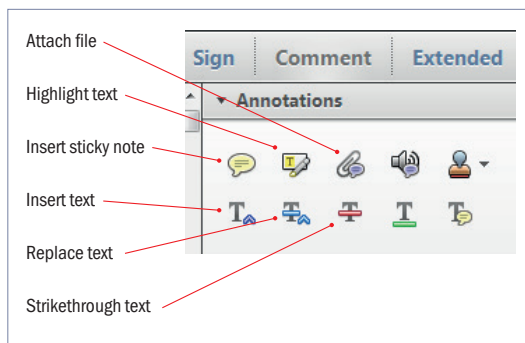


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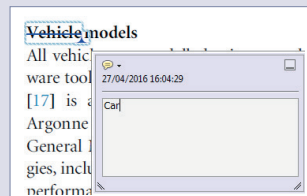


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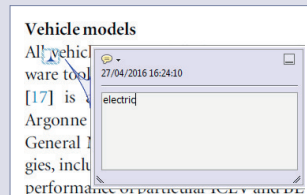
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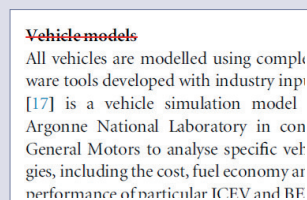
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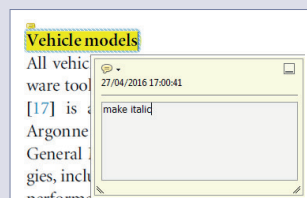
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Healing the 'split'; trauma as a dynamic in psychosis

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In this article, the first author uses an autobiographical account of a trauma she experienced and shows how, in her understanding, this led to her developing what was diagnosed as paranoid schizophrenia. The trauma forced her to accept a distortion of her understanding of reality, which, she explains, caused a split in her ego between the inner truth of the event and the imposed distortion. She considers Freud's theory of how trauma develops and looks at how it applies to her case. Using Winnicott's theory of there being a 'false self' in psychosis, she shows how a false self was formed out of the distortion. Bion's understanding of the development of thought applied to trauma is used to give insight into how the mind finds it difficult to process thought when a trauma occurs and, using Brown's understanding, she indicates how this is similar to what happens in psychosis. Winnicott's explanation of there being a trauma not lived through, as if not experienced, as being present in psychosis and the need to experience, 'remember', this trauma is for healing to take place. In conclusion, she argues how the reaching and establishing of the inner truth is what is needed for recovery to happen and for the split in the ego to heal.

AQ1

**Key words** psychosis • trauma • split mind • false self • thought development

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Introduction by Lindsey Nicholls

Lucia Franco and I have been in conversation since we met in 2011. Our work began as Lucia had written a paper, based on her experience of a traumatic rape, and she wanted advice on where to submit it for a journal publication (see [Franco, 2013](#)). Lucia had been accepted for a PhD in the Department of Sociology and Psychoanalysis and I was appointed as one of her supervisors. Following some early disappointing ethical exploration of gaining approval to interview people with psychosis, Lucia decided to follow the courageous route of using an autoethnographic account of her illness. She has considered her experience of psychosis and trauma through using the theoretical

AQ2

lenses of key psychoanalytic authors. Lucia is a true ‘expert by experience’ and it has been through her persistence and belief she could find a resolution for her illness that she has continued to explore the topic of trauma and its paralysing effect on her mind. This article is work that Lucia continues to do, as part of her doctoral study, to make her insights accessible for people with psychosis and those who work with them.

