

Chapter 5

Conceptual Histories in Psychiatry: Perspectives Across Time, Language and Culture in the Work of German Berrios



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Introduction

Psychiatry deals with inherently complex subject matter, it is at once imponderable and a source of endless fascination. Much has been written on the subject, and one of the largest collections of the extant material is archived in German Berrios' personal library. The synthesis of this material has come to life through his rare powers of intellect, eidetic memory and decades of voracious early-morning reading in a variety of languages. Its expression has taken many forms, notably including a series of conceptual histories on psychiatric topics. Conceptual history teases out the historical semantics of a concept, what did it mean to people using the term in different ages, in different languages, against what contextual background. Implicit is a further challenge. What can be gleaned from past views to strengthen or validate

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contemporary version(s) of the concept? How should we refine or pursue this concept in the future? The depth and breadth of this enquiry can be gauged from the 30 articles published (listed on PubMed) by Berrios with ‘conceptual history’ in the title. They range from disquisitions on the putative diseases in the psychiatric pantheon to key symptoms, and to abstractions such as classification. Throughout, these articles capture the fascination of their subject matter; the malleability and at times fragility of our concepts, changing frames of reference; and the insistent siren call of philosophy including that of empirical science. Accompanying German Berrios on these journeys has for many clinicians, academics and interested lay people been a stimulating, thought-provoking and mind-opening experience. An early adopter and advocate for information technology in publishing both old and new, Berrios continues to influence the way we think, and his legacy will shape the minds of many people addressing the many remaining mysteries in the mind and brain sciences in years to come. This chapter attempts to bring together some of the extraordinary characteristics of German as a person and his extraordinary contributions to scholarship.

The Question

I once attended a conference in Rome. The delegates made frequent sorties to take in the sites and treasures that the city displays in abundance. Dinner conversation was largely taken up with reflections on what people had seen. One party had visited the pantheon and expressed surprise that any fuss was made of it. There was a hole in the roof, the upper walls were bare, and they saw it as a gloomy ruin. They were unaware of its provenance from ancient Roman times, the outstanding architectural achievement of its huge unsupported dome, the proportionality of the oculus and that the bronze clad interior had been pilfered towards the extravagant and exquisite *baldacchino* canopy over the papal altar in St. Peters. A combination of curiosity, imagination and the assistance of a storyteller is required to bring the subject to life, the tale in this case ranging widely from the physical form of the building to the mythological portent of the Roman pantheon.

In psychiatry, the elucidation of the similarly rich interconnections of contextual and conceptual knowledge is exemplified in the work of German Berrios and comes to the fore in his publications on conceptual history.

The extent of Berrios’ contribution to this genre is illustrated by the results of a PubMed search for ‘English [language] AND [conceptual history [title] AND Berrios [au]’. These search terms return 30 papers, 29 with Berrios as the first author of which 19 as the sole author, published between 1981 and 2003. The same search with NOT Berrios [au] returns 19 papers by other authors, 8 between 1979 and 2003 and an additional 11 between 2004 and 2018. Thus worldwide, over half the papers meeting these criteria over a 40-year period have issued from the pen/keyboard and collaborations of German Berrios.

More revealing still is that 15 of the 19 papers not authored by Berrios were one-off forays in the genre, addressing an individual interest of the author(s). The four exceptions comprised one paper each by authors who had previously co-authored a paper with Berrios (Berrios and Beer 1994; Beer 1996) (Fuentenebro de Diego and Berrios 1995; Fuentenebro de Diego and Valiente Ots 2014) and only one other author who appears on two papers (Nicoglou and Wolfe 2018; Wolfe 2014).

This somewhat extraordinary state of affairs begs the question: what is it about the genre of conceptual history and what is it about German Berrios that lead to this standout contribution to the field within medicine? In addressing this question, I shall draw on two sources of knowledge, firstly the corpus of the Berrios publications in this area and secondly some illustrative excerpts from my personal recollections of encounters with German over the past quarter of a century.

