Paranoia, Self-Consciousness, and Social Cognition in Schizophrenics

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The validity of the Paranoia Scale of Fenigstein and Vanable (1992) was investigated in a schizophrenic population. The scale was found to be correlated with clinical ratings of paranoia and marginally with a situational test of paranoia. Further, Fenigstein and Vanable's study of the relation between paranoia and self-consciousness was extended from a normal population to schizophrenic patients. Contrary to Fenigstein and Vanable, paranoia was found to be related to private, but not to public self-consciousness. This finding is discussed in the light of possible differences in self-processes between normals and schizophrenics. Finally, Fenigstein and Vanable's arguments concerning paranoid personalism in social cognition were investigated. It was expected that paranoia and public self-consciousness would be related to extreme evaluations of people. This was partly confirmed for paranoia, but not for public self-consciousness. The implications are discussed.

KEY WORDS: paranoia; public self-consciousness; private self-consciousness; personalism.

Paranoia is a significant aspect of psychopathology in schizophrenia and sometimes also in depressive disorders. It is therefore mainly treated as a part and parcel of such pathologies. Recently, Fenigstein and Vanable (1992) have tried to elucidate paranoia as a continuation of normal tendencies found in the interpretation of relationships between the self and social stimuli.

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In this context, these authors hypothesized that paranoia is characterized by an increased public self-consciousness (Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975). A measure of public self-consciousness is obtained with the Self-Consciousness Scale, which also gives measures of private self-consciousness and social anxiety. Public self-consciousness is similar to private self-consciousness in the sense that it entails frequent attention to the self, but whereas private self-consciousness refers to attention paid to inner aspects of the self such as moods and motives, the Public Self-Consciousness Scale is supposed to measure attention to the self, as it appears to others, and a concern with other people’s attitudes toward the self. It is, however, not identifiable with social anxiety, with which it shows only moderate correlations.

Fenigstein and Vanable (1992) have proposed a new measure of paranoia, the Paranoia Scale, based on several Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) scales of paranoia. This measure showed evidence of construct validity correlating, for example, with the general feeling of being watched in an experimental situation. They also investigated the relation of this new measure to Fenigstein et al.'s (1975) Self-Consciousness Scale.

In accordance with the conjectures above, correlations around .40 were obtained between Fenigstein and Vanable’s (1992) Paranoia Scale and the measure of public self-consciousness in several samples. Much lower correlations were obtained between the Paranoia Scale and the Private Self-Consciousness Scale. Besides, public self-consciousness was in this study found to relate to the feeling of being watched in an experimental situation, but in a different manner from paranoia. Whereas paranoia turned out to be related to the feeling of being watched in a situation where this was relatively unlikely as well as where it was much more plausible (in a room with a two-way mirror), public self-consciousness was only related to the feeling of being watched in the plausible situation.

Fenigstein and Vanable’s (1992) assertion that there are links between paranoia and sensitivity to being an object of other people’s attention is in accordance with clinical observations of paranoia. It is, however, unclear to what extent the findings of Fenigstein and Vanable generalize to psychopathological settings and to schizophrenic patients in particular. Therefore, it is uncertain whether paranoid tendencies in schizophrenics relate to the frequency of thought about the self as a social object. Answers to that effect are likely to clarify our conception of paranoid tendencies in such contexts. In fact, research into self-attention processes in schizophrenia have been sparse, with only few notable exceptions. Exner (1973), for instance, studied self-focused attention in relation to schizophrenia, finding indications of heightened self-focused attention in schizophrenics. Puente and Morrisey (1981) also investigated Fenigstein et al.’s (1975) self-consciousness variables in relation to schizophrenia. They found some evidence