*Please note that the narrative account in this article contains a graphic description of sexual violence.*

## Introduction by Lucia Franco

In myself I am certain of what led to my psychosis, paranoid schizophrenia as it was then diagnosed; it was the consequence of a trauma I suffered as a 20-year-old woman. My experience, my knowledge of other people and my research have helped me formulate the hypothesis that what can lead to psychosis is the presence of a trauma that forces the individual to accept a lie of an abuser and deny the truth of the inner self of the victim, thus creating a distortion of reality and a split in the individual between the inner truth and the imposed lie. To provide the evidence, I will try to show how a trauma can lead to psychosis by narrating my experience of being raped and how I understand it. I indicate how I made my recovery journey, also giving a background of my early life to support my argument that a later trauma can be associated with psychosis and need not be linked to childhood trauma. I then look at the understanding of trauma in established theory and in the work of writers such as Winnicott (1896–1971) and Bion (1897–1979) and how their thinking sheds light on the psychological processes in my psychosis. I finally present my understanding of why and how the healing of the ‘split’ in my ego occurred.

## My Trauma

In 1976, at the age of 20, I found myself, while visiting India, in a situation where an acquaintance, who I considered a friend, attacked me as if attempting to kill me. After an initial struggle, realising that I was in his complete power as I could not fight him off, I started to violently shake with fear. He, at this point, started to reassure me by agitatedly rubbing my arms (as if worried and concerned for me). In my mind I experienced this as very violent. Suddenly I became emotionally and intellectually paralysed, doubting myself and thinking that I must have been wrong. It was as if my breath was taken away from me. My fear became blocked in its expression; my mind became unable to understand. There followed a skirmish where he would come close and I would fear him, he would respectfully withdraw and I would calm down, he then would come close again and so it continued for a while. At that point I felt as if I was going mad, an intense fear of my mind, my being, being annihilated. I then decided to trust him, he then proceeded to rape me, which I suspected was his intention all along. I had become unable to understand what was happening anymore.

My shaking with fear had occurred at the realisation that I was about to die a violent death and that I could do nothing to prevent it. His reassurance and agitation, which appeared to be concern for me, were behaviours completely incongruous with what I then understood to be how someone intent on harming me would have behaved. This behaviour, in the context of the terror I was under, acted like psychological

violence to my emotions and mind. I was forced, against all my instincts, to reconsider my understanding, this also because it was giving me the hope of survival. My heart felt stopped in its course of emotions, paralysed into doubt and an inability to find expression.

Over the years I have undergone intense analytical psychology followed by therapy or counselling from several people. The work with them has helped me understand myself in terms of my childhood and other life experiences. (Only 14 years after the event, following my falling in love for the first time after the trauma, could I start to think that I had been raped. I did not, however, remember the violence that had taken place. I had only a fragmented memory of it. I started working on the trauma almost 20 years after it had happened when I decided to do self-analysis.)

With my ego strengthened from work in psychoanalysis, many years after the traumatic event and having unearthed some memories of the violence, I discovered that unconsciously another thought was forming as a response to the violence: 'I must do what he wants.' Here can be seen the beginning of the split in my ego. I started to feel divided between what I thought was really happening (the truth of the violence that was taking place) and the meaning of it he was forcing me to accept (that all was well and that he was a caring friend). In the ensuing skirmish between reassurance and threat, I kept switching in understanding between trust and fear. I felt as if I was going mad; I did not know what was happening. Was he my friend or was he about to kill me? My survival was at stake; I had to choose.

At my silently begging with my facial expression as to whether I could trust him, he nodded reassurance. As I could see no reason for him to want to kill me, I capitulated and forced myself to believe in him as the friend he had been up until then. This fear of going mad felt very much like a threat of annihilation. It was indeed a threat of death and the annihilation of my mind, so the threat was both real and symbolic.

I had become unable to trust my mind and thus unable to put up any more resistance. I put complete trust in his guidance as to what was happening. I became like a small child trusting an adult. The struggle between the two possibilities between life and death that his behaviour had forced me to face had led to my fear of going mad; I had feared my imminent death and I was feeling in his complete power. I remember the feeling of humiliation but faced by imminent death I felt it did not matter; nothing else mattered. In my confusion, making the choice to trust him, and unconsciously directed by what he wanted, I thus entirely relinquished my being, my ego, and trusted what was ultimately to me self-destructive because of his threat and aggression.