The Corpus

The field of conceptual history had its origins in mid-twentieth-century Germany under the equivalent term *Begriffsgeschichte*. It is an interdisciplinary field of enquiry, particularly engaging philosophers and historians. In psychiatry, given the central importance of symbolic language and communication to the expression, understanding and explanation of mental phenomena, the analysis of concepts and their historical contexts is of particular relevance (Marková and Berrios 2016). In addition, since concepts often ‘migrate’ from one culture to another, they may acquire shifts in meaning through non-correspondence of the languages or differing cultural references. The practice of conceptual history therefore places a premium on research across literature written in diverse languages and from a historical perspective, particularly in medicine which thrives on cross-cultural exchanges of knowledge and therapeutics.

Berrios and his co-authors have ranged widely through the semantic web of psychiatry, examining the conceptual history of a variety of symptoms, diagnoses and classifications. This approach is intellectually liberating in that the changing fortunes of many perspectives on psychiatry are well represented (see Table 5.1) rather than a mere catalogue of those currently in favour.

As can be readily seen from the conceptual history papers listed, the range of topics is broad. A number of papers are focussed on specific time periods and countries/languages, for example, ‘in France during the nineteenth century’. These nominated time periods range from the seventeenth to the twentieth century. Researching these periods is greatly facilitated by the appearance of historical dictionaries and encyclopaedias from the mid-eighteenth century onwards. In addition to these reference works, there is an increasing volume of primary source material in journals and books. Access to this material is of critical importance to the researcher. One helpful factor for Berrios was that the University of Cambridge Library is one of the world’s leading copyright libraries with vast holdings. More importantly, Berrios is a book collector of consequence.

Table 5.1 Publications in English with ‘conceptual history’ in title and Berrios as an author, in a chronological order

Topic of the conceptual history	Citation
Delirium and confusion in the nineteenth century	Berrios (1981a)
Stupor	Berrios (1981b)
Epilepsy and insanity during the early nineteenth century	Berrios (1984)
Positive and negative symptoms and Jackson	Berrios (1985)
Dementia during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries	Berrios (1987)
Melancholia and depression during the nineteenth century	Berrios (1988)
The early development of Kraepelin’s ideas on classification	Berrios and Hauser (1988)
Obsessive-compulsive disorder in France during the nineteenth century	Berrios (1989)
Feelings of fatigue and psychopathology	Berrios (1990)
Durkheim and French psychiatric views on suicide during the nineteenth century	Berrios and Mohanna (1990)
Delusions as ‘wrong beliefs’	Berrios (1991a)
French views on positive and negative symptoms	Berrios (1991b)
Phenomenology, psychopathology and Jaspers	Berrios (1992)
European views on personality disorders	Berrios (1993)
The notion of a unitary psychosis	Berrios and Beer (1994)
Déjà vu in France during the nineteenth century	Berrios (1995)
Abulia and impulsiveness revisited	Berrios and Gili (1995)
Cotard’s delusion or syndrome	Berrios and Luque (1995)
The anhedonias	Berrios and Olivares (1995)
The pre-delusional state	Fuentenebro de Diego and Berrios (1995)
Pseudo-hallucinations	Berrios and Dening (1996)
The scientific origin of electroconvulsive therapy	Berrios (1997)
Depersonalisation	Berrios and Sierra (1997)
Confabulations	Berrios (1998)
Anxiety disorders	Berrios (1999a)
Falret, Séglas, Morselli and Masselon and the ‘language of the insane’	Berrios (1999c)
Classifications in psychiatry	Berrios (1999b)
Erotomania	Berrios and Kennedy (2002)
Assessment and measurement in neuropsychiatry	Berrios and Marková (2002)
The insanities of the third age – paraphrenia	Berrios (2003)

The Bibliophile

Berrios has amassed one of the world’s leading private collections of books on the topic of psychiatry, psychology, philosophy and related disciplines. This personal library has sequestered a goodly portion of his home, kept in place and in check by numerous bookshelves and a set of compactors. The collection is indexed, both formally and in German’s head; he is quick to pull a book from the vast array to

illustrate a point. The historical dimension is immediately evident, with many original editions. Included are early encyclopaedias and dictionaries in a variety of languages. The collection is predominantly in the European languages, with particular strengths in English, French, German and Spanish source materials. This book collection was amassed over decades of rummaging in Antiquarian bookshops and exchanges with like-minded bibliophiles.

