

Abstract

INTRODUCTION: Social dysfunction is a well-documented phenomenon among individuals with schizophrenia spectrum disorder. Despite this, the underpinnings of such deficits remain unclear because of illness complexity and methodological limitations. To this end, the current study investigated the relationship between persecutory delusions, asociality and social functioning in a group of individuals with schizophrenia spectrum disorders, and whether their relationship is moderated by social motivation. **METHODS:** Participants aged 18 to 65 with first episode psychosis ($N = 70$) completed clinical interviews, questionnaires about their psychiatric symptoms and social functioning, as well as a computerised measure of social motivation (i.e. approach-avoidance task). **RESULTS:** After controlling for the effects of depressive mood, social phobia and estimated full-scale intelligence quotient, asociality was strongly associated with poorer social functioning. Moreover, social motivation moderated the relationship between persecutory delusions and social functioning, where persecutory delusions were associated with poorer social functioning among social motivated individuals. **DISCUSSION:** This study was one of the first studies to adopt a single symptom approach to study persecutory delusions and asociality in individuals with first-episode psychosis, and demonstrated the notable role of social motivation in influencing functional outcomes. It also informs the crucial consideration of individual symptoms and social motivation in existing therapeutic options for schizophrenia, such as cognitive behavioural therapy and social skills training. More research is needed to clarify the contribution of individual psychotic symptoms and social motivation to functional outcomes to aid theoretical and therapeutic advancement.

Keywords: schizophrenia spectrum disorder, asociality, persecutory delusions, social functioning, social motivation