Psychogenic psychosis and the ongoing debate of the “third psychosis”

André Sousa¹, Corona Solana², Joana Gomes¹, Guida da Ponte¹, and António Paiva¹


Abstract

Introduction: The existence of acute psychoses of short duration, often associated with an intense symptomatology, but also full remission, has always been described over the last two centuries. The concept of psychogenic psychosis was first published in 1916 by August Wimmer, and is widely used in scandinavian countries. According to Wimmer, psychogenic psychoses are etiologically defined as psychoses apparently caused by a mental trauma in predisposed individuals. The traumatic stress determines the content and the course of the psychotic reaction, which tend to remit in days to weeks.

Objectives: To make an historical review of the concept of psychogenic psychosis and discuss the debate over the classification and description of acute and transient psychosis.

Methods: A bibliographic review is made of the psychogenic psychosis, based on the data published in PubMed.

Results: The studies demonstrate a considerable prevalence of this clinical entity among all psychiatric admissions in scandinavian countries.

Discussion: After Emil Kraepelin’s division of the so-called endogenous or functional psychoses into a group of dementia praecox and manic-depressive insanity, some of the acute, brief, transient and good prognosis psychoses were classified as schizophrenia and some others as belonging to the affective category. However, the possibility of a “third psychosis”, apart from the Kraepelin dychotomia system has always been debated since then. Such different concepts as the “bouffée delirante”, “cycloid disorders”, “atypical psychosis” and “reactive or psychogenic psychoses” have influenced this debate, lasting until our days. The concept of psychogenic psychosis through most of the 20th century has been widely used in the scandinavian countries for a major group of the so-called functional psychoses, separate from manic-depressive psychosis and schizophrenia. However, since Wimmer’s works had not been translated from danish into any other language until recently, his contribution must surely be one of the least frequented in other countries.

Conclusions: The phenomenology and classification of acute and transient psychotic episodes with good prognosis has always been a matter of discussion in psychiatry. Thus, it is important to review and acknowledge this entity in order to strength the debate of the classification of the episodes mentioned above.