My conscious reasoning was that he was my friend and would not want to harm me; unconsciously I was terrified. He then raped me, but with my mind unable to understand anymore, I saw the act as if I were participating by choice. My having given him complete trust meant that I identified with the meaning his behaviour indicated to me. That trust was, however, the result of his mendacious behaviour. It was based on a lie; as such, it violated my mind and body.

Since then, the thought processes I went through have come into consciousness. One part of me was unable to process thought, in terms I was unable to overcome the opposite meaning to what was happening his incongruous, irrational behaviour had forced me into. My having accepted his reassurance later, meant that when I trusted him the fear did not disappear – a great part of it turned into overwhelming guilt at having accused him. Another part of me (hidden to me) remained terrified and suspended in readiness for what was coming next, as if on extreme tenterhooks.

Under these conditions, when he began to rape me I, somehow, thought I was making love to a friend, almost as a kind act on my part.

What I have felt all along was that something was controlling my mind and forcing it to think how it wanted. When I started being able to identify this controlling force, I felt it to be the rapist's.

I understand that the inability to reason through the psychological blow of his irrational behaviour, with the greater fear of him that this caused, the relentless skirmish when he would reassure and then threaten me again and the hidden terror with the threat to my life, all these factors acted like a violence forcing me to think as he wanted. I became a puppet in his hands, totally controlled by him. I do not think that my vulnerabilities were what led to the distortion of thinking. I think it was the overpowering psychological violence I had been victim of.

I believe that the internalisation of distorted understanding and the inability of the inner truth to emerge lead to psychosis. I am trying to describe in my case a violence that took over my conscious mind, forcing me to accept a distortion of the significance of what was happening.

What followed was a gradual fragmentation of my ego over time. The distorted understanding led to an overpowering guilt and to an entire formation of a new personality-like, a false self, which made me feel rather monstrous in my being.

AQ4

The false self that I see myself developing here I can only describe as a part of me that would reason and act in a manner not in line with my normal thinking – a part that I could not make sense of, that felt false and immoral. For years after the trauma, I kept trying to reach what was the 'real' me, as I felt so much like being a deception.

From my self-analysis, ongoing psychotherapy and autoethnographic work on my PhD, I have come to understand that the gradual formation of my psychotic symptoms directly relates to the traumatic event I have described. The truthfulness of what had occurred wanted to emerge, but could not, as I had never fully processed what had happened. My psyche therefore produced images, delusions and ideations that all held symbolic meaning to the event; in other words, the 'classic' psychotic symptoms had a distorted meaning (Franco, 2013).

## My Recovery Journey

My recovery journey has been a process of allowing my subjective truth to emerge. It was not enough to eventually be able to remember and understand what had happened as a thought/memory; this was only the tip of the iceberg as it was a superficial understanding. The arduous work was finding the real me by fighting and asserting myself against the violence I felt embedded in my psyche and that was still forcing me to accept the original distortion. To do this I had to face my psychotic symptoms, resist their force, interrogate the distortion and allow the truth to emerge. For me it was like a fight between what remained of his violence in me, forcing a distortion of reality, and my truth trying to resist that force. It often overpowered me but then I would start again until I had more strength, however little, against this psychical force.

I understand the reason why this 'force' was so difficult to resolve because the truth of reality had still not been achieved. Some of the thought processes that were needed to bring reality to the event were still to be formulated into words; feelings could not be felt. Thinking around and about the trauma was still difficult. Furthermore, there

were the false established thoughts (habits of thought) formed through the violence that had been there for years and were deep in me and needed to be disempowered.

Most authors consider early childhood experiences as causal vulnerability factors in psychosis. My argument is that a trauma leading to psychosis can occur later in life and does not necessarily track back to childhood. I consider my early life as having had some difficulties, like most people, but not in any way particularly traumatic. As an adolescent I became rebellious to strictness on women in my society. These factors might have led to a less secure identity, but I do not believe they made me vulnerable to developing psychosis later in life.

