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The “as if” function and its loss in schizophrenia

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Introduction: the “as if”

- distinction of real and virtual, factual and fictional
- imagination, day-dreaming, hypothetical thought, fiction, pretence, role play, theater
- representation (e.g. mirror image, map, actor)
- perspective taking
- **‘as if’ function**



Introduction: the “as if”

Loss of ‘as if’ in schizophrenia:

- concretism (disturbance of metaphorical language)
- failure of perspective-taking
- delusion



The 'as if' function

- „as if“
- „als ob“, „wie wenn“ (Germ.)
- „quasi“ (Lat.)
- „comme si“ (Fr.)
- „come si“ (Ital.)

- **as**: comparison
- **if**: conditional clause; something only hypothetically or fictitiously given
- **as if**: irreal comparative clause; something given is compared with something other whose unreality or impossibility is declared at the same time



The 'as if' function

double intention (e.g. pretend play, lying)

imagination

Husserl: pictorial consciousness (*Bildbewusstsein*):
conflict between the picture as mere object and the
picture *as picture*, in which an absent object is
presented in an 'as if' mode.

fictionality (actor, movie): double or split awareness



The 'as if' function

The human life form is permeated by the 'as if' – by artificiality, fictionality, pretence, irony, metaphor, role play, masquerade or intrigue.

“person”

(from the Greek *prósopon* and the Latin *persona* = mask, role)

“homo duplex” (Buffon, Durkheim, and others)

I and me (G. H. Mead)

role distance



The 'as if' function

The 'as if' function is interlinked with intersubjectivity and to man's "excentric position" (Helmuth Plessner 1927).

Perspective taking

The excentric position implies the capacity to integrate

- one's primary embodied position
- and an external position only taken virtually.

Reflective self-consciousness: seeing oneself "as if" from the outside



Development of the 'as if' function

Around 1 year: sharing another's point of view on external objects

16th – 24th month: recognizing one's mirror self-image, pretend play

2,5 years: children learn to determine which objects other persons can or cannot perceive from their spatial point of view
shift from egocentric to allocentric space

4-5 years: insight into the perspectivity of knowledge and beliefs (→ false belief tasks)



Development of the ‘as if’ function

What allows children to solve false belief tasks is their *ability to be aware of both perspectives simultaneously, or to flexibly shift between them.*

This shifting is only possible on a higher level of integration = “excentric position”

All these developments happen in close connection to interactive practices in which the shifting of perspectives or the “as if” mode is experienced and trained.



Development of the 'as if' function

For example: Pretend play

The new, fictional reality is jointly created through a shared or we-intentionality.

Role taking: Here the object of pretence is not an external object but one's own body, or oneself as playing a role before others.

Shared or we-intentionality

Shared virtuality



The loss of the 'as if' in schizophrenia

- concretism (disturbance of metaphorical language)
- transitivity (failure of perspective-taking, loss of self-other boundaries)
- delusion (failure of perspective-taking and concretism)



a) Concretism

failure to adequately use and understand the metaphorical or figurative meaning of language

metaphors or proverbs are taken literally and acted upon on the concrete or bodily level



a) Concretism

A patient who feels worthless swallows a ring, by this trying, as she explains, “to have something of worth in me” (Heinz 1996).

A patient takes a purge because he wants “to get rid of my dirty thoughts”.

A patient complains about the heartlessness of her mother: “She has a heart defect and should consult the doctor”.



a) Concretism

Metaphor:

- combines concrete and abstract term by an “as if”
- oscillates between two meanings or frameworks of reference which have both to be held present in order to understand the metaphor correctly

Schizophrenia: collapse of the ‘as if’, equation of levels



a) Concretism

Inability of patients to explain the metaphorical meaning of proverbs

- “Too many cooks spoil the broth.”
(Explanation:) “Well, if a cook is responsible for the kitchen, one should leave it to him, otherwise the meal will be spoilt.”
- “One should strike while the iron’s hot.”
(Explanation:) “Heat serves to make the iron soft, so you can better forge or form it.”



b) Transitivity

“When I look at somebody my own personality is in danger. I am undergoing a transformation and my self is beginning to disappear.” (Chapman 1966)

“The others’ gazes get penetrating, and it is as if there was a consciousness of my person emerging around me ... they can read in me like in a book. Then I don’t know who I am any more.” (Fuchs 2000)



b) Transitivism

→ "Being conscious of another consciousness" may threaten the schizophrenic patient with a loss of his self.