Through his extensive reading habits, the contents of his library and the contents of his mind had become intrinsically linked, the one feeding the other. The books were the reference and evidentiary material of the history of concepts, and his intellect was the driving force in synthesising the disparate sources.

Whilst a collector of consequence, German was not captive to the musty odours of the past. With the advent of Project Gutenberg, he enthusiastically welcomed the improved access to rare reference texts that the new electronic media enabled, and added several of these newly available resources to his holdings, lodged in the modern world's version of the compactor system, computer hard drives and servers.

The Linguist

As a native Spanish speaker, German's erudite Oxbridge English is accented and immediately announces his dual linguistic heritage. He researches source material in a number of languages, for example, he has published translations into English of excerpts of German, French, Spanish and Danish seminal texts, in his own right and in collaboration with native speakers as appropriate. He has also published a number of papers in Spanish, including several on conceptual histories, though generally he publishes in English in conformity with its current standing as the international language of academe. Notably he is concerned with the meaning of words and concepts in their historical and cultural context, which can become more distinct and better contested when viewed through the prism of different cultural and language traditions.

German has no hesitation in encouraging students he is supervising to tackle documents in a language that is foreign to them. His own interests in psychiatry have largely involved the French and German literature. French is readily accessible to him as a romance language similar in many respects to Spanish; German is an obligatory language for primary source investigations in psychiatry.

German's fluency in both Spanish and English has enabled him to serve as an important bridge between the English-speaking world and the Spanish-speaking world of psychiatry, and he has been in frequent demand as a speaker and as a visiting professor in both Peninsular Spain and Hispano-America.

In addition to the source material in his library and the language abilities needed to decipher it, a further requirement is to find enough hours in the day to cover the ground.

The Early Riser

I first knew of German by repute; he was an outstanding contributor to the field of the history of psychiatry. It came to my attention that we were both attending a medical conference on the Iberian Peninsula, where he was a keynote speaker. I sought him out and he kindly offered to discuss my research on early nineteenth-century German psychiatry. He suggested the next morning at breakfast time. Great, when would that be? Say 6 am! We met the next morning in the breakfast hall which was deserted, serving did not start until 7.30 am, and German generously heard me out and imparted some good advice.

This was followed up with an invitation for German to attend the Australian Society for the History of Medicine Conference 1993 in Hobart, Tasmania, Australia. German and Doris stayed at our home, and I became better acquainted with German's early starts. Rising at my customary 7.30 am, I would find him ensconced with a book or a paper which he had already spent several hours on.

He once explained that he had trained himself to need only 5 or so hours of sleep by gradual restriction of sleep time, ostensibly an established tradition in Oxford and Cambridge.

The next task is to retain and process the information.

Memory

Whilst in Tasmania, German was entertained by the convenor of the History of Medicine Conference. Her husband hailed from an expatriate English family in Antofagasta, Peru. It was quickly established much to their astonishment that German was well acquainted with their family tree through having read and memorised details of gravestones in the graveyard in Antofagasta, in his native Peru whilst waiting for the bus.

His prodigious memory abilities were routinely evident in his ability to recall chapter and verse from many of the texts in his personal library, not infrequently citing the page number. Obliquely, these mnemonic abilities were mirrored by several of his clinical interests, running specialist NHS clinics for memory disorders and for neuropsychiatric disorders in Cambridge.

These factors of linguistic capabilities, dedication of time, memory capacity and the contents of his personal library were all dedicated to the academic and clinical enterprise, but there was another key ingredient.