In the past, not being able to process the trauma and understand with the whole of my being what had happened meant that 'the lie' I had internalised had a psychic power of its own. Every time I tried to face the conflict, the distortion came alive; it was as if I had to face my abuser with his powerful lie each time. I understand now that my mind could neither accept the distortion nor get to my truth unless I stopped myself from feeling overwhelmed by the psychological violence. To do so I had to become certain of my underlying thoughts that had led to my not understanding what was happening anymore.

I had to learn how his violence had affected me and how I had become divided between the two realities: that he is my friend and that he wishes to kill me. This 'split' / division was out of fear and a survival instinct as well as my inability to understand his incongruous behaviour of reassuring me, which had paralysed my thought. To overcome the falsely held beliefs about him and the powerful feelings of shame they evoked in me, I had to accept my failure to understand and my choice of trusting him. Then the real me with the real emotions could emerge; without this working through, the traumatic lie would have continued to exist.

In reading Bion, who wrote extensively on how thoughts are formed and on psychosis, I have come to understand that when we experience something, we need to process it to make it part of our experience and make sense of it. In my case I could not do so. The trauma in its undigested form remained blocked in my psyche, trying to find resolution and distorting things more and more.

Any future conflict or stresses in my life made the psychological complex created by this trauma emerge and the psychotic symptoms would become more florid. I now view each psychotic episode I have had as partly an attempt to find the truth and partly the outcome of realities in my life that were putting my inner self, with its unresolved trauma, in conflict with outside events.

To allow my true self to emerge, resolve and dissolve the distortion, I had to learn to understand the symbolic meaning of my symptoms, my paranoid perceptions, my delusional thoughts and my fears. I had to discover how the punishing god that was part of my delusions was a representation of my attacker who had become such a powerful entity in me. While undertaking a self-analysis, I had reached in-depth understanding. It took, however, my relationship with my psychologist, with its own difficulties, insights, transference and countertransference, to finally achieve a resolution. Together we were able to bring reality into the experience.

My 'self' had been entirely taken over by the sense of reality my attacker had given me, to the point where the truth could not emerge and my 'false self'<sup>1</sup> had identified with him and his meaning of what was happening. I know now that I reached a point where his will took over entirely from my will and I ultimately was under his complete power, both physically and mentally. My psychologist was of great help to



my difficulties coming to terms with the incongruity of his behaviour in making me understand that he probably was refusing to accept any guilt or responsibility for his actions. Without this insight I was unable to think around the sense of being 'in his power'. It felt as if my mind had received a physical blow that I could not overcome.

I think that the pattern of losing one's 'self' may be like other experiences of trauma, as in the case of Stockholm syndrome (De Fabrique et al, 2007). It appears as if, in the case of Stockholm syndrome, that people identify with their aggressor to protect themselves rather than become split between two realities. I want to suggest, however, that for psychosis to develop out of trauma, the psychological violence must be forcing a denial of self and a distortion of understanding such as creating an inner division.

Freud (1963) explained how an experience becomes traumatic due to it reactivating the memory of an earlier childhood trauma. Factors of my upbringing may well have contributed to my strong sense of guilt at thinking that I had accused my attacker unjustly. However, in my understanding, it was the perpetrator's irrational behaviour that forced me to think differently and gave rise to my psychosis. Later, after the long skirmish and his subsequent reassurance, I forced myself to trust him, and it was then that my fear became displaced into guilt. This displacement, I now understand, is what led to the distortion of thinking.

The driving force behind the surface guilt was terror and the need to survive. What was preventing me from understanding anymore was the fear of him and his authority, which stopped me from accusing him. I feel in myself that my overwhelming fears and his irrational behaviour were the main reasons that forced the distortion of reality that I experienced. It was the psychological rape of my mind that took place that overpowered me and, in my view, led to my developing psychosis. The actual sexual aspect of the trauma, while horrific and led to enormous conflict, confusion and guilt, was not, for me, the causing factor; rather, it was my mind having been forced to be split between two meanings.

