Controlling Bizarre Delusions

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My Strategy for Controlling Bizarre Delusions: Identifying Their Evidence Base

I wish to discuss a strategy I have developed for controlling my risk of developing bizarre delusions by analysis of certain inferences that I am liable to make. I should say here to avoid confusion that by inference here I mean thoughts about what I think is happening or has happened, based on some kind of evidence or reasoning.

This strategy of analyzing inferences won’t at the same time be able to explain how the bizarre delusions developed exactly, ie, I cannot for instance account for why I make the inferences that I highlight, and I also don’t know how all the other symptoms that I may be exhibiting may also have contributed to making these inferences or developing the bizarre delusions, so this strategy is not intended to serve as a complete explanation of my behavior, let alone anyone else’s.

The aim instead has been for me to understand more about where my bizarre delusions come from in my immediate consciousness and interpretation of the world so that I can reliably identify when there is real danger that a bizarre delusion might develop. By identifying these inferences, this can serve as an early warning system, which can then prompt me to question the inference and be much more skeptical toward it allowing me to spend more time assessing its credibility and gathering evidence that will give me the opportunity to disconfirm it.

To be successful, this early warning strategy has to be quite specific. You can’t go around thinking every anxious or slightly paranoid thought means you are at risk for developing psychosis again. Such an overly cautious strategy will fail because it is exhausting. Therefore, what I have is a strategy that still warns me early enough that I can do something about it, while being specific enough so that it does not get triggered by something that is actually an inconsequential thought. In this regard, I think that the analysis that I present has been really helpful for me, not only in addressing the psychosis risk, but also in having the welcome side effect of lowering my general level of paranoia and unusual feelings. Part of the success of this is that I can really see how the inferences that I describe have led in a direct way to some of the content of my bizarre delusions, so I can “fast-forward” in my mind to the likely effects of believing a certain inference is true with too much certainty or frequency. This ability to clearly see the seeds of the bizarre delusion in the relatively innocent looking inference is crucial for motivating me toward efforts to reject the “risky” inference, either by gathering evidence to disconfirm it or at least to place a big question mark about it.

What I’d like to do first is just make a list about the kinds of inferences that I have identified as putting me at risk of developing a bizarre delusion. They are inferences about events that I think have happened, and which I tend when I have them grip me, either because of their “fear factor” and/or because I seem very certain about them. I describe what they have in common is that they are about communicative acts, and are inferences that have extraordinary implications.

Here is the list:

1. Inference that someone made a reference to something only I could know.
2. Inference that a stranger knows exactly what I am thinking even though it isn’t really obvious at all.
3. Inference that shared knowledge between others that requires some novel kind of collusion between them.
4. Inference that I am expressing something that I would normally never express.
5. Inference that there is a double meaning to what is being said either by me unwittingly or by someone else.
6. Inference that communication from others has to be “decoded” because what is superficially meant cannot be meant.
7. Inference that I am unwillingly communicating all my thoughts and feelings to others.
8. Inference that imperceptible gestures of mine and others are highly meaningful to others.
9. Inference that there is a radically different way of understanding what people are saying in terms of the subject of the conversation.
10. Inference that certain language that would normally be used nonliterally, are to be taken literally (like a code hidden in plain view such as the use of common metaphorical speech, but taken literally).
11. Inference that other people are talking about me indirectly using their apparently normal conversation as a cover.

This list may not be exhaustive, but while at first glance contains some quite different kinds of inference, and also some overlapping categories, they are all similar in the sense that they involve communicative acts, and because they all have extraordinary implications. By highlighting this similarity between an otherwise rag-bag mixture of inferences, I can draw a connection between these inferences and some of the content of the bizarre delusions. Here is an example of one of my own earliest delusions:

I once considered that I was a kind of human-robot (perhaps severely autistic), and had been stuck in the same routine for years which meant that everyone knew me and recognized me and always knew exactly what I was thinking. I thought that I was in fact the subject of some kind of experiment designed to cure me from being so predictable and obvious in my behavior and thoughts. On my way home and at work this explained why it is I thought that people didn’t know actually recognized me, and why I also believed they were secretly all wishing me well and why they now thought I might have been cured because I was now behaving differently and less predictably. However it also explained why they didn’t come up to me directly or directly acknowledge me, since it was because they had spent years under instruction about how not to approach me by the organizers of the experiment. Since the experiment was very delicate they had to try very hard to ignore me, even though they thought I could see signs in myself that they could see, that meant that they knew I was on the brink of being cured and so were very happy about it.

The delusion seems to me to indicate the potentially quite paranoid yet perhaps not that uncommon inference that people know exactly what you’re thinking. In a certain context, such an inference is harmless, when it is not that extreme in its certainty or happening with too much frequency. Outside of that normal context such an inference however naturally has extraordinary implications, eg, if you think complete strangers on the bus know and can predict your every move and thought. This inference underlying the delusions seems to be an extreme form of (2), the idea that people don’t know me know exactly what I’m thinking and (8), the idea that imperceptible movements and gestures of mine are highly significant to other people. These kinds of inference start to have extraordinary implications if believed about a large group of people and with great certainty.