Fellowship

German embraced the social and intellectual opportunities of the Cambridge don with ready access to many fine minds and the constant stream of visitors and post-graduate students from around the world. As a fellow of Robinson College, he actively sought to provide residential sabbatical opportunities for visiting scholars. I was privileged to take up a Bye-fellowship at Robinson in 1993/1994 and enjoyed the intellectual stimulation of the senior common room. German also hosted regular ‘think tanks’ on the history of medicine and on neuropsychiatry, in his home surrounded by his book collection. These think tank meetings provided an avenue for sharing and critiquing ideas and hypotheses, methods and conclusions on a range of research topics with a mixed audience of postgraduate PhD students, academics and clinicians. His home hosted many visitors to Cambridge and he and Doris were an impressive team.

German was instrumental in cultivating links between Cambridge University and the University of Heidelberg, the respective Departments of Psychiatry enjoying reciprocal visits every few years. Having spent a previous sabbatical in Heidelberg, I was delighted to assist in organising the program for one of their visits to Cambridge.

Berrios’ international reach was such that most countries have a German Berrios story. Others can elaborate on his close ties to Hong Kong and to the Spanish-speaking world. I shall touch on his links to Australia.

Australian Connections

Before taking up his position in Cambridge, Berrios worked in Leeds with Max Hamilton who was influential in introducing approaches to psychopathology from Germany, particularly promulgating *Fish’s Clinical Psychopathology*. Leeds was also a leading centre of the debate about reactive versus endogenous depression, which enjoyed a strong following in Australia.

At Cambridge University, the Head of Psychiatry Martin Roth (1975–1985) and his successor the New Zealander Eugene Paykel were well connected to Australasian psychiatry and ensured a regular stream of academic visitors from the Antipodes.

During my sabbatical visit, I was cycling back from Addenbrooke’s Hospital to Robinson College over the backs when I spied Gordon Parker from Sydney bare-chested and wielding a punting pole on the Cam. He was visiting German, and we travelled as a threesome to a psychopathology conference in Leeds. It was a small world. A number of other Australian psychiatrists also had the opportunity of spending sabbaticals at Robinson College.

Sid Bloch who had previously held an academic post in psychotherapy in England and was prominently involved in the controversy regarding treatment of

dissidents in Russia recalled his regular early hours of communications with German and other academic night owls in the UK.

Rob Barrett from Adelaide, whom I first met over a long conversation about Johann Christian Heinroth at a suburban railway station, was fascinated by German's reputation as a polymath. Rob was himself a fascinating character, holding a joint chair in psychiatry and anthropology and given to wearing a pith helmet on his research forays in the rainforests of Borneo. Rob arranged for German to take up a visiting professorship at Adelaide University.

Assen Jablensky, who knew German from WHO days, invited German to speak on the topic of descriptive psychopathology at an RANZCP Congress in Perth, Western Australia. As was his custom, German made himself readily available to delegates and was enthusiastically received by the history and philosophy of psychiatry interest group.

The Pantheon

In modern usage a pantheon refers to 'The group of people or things most revered by an individual, nation, profession, etc.; a group of people particularly respected, famous, or otherwise significant in some capacity; a set of things having acknowledged value or importance' (Oxford English Dictionary).

As will be evident from this brief account, German Berrios has made an immense and in some respects unique contribution to psychiatry through his erudite and bounteous scholarship, his ability to communicate his enthusiasms to others whether in writing or in person, his prosocial links to colleagues throughout the world, his fostering of the work of others and his ongoing curiosity and thinking about the many unresolved issues in psychiatry. In a society preoccupied by the present, he gave weight and respect to the past; in his spare time, German would visit and tend the grave of Wittgenstein. Yet German defied definition. When he was nearing NHS retirement age, I recall him telling me to my surprise that his primary interest was in the mathematics of psychiatry. I am reminded of the hole in the roof, the oculus, of the pantheon in Rome, which lets the light in and connects to the cosmos; it is an enigma.

These recollections of my own association with German are fragments of a much larger story with many voices, experiences and dimensions. His place in the modern pantheon of psychiatry is assured, but more important is the challenge to take forwards his passion for engagement of self and others in understanding and discovery in the field of psychiatry.

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