: 📅 September 01, 2023

Published: 📅 September 13, 2023

Volume 7 - Issue 3

How to cite this article: Damiani S*. Introducing Oloudenia: A Novel Psychopathological Framework for Ambivalence in Psychosis. Psychol Psychother Res Stud. 7(3). PPRS. 000665. 2023.

DOI: [10.31031/PPRS.2023.07.000665](https://doi.org/10.31031/PPRS.2023.07.000665)

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Opinion

"To enjoy bodily warmth, some small part of you must be cold, for there is no quality in this world that is not what it is merely by contrast." [1]. We experience by contrast. When introducing the foundational concept of "ambivalence", Bleuler drew an analogy between the intricate dynamics of limb movements, where opposite forces of agonist and antagonist muscles interact, and psychological phenomena [2]. Ambivalence was thus meant as the co-existence at different levels of consciousness of distinct, even contradictory mental contents [3]. More than a century later, psychosis is still considered as a dreamlike state [4] wherein incongruent possibilities co-exist simultaneously. However, while dreams purely originate from ambivalent internal productions, ambivalence during psychosis arises from the amalgamation of internal and external stimuli. This increased permeability between internal and external realities stands as an intrinsic facet of all psychotic symptoms: hallucinations, delusions and thought disorganization. For instance, auditory hallucinations entail the perception of internal thoughts as external sounds. Yet, patients may also feel that they can access others' minds. Likewise, delusions frequently reflect a disruption in the basic sense of self [5] where self and non-self identities can be present at the same time. Hence, a patient might concurrently hold beliefs of being his/her authentic self while also identifying as someone else (eg., Jesus). As the core self becomes fragmented, the boundary between the subject and the surrounding world blurs, potentially leading to the experience of diverse mental contents that interfere with each other. The so-called "thought crowding" [6] finds its expression in a disordered speech flow, wherein seemingly distant concepts are juxtaposed in incoherent patterns. The shared link between the co-existence of irreconcilable meanings and the loss of differentiation of internal and external realities contributes to shape the very concept of psychosis. Indeed, when idiosyncratic experiences are allowed to persist within the same consciousness, the contrast defining their boundary weakens. If these experiences involve both world-related and self-related stimuli, the external can seamlessly meld with the internal and vice versa. Among the major consequences of this misattribution lies the disruption of meaning, which is the boundary between semantic categories. Referring back to the aforementioned examples of psychotic symptoms, the meanings associated with the words "internal" and "thoughts" can recombine with those of "external" and "perceptions", encoding internal processes as perceptions (hallucinations) or external events as own thoughts (ie., reading others' minds).

The term "World/Self Ambivalence" has been coined to describe this bidirectional confusion of information [7]. While a certain degree of World/Self Ambivalence reflects the physiological connection between the subject and the object of his experience, its dramatic increase during psychosis - see Conrad's concept of *apophenia* [8] - triggers the disruption of the world/self boundaries. At its utmost level, ambivalence becomes existential: On one hand,

the ego expands and invades the world, on the other it dissolves in it [9]. Typically, we become aware of such paradoxes or mental conflicts due to our ability to perceive the cognitive dissonance arising from their contrast [10]. Anks to this innate process, we instinctively conceive ourselves as unique and separate entities from the world, as excessive World/Self Ambivalence is perceived as a logically incorrect or uncomfortable state of mind. Under the extreme circumstances of psychosis, the dissonance ceases to be perceived, and each stimulus is assigned equal-or aberrant-salience. Everything can be possible, causing meaning to erode until it holds no substance. The absence of contrast generates a state of maximum entropy, accepting all the possibilities but preventing the brain from encoding information through difference [11]. I propose to define the simultaneous presence of all (olos, ὅλος) and nothing (ouden, οὐτεν) experienced during acute psychosis with the term *Oloudenia*. In this condition, where ambivalence reaches its pinnacle, the individual's identity is severely threatened by a sea of possibilities with the same valence. The internal and external realities merge into a single atmosphere of awe allowing to feel both anguish and indifference at the same time. The firsthand experiences of experts by experience further clarify the bewildering sense of fusion and perforation of the world/self boundaries perceived during acute psychotic episodes [12]. The notion of *Oloudenia* itself has been eloquently elucidated during a session where a patient shared insights on a psychotic breakdown he overcame: "...to consistently see the whole and the nothingness, to immerse oneself in one thing and in another at the same time, which is, in a way, the essence of psychosis." In conclusion, *Oloudenia* encapsulates two interdependent aspects that characterize the most severe stage of psychosis. Firstly, the fragmented mind (literally, schizo-phrenia) seen as a multiplicity of co-existent meanings. Secondly, the merging of those meanings into a singular, unmeaningful ambivalence where internal and external realities collide.

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