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Assessing the narrative patterns of body boundary imagery and regressive imagery in discourses of religious-mystical and psychotic experiences - A case study

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Introduction
Primordial cognition and changes in body boundary awareness have been identified as shared phenomenological features in both mystical and psychotic altered states of consciousness (ASC) (e.g., Prince & Savage, 1966). Computer-assisted content analysis has identified that the narrative pattern of linguistic variables associated to regressive states (i.e., primordial thought language and penetration imagery) follow a fifth polynomial degree curve in religious texts (West, 1991; Wilson, 2009). This study investigated the narrative pattern of body boundary and primordial imagery in the discourses of mystical and psychotic experiences to explore the notion of adaptive and maladaptive regression (Balint, 1968), and the dynamical function and interaction of primordial language, body boundary imagery, and emotion language in ASC.

The mystical discourse here is Saint Teresa of Avila’s (1567) “The Way of Perfection”, and the psychoanalytic discourse is Daniel Paul Schreber’s (1903) autobiographical writing “Memoirs of My Nervous Illness.” It was hypothesized that primordial thought language and penetration imagery will follow a fifth polynomial degree curve in the religious-mystical and psychotic text.

Objective measures

Results

Religious-mystical text
Primordial thought language (BIC = 131.44, R²ML = 0.20, LR(7,9) = 9.55, p < .01) followed a quadratic trend in form of a prolonged inverted bell curve, and penetration imagery was modelled with a quintic polynomial fit (BIC = 97.58, R²ML = 0.22, LR(7,11) = 10.75, p < .05) with a homogenous fall-rise-fall-rise pattern. Both curves coincided in the driving force of their rise-fall pattern (approx. with a quadric polynomial fit (BIC = 97.58, R²ML = 0.65, LR(7,10) = 32.28 p < .001) showed an inverted cubic trend (see Figure 4-5).

Penetration imagery (BIC = 109.69, R²ML = 0.14, LR(7,8) = 4.85, p < .05) indicated a positive linear curve (see Figure 6-7).

High barrier imagery and glory lexis might function as a narcissistic defence to exclude trauma experiences from conscious awareness to protect the ego from threatening annihilating insights. In such a dynamic, high barrier imagery represents a competing driving force that inhibits the blurring of body boundaries and the ability to confront unconscious conflicts in the regressive state, and thus leading to the continuous disintegration/splicing of existing meaning structures.

Conclusion
The function of body boundary and primordial regression differed between religious-mystical and psychotic experiences. In the religious-mystical text, the blurring of body boundaries corresponded with the driving force to confront and resolve unconscious conflicts, indicating an adaptive primordial regression. In the psychotic text, however, barrier imagery maintained the narcissistic equilibrium that excludes unconscious conflicts from conscious awareness, such as trauma experiences, and therefore restrains and overrides the driving force to gain new insights and to change dysfunctional meaning structures, representing a maladaptive primordial regression.

References

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