Psychotic Symptoms in Prelingually Deaf Adults

Because of the scarcity of mental health providers expert in both deafness and treatment of serious mental illness, there are very few reports in the literature describing psychotic symptoms in deaf adults with mental illnesses. Diagnosis of a psychotic illness requires a fairly sophisticated level of expertise, especially if an individual presents with a subtle disorder of thought form. Clinicians with appropriate diagnostic expertise are generally not knowledgeable about Deaf Culture, American Sign Language, or other systems of manual communication. If a deaf patient wishes to communicate in a signed, rather than spoken, language, then the psychiatrist must generally rely on an interpreter. Under some circumstances, use of an interpreter can be a barrier to diagnosis of psychotic symptoms. The interpreter may inadvertently attempt to gloss over defects in the logic or form of the deaf patient’s thoughts. Or, a clinician may assume that choppy, poorly understandable phrases are due to cultural/linguistic barriers, rather than to mental illness. In another situation, a Deaf patient with minimal language skills lacks fluency in any system of communication. That patient’s utterances are intrinsically incomplete or unclear, leading the listener to guess at the intended meaning. In the latter circumstance, a clinician may diagnosis thought disorder when, in fact, the patient is presenting with a primary language disorder. Occasionally, such low formal language patients can have both linguistic deficiencies and a psychotic illness.

All inpatients at Virginia’s inpatient unit for deaf adults during a ten-year period (1988-1997) served as the sample population. Deafness can occur at any time in life. This study focuses on individuals raised as deaf. Thus, the onset of hearing loss was from birth or during the first few years of life. Diagnoses were made by extant DSM
criteria. There were 12 patients with Schizophrenia, five with Schizoaffective Disorder, three with MDD, and two with BPAD. Patients diagnosed with Schizophrenia, Schizoaffective Disorder, Bipolar Disorder, and Major Depressive Disorder were analyzed for presence and phenomenology of psychotic features. Psychosis was defined as disturbance in thought content and/or thought form.

**Results:**

Types of Psychotic Symptoms:

No psychotic deaf patient displayed only disordered thought form.

All psychotic depressed persons demonstrated only disordered thought content (delusions, hallucinations). In the other three diagnostic groups, both disordered thought form and content were present.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Schizophrenia</th>
<th>Schizoaffective</th>
<th>Bipolar</th>
<th>MDD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disordered Thought Form and Content</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only Disordered Thought Content</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>100%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

1. **Delusions in Psychotic Deaf**

The delusional content patients reported is very similar to that reported by hearing psychotic persons:

- Witnessed a murder
- Satan trying to enter patient’s soul
- God is watching through a microscope
- Government is trying to get him
- I am God
- Food is poisoned
- Fear of turning into a vampire
- Need to search for lost children
- All bones are broken
- I am a dog

2. **Hallucinations in Psychotic Deaf**
Between 50 and 80% of psychotic patients reported hallucinations: One of the two bipolar patients, two of three depressed patients, eight of twelve schizophrenia patients, and faces of five schizoaffective patients.

The subjects’ hallucinations were then categorized by sensory system. (Table 2)

### HALLUCINATION SUBTYPES IN PSYCHOTIC DEAF PERSONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DIAGNOSIS</th>
<th>HALLUCINATION SUBTYPE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Auditory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schizophrenia (12)</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schizoaffective (5)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bipolar (2)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MDD (3)</td>
<td>1</td>
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Auditory and visual hallucinations were present in all four disorders.

Seven of 12 schizophrenic patients reported auditory hallucinations, even those subjects deaf since birth. These deaf persons described being spoken to or about in a manner similar to reports from hearing persons with schizophrenia.

When analyzed by somatosensory system, only schizophrenic patients reported olfactory hallucinations.

### HALLUCINATIONS IN SCHIZOPHRENIA

#### AUDITORY

- Hear singing
- Sounds of someone breaking into house
- God talking
- Voices comment on behavior
- Talk with God
- Hear Voices saying patient should be a sacrificial lamb
- Voices say patient will die

#### VISUAL/SOMATIC

- See thoughts
See a “mean man”
See God
Try to pet invisible animals

TACTILE

Worm in the abdomen
Electric shocks
People shocking patient through his feet
Vaginal sensations

OLFACTORY

Body stinks
Smells in hair

Because of the small number of cases, patients with Bipolar and MDD were pooled. Some, but not all, of their content is mood congruent.

HALLUCINATIONS IN MOOD DISORDERED PATIENTS

AUDITORY

Voices tell patient to vote and to dance (Bipolar)
Voices tell patient to kill himself (MDD)

VISUAL

See devil (Bipolar)
See person with a knife (MDD)
See Jesus and the devil (MDD)

TACTILE

Feel footsteps (MDD)

Disorders of Thought Form

Patients presented with disorganized signing, incoherent sign (lack of ASL syntactical markers), fragmentation, loose associations, flight of ideas, neologisms, and clang associations.
In ASL, a sign’s meaning is determined by a combination of three factors: hand shape, hand position, and hand movement. A schizophrenic man had poorly formed hand shapes, rendering his sign incomprehensible.

One female condensed signs to create a neologism, combining rabbit and bat to make “rabbibat”.

In sign, clang associations are made by rhyming to hand shapes or motions. One bipolar patient made such clang associations.

SUMMARY

Psychotic deaf people experience disorders of thought form and content. They, at times, report hearing voices, even if they have been deaf from birth. 41% of schizophrenics reported auditory hallucinations.