Trauma typically leads to dissociation and the formation of a false self, as a form of psychological defence against an unbearable situation (Sieff, 2015). I understand that the dissociation that took place in me, during those following moments, became a more serious split between the conscious false understanding and the hidden driving terror.

Using theory to facilitate my recovery, concerning the possibility of psychosis developing because of trauma, the understandings of psychological processes developed by both Winnicott (1972) and Bion (1991; 2005) particularly lend themselves to insights of how this could happen.

Alford (2013), looking at Winnicott's understanding of trauma, indicates how trauma brings the knowledge of 'unbearable reality' and how it gives reason for the false self to emerge to protect the core true self. The false self is an aspect of personality that develops as a defence to protect one's being when the core of the individual (the true self) feels threatened. For Winnicott, the false self was strongly present in psychosis.

Both Bion (1991) and Winnicott (1972) viewed the origin of psychosis in the early experiences of the infant in relation to the mother-infant (carer-infant) relationship. The threat of annihilation, for them, stemmed from the early more negative experiences.

Instead of regarding psychotic mechanisms as originating in the early mother-infant relationship, as Bion postulated, Brown (2012), using Bion's theory, observes how a reaction to severe trauma where there is 'a blunted capacity for abstract thought and dreaming and a tendency to fragmentation' (Brown, 2012: 1194) is very much like the

conditions present in psychosis. [Brown \(2012\)](#) writes how severe trauma can cause an individual to be unable to process the trauma and thus can create a situation where thought becomes difficult. I think this happened to me because the trauma put me in a divisive situation and, under severe and prolonged psychological abuse/violence, I ended up being forced to accept an understanding of the traumatic reality that separated me from my own internal truth.<sup>2</sup> The prevalent thoughts pertaining to the true self were buried under the constraints caused by the abuser. In terms of Winnicott's theory, thinking true thoughts pertaining to the true self would be extremely difficult and false-self thinking, with its distortion of reality, is likely to prevail.

I needed to resolve the division for the truth and for it to emerge, but this was kept at bay by the internalised violence that forced the splitting of my ego. My mind needed to find a way to digest/process the trauma but instead it remained blocked in a split meaning. A trauma is normally difficult to process but this was made even more difficult by the distortion of understanding, which prevented any processing of thought and kept the truth of reality hidden. Truth, said [Bion \(2005\)](#), is central for the healing process to take place.

## Healing the 'split' process

[Winnicott \(1974\)](#), in his final paper, talked of finding in some patients a 'fear of a breakdown' and he stated that this fear is about something that has already happened but which the patient did not 'experience' at the time it happened. He saw the fear as being about the 'breakdown of the unit self' (1974: 103) and the psychosis is the defence against such breakdown; 'it is a fear of the original agony which caused the defence organization which the patient displays as an illness syndrome' (1974: 104).

Winnicott explained that the agony that causes this fear is not experienced because '[t]he ego is too immature to gather all the phenomena into the area of personal omnipotence' (Winnicott, 1974: 104). He was referring to the personal omnipotence that is part of the early development of the infant when the facilitating environment (that is, the mother) is providing a sense of security. As [Ogden \(2014: 213\)](#) explains, it refers to the internalised experience when the mother has succeeded in making the infant feel that the world is 'as he wants it' and this internalisation continues in life.

For Winnicott, it was an early event (or events) that led to this agony and it occurred when the facilitating environment failed. As the event had not been 'experienced' by the individual, there was no memory of it; it existed as a recording in the unconscious but an unconscious that was neither Freudian nor Jungian (collective). [Ogden \(2014: 2013, emphasis added\)](#) attempts to explain this unconscious as 'an aspect of the individual (often more physical than psychical) where there exists registration of events that have occurred, but *have not been experienced*'.