This wasn’t the first delusion that I had when I first suffered a psychotic episode. However, it shares certain features with my initial delusion and so might be considered a development of it. My first case of psychosis occurred at an event run by an organization called Landmark, which I have spoken about elsewhere. Although after the Landmark event, I suffered from many delusions, what I now recognize as an element of consistency was that they relied on inferences about communicative acts that already had extraordinary implications. Rather than these delusions simply being extraordinary interpretations of the world around me, my delusions initially involved inferences about my communication with other people that were extraordinarily question-begging. Inferences about how transparent I was in my thoughts and behavior, and also how imperceptible movements and gestures of mine were highly significant to other people. The idea that what I said or what other people said had a double meaning or that I was unwillingly communicating my thoughts and feelings to other people. These inferences sent my mind racing because they had extraordinary implications, and the puzzle is why their extraordinary implications didn’t lead me to reject them straightaway as outlandish. I don’t know why this is, but one thing that seems clear to me is that perhaps because I found them believable, I also didn’t notice the precise content of their extraordinary implications, focusing instead on the belief and immediate meaning of the communicative act that had taken place rather than the extraordinary implications that they had as a result of taking place at all.

Until recently, I still used to have these kinds of inferences quite regularly in a relatively mild form. I would get into moods where while walking down the street I thought people knew almost exactly what I was thinking by just glancing at me, or where I thought that people could very clearly see my emotions about something particular, or if I just looked at someone a certain way, they would be certain to draw certain conclusions about me (eg, they would think I was gay and though I am neither anti-gay or gay myself, the thought of being thought of as gay seems extremely off-putting). These inferences are all about communicative acts, mostly performed unwillingly on my part, and these inferences have extraordinary implications about my relationship and the world if “taken seriously,” which really just means “if strongly believed” and if they are made with great frequency. Therefore, if I became convinced that they are really true and I begin to make them too often, then they will become dangerous inferences to let go unchallenged.

The question-begging nature of the inferences means that they are very open ended regarding possible explanations and together with their probable heterogeneity this accounts for why I think I had many very different kinds of delusion. If it is true that part of my path to bizarre delusions really have been question-begging inferences about communicative acts, then it would account for why I had delusions that were not otherwise fixed and stable in character. For instance, at various times, I had persecutory delusions, I had grandiose delusions (I thought immediately after getting home from the Landmark that I was a reincarnation of the Buddha and had just defeated all the “false buddhas” at the Landmark...
itself), I had temporarily euphoric delusions (as mentioned above, everyone knows me and is happy to see me; I am the subject of some long-term experimental treatment that has just possibly succeeded), and I had delusions that probably defy description (a combination of the above delusions and some others involving the belief that we are all really monkeys, or that we are playing some kind of incredibly important life or death games involving language and our immediate reactions to each other). The relative lack of consistency seems to me to be the hallmark of making heterogeneous inferences about communicative acts but all with highly question-begging implications because they had many possible bizarre explanations.

A final comment that I’d like to make is that I don’t think that people with delusions necessarily have a lot in common in terms of the whole path toward the bizarre delusions. While they may share very general symptoms that are indicative or a risk of developing psychosis, I believe that people developing psychosis can be very different from one another in the precise path to their bizarre delusional beliefs. Perhaps, however, there are a certain number of groups of similar paths, which may be different from one another but similar within each group, in which case, I may belong to one of these paths, and if this is the case, then identifying one of the key “components” in my path to delusional beliefs could be a helpful strategy for similar people. Another way this could be useful is by describing in general strategy that I have developed for dealing with my bizarre delusions. Certainly, I have found the strategy of looking at the external evidence I have for my beliefs to be helpful in my own ongoing quest never to suffer from an episode of psychosis again. These inferences about communicative acts seem to form the evidence base for my bizarre delusions. I believe that this process of identifying the evidence base is difficult but important, as, eg, I may find that I need at some point for health reasons to reduce or discontinue my medication, or I may find myself in a particularly distressing point of my life, in either case, this kind of analysis might really pay off.

So to conclude, I believe that I have discovered a pattern of inferences that reliably indicates my risk of developing psychosis and bizarre beliefs when they are made with a high degree of certainty and frequency. I have explained the connections between the inferences and the beliefs, but not why I make the inferences in the first place, as that is something that I don’t know. Nevertheless, it seems to me that a clue is that all the inferences are about communicative acts, and are therefore, naturally complex inferences, because they involve a whole set of component inferences about events and the precise immediate relations between myself and other people. Perhaps their complexity means that these types of inference are naturally prone to more problems? Knowing that these inferences have something in common, and being able to “see” the immediate connection between relatively innocent-looking kinds of inferences and my bizarre beliefs has given me some more insight and some new measure of control over my illness.