

Psychosis as Dopamine Addiction: An Interdisciplinary Study of Motivation, Meaning, and Neurobiological Regulation

Introduction

Psychosis and addiction are generally studied as separate phenomena: the former within psychiatry, the latter within addiction science. Both fields focus on dopaminergic dysregulation, but from different paradigms—respectively aberrant salience and reinforcement learning. From an experiential and philosophical perspective, I propose reconsidering this separation. This research proposal aims to investigate psychosis as a natural form of dopamine addiction, in which meaning, motivation, and loss of control converge.

Hypothesis

The central hypothesis is that psychosis is not merely a pathological dysregulation but a form of endogenous addiction to meaningful stimuli. Dopamine functions here both as a neurobiological carrier of motivation and as an existential vector of desire and meaning. Recognizing this dual role allows the dynamics of psychosis to be understood as a process of **regulating intensity**—an attempt to live with overwhelming meaning rather than simply a loss of contact with reality.

Research Objectives

Conceptual objective: to develop a theoretical framework integrating experiential knowledge with dopamine theory.

Empirical objective: to investigate parallels in dopaminergic dysregulation between psychosis and addiction.

Methodological objective: to explore ways in which experiential experts can participate as co-researchers in analyzing structures of meaning and motivation.

Applied objective: to formulate recovery practices that preserve and guide motivation rather than suppress it.

A. Meaning-Oriented Research

This sub-study focuses on the experiential dimension. Through phenomenological analysis of experiential narratives from people with a dual diagnosis, the study investigates how desire, control, and meaning-making influence one another.

Interviews will be thematically coded with attention to experiences of intensity, dopaminergic stimulation, and recovery orientation.

Philosophical hermeneutics will then provide a framework for relating these experiential data to existing theories of motivation. In this way, experiential knowledge may contribute to renewed understanding of motivation as an existential dynamic.

B. Neurobiological Research

The second component examines dopaminergic regulation in psychosis in comparison with addiction. PET and fMRI studies show that both conditions involve a shift in the attribution of salience to stimuli.

This project asks whether this shift reflects the same underlying motivational systems.

An integrated literature analysis and collaboration with neuroscientists may lead to a model in which **meaning salience** and **reward salience** are understood together. Such a model offers an alternative to the dualism between psychiatry and addiction care.

Research Questions

A. Meaning-Oriented Research

- How do people with a dual diagnosis describe their experience of desire, meaning, and loss of control?
- In what sense do they experience psychosis as a form of “intensity addiction” or “addiction to meaning”?
- How can this perspective contribute to new recovery practices that do not suppress motivation but help to guide it?
- What does this imply for the role of experiential experts in research and care, as carriers of knowledge about motivation and meaning rather than merely symptoms?

B. Neurobiological Research

- What similarities exist between dopaminergic dysregulation in psychosis and in addiction, as measured through PET/fMRI research?
- Can we speak of a shared motivational circuit regulating both meaning and reward?
- Can the attribution of meaning (aberrant salience) be understood as a form of dopaminergic addiction to meaningful stimuli?
- How does dopaminergic treatment (antipsychotics versus dopaminergic agonists) influence the subjective experience of motivation and intensity?
- Can understanding psychosis as dopamine addiction lead to treatments that preserve motivation rather than flatten it?

Methodology

The proposed methodology is **interdisciplinary and participatory**:

- **Empirical:** qualitative interviews and narrative analysis; secondary analysis of neurobiological data.
- **Theoretical:** conceptual synthesis drawing on phenomenology, neurophilosophy, and motivational psychology.

- **Participatory:** collaboration between experiential experts, philosophers, and neuroscientists, recognizing experiential knowledge as an equal source of insight.

Expected Contribution

This research aims to build a bridge between experiential knowledge and neuroscience by demonstrating that dopamine is both a neurochemical substance and an existential symbol: a mechanism of desire experienced both physically and meaningfully.

This integration may lead to:

- a new conceptual framework for dual diagnosis and recovery,
- recovery practices that place motivation and autonomy at the center,
- and a broader scientific conversation about what **experiential knowledge** can contribute to research.

The hypothesis and research direction were previously explored in my essay *Dopamine Dialogue*, in which I reflect, as both an experiential expert and physician, on the interconnection between psychosis, desire, and meaning. This research proposal forms the scientific deepening of that line of thought.

Researchers interested in collaboration are invited to make contact via the website.

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