AQ5

It is my understanding that my traumatic experience was similar to what was described by Winnicott in his paper; however, my ego could not encompass it because of the fear and need to survive that were forcing acceptance of the will of the attacker, and because his irrational behaviour had caused self-doubt and a lack of self-assurance. The event was registered in a part of my mind that did not have the usual neurotic repression as its origin, but simply a part of my mind, which, like Winnicott, I call unconscious, which kept it without meaning. The only real 'memory' I had was of the beginning, (although I had repressed it following the acceptance of the distorted meaning), which I had originally processed, that is, the original fear. The following



events existed without understanding, almost like a movie with fragmented pictures with no meaning. In consciousness was the distortion.

What followed the original fear had led to the terrifying agony, I clearly remember now, of the feeling of losing my mind, total madness, non-existence. The defence, I now understand, was indeed the psychotic choice of believing him.

I think that a trauma *as an adult* can bring a fear of total collapse of the self, the agony of disappearing as a unit. In my case it was the trauma itself that prevented me from encompassing it in my psyche. The event was totally outside my experience or understanding of reality, with the irrational behaviour of the attacker and the unexplainable death threat, and this, together with the need to survive, caused the failure of my ego to recognise or integrate the experience.

I am suggesting, therefore, that it depends on the details of how a trauma happened that the mind can be brought to agonising pain and why it becomes unable to encompass it. As Winnicott (1974) postulated, reaching the healing ‘memory’ of the event (which he compared to the lifting of repression in the neurosis) is what enabled me to heal.

I can now look at each psychotic episode I experienced as an attempt to escape the death that I had lived through then (but did not ‘experience’) and which was preventing me from living my life.

I have found that to achieve the memory and heal the split in my ego I needed to be clear why I understood and internalised the distortion of the trauma. I needed to be stronger than the impulse to continue to be afraid and still believe the distorting meaning. To do this I needed to retrieve the memory as it existed hidden beneath the distortion. All this is achieved and consolidated when real thoughts and feelings concerning the trauma are formulated.

As mentioned, thinking surrounding the trauma is very difficult and slow, but it can be obtained especially with the help of a therapist. As all of this is in place, I have no reason to be split into two realities. My ego has found a wholeness. I have become able to link the truth of the trauma with my previous experiences and vulnerabilities.

To achieve the ability to think about the reality of the trauma, I have relied over the years on the non-psychotic part of my personality. Bion (1993) stated that in people suffering from psychosis there is a part of the personality that is psychotic and a part that remains non-psychotic. I find that the part of me that held the distortion (the false self) was my psychotic part and the part of me that knew the truth of the trauma (however unprocessed) was the non-psychotic part of my personality.

## In Conclusion

The truth behind a psychosis is, in my experience, entirely hidden, not just repressed (for many years I did not even think I had been raped). It is hidden because it exists distorted, never processed, never entirely understood, its reality never ‘experienced’. I believe that if we look for the distortion of reality and for the subjective reality of the person who has become psychotic, and understand what the symbolic meaning of the symptoms are saying, then the truth can be reached and the ultimate knower of that truth can only be the person who experienced it.

My journey of recovery led me to having to understand my childhood and growing into adult experiences as well as what I had lived through since the trauma, before I was able to understand the impact the trauma had had on me. Coming to terms with

how his violence drove me to my inability to understand and ultimately to insanity has been difficult but needed to be faced and worked through.

To be able to retrieve that subjective inner truth, thus asserting oneself against whatever form of traumatic abuse one has been subjected to, allows, in my experience, for the healing of the psychosis. The truth, once reached, allows for the processing and the mourning of what happened and of its consequences. It is what the self needs to heal.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> After studying Winnicott's writing on the false self, I found this a useful concept in describing my experience.

<sup>2</sup> Here there is a similarity to Laing's (1990) work, who postulated that in schizophrenia the self is split and divided between two conflicting understandings of reality and unable to resolve them.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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