While taking the perspective of others, the distinction between the primary or bodily sense of self and the 'as if' mode of self-as-other collapses.



b) Transitivity

“A young man was frequently confused in a conversation, being unable to distinguish between himself and his interlocutor. He tended to lose the sense of whose thoughts originated in whom, and felt ‘as if’ the interlocutor somehow ‘invaded’ him, an experience that shattered his identity and was intensely anxiety-provoking. When walking on the street, he scrupulously avoided glancing at his mirror image in the windowpanes of the shops, because he felt uncertain on which side he actually was.”

(Parnas 2003)



b) Transitivity

Every conversation with others implies a continuous oscillation between my central, embodied perspective and the decentred or virtual perspective from which I am aware of the other as being aware of me.

However, in order not to lose myself in this oscillation, it is also necessary to keep up the difference between the embodied and the virtual perspective (excentric position).

Breakdown of the 'as if' in schizophrenia:

The perspectives of self and other are confused instead of being integrated.



b) Transitivity

“When I am looking into a mirror, I do not know any more whether I am here looking at me there in the mirror, or whether I am there in the mirror looking at me here. (...)
If I look at someone else in the mirror, I am not able to distinguish him from myself any more. When I am feeling worse, the distinction between me and a real other person gets lost, too.

While watching TV, I don't know any more whether I am speaking in the TV-set or whether I am hearing the words here. I don't know whether the inside turns outwards or the outside inwards. It is as if the foundation of my self collapses. Are there perhaps two 'I's?' (Kimura 1994)



b) Transitivity

To recognize others as mental agents or persons, and to recognize oneself as a separate person among others is one and the same achievement, namely reaching the excentric position.

This achievement is threatened when the basic bodily sense of self is weakened and the “as if” mode of perspective taking cannot be maintained.

The schizophrenia patient sees *and loses* himself in the eyes of others.



b) Transitivity

Thought-broadcasting: all the patient's thoughts are known to others; there is no difference between his mental life and that of others any more.

→ social exposure and emotional disclosure as a particular stress, often leads to first episodes of schizophrenia



b) Transitivity

Related phenomena:

A 22 year-old schizophrenia patient when engaging in a relationship with a man felt her father invading her and inserting critical thoughts into her mind. Very upset by this, she called on him the next day and reproached him for his unwanted interventions.

(unable to maintain the “as if” of her father’s imagined objections → confusion of two different modes of intentionality)



b) Transitivity

Related phenomena:

A 26 year-old patient watching a football game in the TV found that he was perfectly able to put himself into the players' shoes, anticipating their next moves in the imagination; he then realized that they did exactly what he thought. Thus, he felt that he was actually able to steer the game at his own will.

("as if" mode of imaginary transposition breaks down → self-centrality or delusion of omnipotence)



c) Delusion

The emergence of a delusion is usually preceded by alterations of perception, feeling or thinking which create the impression that an external power is somehow taking possession of the patient's mind.

pre-delusional state: reservation of "as if"



c) Delusion

“I could no longer do what I wanted. (...) I wanted to get up, and then I could no longer move my legs. They were stiff. It was *as if* I was no longer in control of my movements, *as if* my legs would no longer serve me. I started to wonder whether I still could move myself. At every step I thought: ‘are these your own movements, is it you who is moving now?’ I tried to check that, walking back and forth, or I ran a bit. That worked alright, but I thought ‘it could still be programmed that you are now doing this’.”

(Klosterkötter 1988)



c) Delusion

(further course)

“She was now convinced that extraterrestrial powers were able to control her and steer her movements. How this worked and to what purpose she did not know. Yet under these influences, she really had become a marionette.”

(Klosterkötter 1988)



c) Delusion

“I could no longer think the way I wanted to . . . It was *as if* one could no longer think oneself, *as if* one were hindered from thinking. I had the impression that all what I think were no longer my own ideas at all . . . *as if* I wouldn't be the one who is thinking. I began to wonder whether I am still myself or an exchanged person.”

(Klosterkötter 1988)

onset of delusions = breakdown of the 'as if'



c) Delusion

breakdown of the 'as if' :

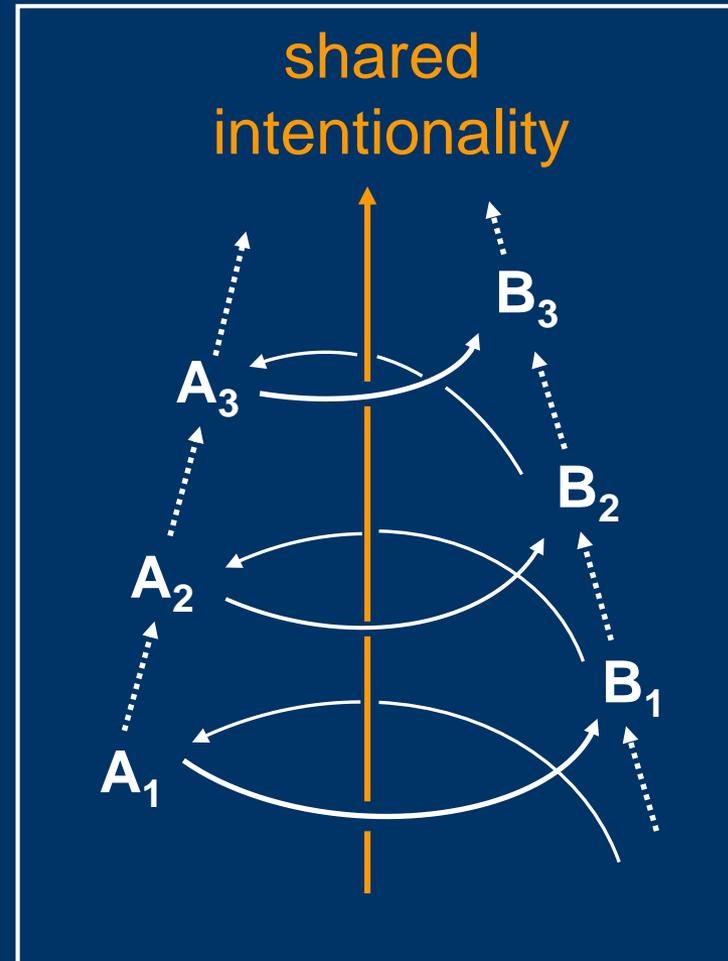
- loss of intersubjectivity
- failure of perspective-taking
- loss of the excentric position



We- or Shared Intentionality

Interaction as participatory
sense-making

leading to consensual
understanding of the situation





c) Delusion

Delusion: inability to take the other's perspective into account, to understand his doubts, to try to make one-self adequately understood, etc.

Disturbance of communication: comparison, correction and alignment of perspectives fails

lack of "excentric position"

- from which one's own and another's point of view could be compared
- from which feelings of self-centrality and reference (being alluded to, observed, persecuted by others) could be neutralized



c) Delusion

Peculiar reaction to doubts or objections by others:

- falsely assuming a consensually perceived situation
- failure of *jointly talking about* the situation
- stating the delusion in a pre-predicative, non-symbolical and therefore ultimately concretistic language
- incorrectability (Karl Jaspers) resulting from breakdown of 'as if'



c) Delusion

Exclusion of coincidence:

- Normally, neutralization through principle of coincidence: “It only seemed *as if* he was looking at me tellingly, but it was really not meant for me.”
- In contrast, in schizophrenia, the normally irrelevant and accidental background elements of a situation that adopt a meaningful, telling, sinister or threatening character.
- Exclusion of coincidence, self-centrality



c) Delusion

“Double book-keeping”:

- A patient may hear voices as clearly as the voice of the psychiatrist and believe them just as real, yet at the same time acknowledge that the psychiatrist does not hear them.
 - A grandiose patient may be fully convinced that his coronation is imminent yet continue to do humble services on the ward.
- Loss of excentric position, but coexistence of different ontological domains, without contiguity or overlap



Conclusion

‘as if’ function

- being aware of two conflicting perspectives simultaneously and flexibly shifting between them,
 - the one representing the primary, bodily or concrete domain,
 - the other the virtual, disembodied or metaphorical domain
- enabled by the „excentric position“ or higher level intersubjectivity



Conclusion

‘as if’ function

- loosening the grip of reality and extending the scope of possibilities
- “alternative worlds”
- linked with perspective taking and we-intentionality



Conclusion

Failure of 'as if' function in schizophrenia

- concretism
- transitivity
- delusion

→ The double intentionality that is crucial for the 'as if' collapses, and the patient becomes enclosed in self-centrality and solipsism.

Thus, he is no longer able to transcend his subjectivist position towards the open world of shared intersubjectivity.



Conclusion

The fundamental alteration of experience at the roots of schizophrenic delusions resembles in many respects the state of dreaming:

Here too, the shared world is replaced by a private world of figments and imaginations that are not recognized as such and lack the reservation of the „as if“.

Heraclitus spoke of the *ídios kósmos* of the dreamer, in contrast to the *koinós kósmos* of daytime.



„The waking have one common world,
but the sleeping turn aside,
each into a world of his own.“

Heraclitus



Thank you very much!
