



Original article

Reflexions on the relationships between history and psychiatry[☆]

Réflexions sur les rapports entre l'histoire et la psychiatrie

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Abstract

Objectives. – This article proposes a study on the relationships between history and psychiatry, by examining psychiatry in its history and by analysing the epistemological, clinical and methodological issues involved.

Method. – Three areas were explored: the relationships between the evolution psychiatric ideas and practices and the historical context from the 19th century to the present; the relationships between the epistemologies of psychiatry and history; and finally, the use of narrative in psychiatric care, particularly in institutional psychiatric care.

Results. – The study of its history shows that psychiatry, unlike other areas of medicine, does not evolve with an increase in knowledge. It accompanies social transformations and the history of ideas and is subjected to its own liberal breakthroughs and authoritarian withdrawals.

Discussion. – For the time being, psychiatry has more to gain from a convergence with the social sciences than with medicine or neurobiology. In line with Paul Veyne's epistemology, a number of common points can be identified: causality in psychiatry, as in history, is "retroductive". Diagnoses become abstractions, categories, temporary hypotheses that cannot have any claim to be factual values, unlike lesions in medicine.

Conclusions. – Psychiatry and history are based on the principles of narrative as set out by Paul Ricoeur. Narrative is the common denominator for all types of psychotherapeutic intervention, and it is in particular the basis of institutional psychotherapy. Clinical practice is inseparable from this narrative shared by both patient and carer, bringing with it the pleasure of thought and consolation for loss.

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Keywords: History of psychiatry; Psychiatry; Epistemology; Psychiatric care; Therapeutic narrative

[☆] To quote this article please use the French version. Hochmann J. Réflexions sur les rapports entre l'histoire et la psychiatrie. *Evol Psychiatr* 2017;82(3):469–81 (for the print version) or URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.evopsy.2017.02.007> [date of consultation] (for the electronic version).

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.evopsy.2017.08.001>

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Résumé

Objectifs. – Cet article propose une étude des rapports entre l'histoire et la psychiatrie, en abordant la psychiatrie dans son histoire et en analysant les enjeux épistémologiques, cliniques et méthodologiques qui les traversent.

Méthode. – Trois points sont envisagés: les rapports entre l'évolution des idées et des pratiques psychiatriques et le contexte historique depuis le début du XIX^e siècle à nos jours; les relations entre l'épistémologie de la psychiatrie et celle de l'histoire; enfin l'utilisation du récit dans le soin psychiatrique notamment institutionnel.

Résultats. – L'étude de son histoire montre qu'à l'opposé du reste de la médecine, la psychiatrie n'évolue pas selon une logique d'accroissement des connaissances. Elle accompagne les transformations sociales et l'histoire des idées, et est subordonnée à ses avancées libérales et à ses reflux autoritaires.

Discussion. – Pour le moment, la psychiatrie a plus à gagner d'un rapprochement avec les sciences humaines qu'avec la médecine et la neurobiologie. En suivant l'épistémologie de Paul Veyne, plusieurs points communs peuvent être identifiés: la psychiatrie et l'histoire sont l'une et l'autre basées sur l'événement singulier et non sur l'établissement de lois. La causalité en psychiatrie comme en histoire est « rétrodictive ». Les diagnostics sont des abstractions, des catégories, des hypothèses provisoires, qui ne peuvent prétendre à la valeur de fait comparable à la lésion en médecine.

Conclusions. – La psychiatrie comme l'histoire se fondent sur les principes de la narratologie, tels qu'ils ont été établis par Paul Ricoeur. La narratologie forme le point commun de toute intervention de type psychothérapeutique et elle constitue notamment les fondements de la psychothérapie institutionnelle. La clinique est inséparable de cette mise en récit partagée entre soignant et soigné, support à la fois du plaisir de penser et véhicule de la consolation des pertes.

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Mots clés : Histoire de la psychiatrie ; Épistémologie ; Psychiatrie ; Soins psychiatriques ; Récit thérapeutique

1. Introduction

Psychiatry has a number of relationships with history. It has evolved at least as much with the pace of the social context, on which it is dependent, as with the pace of scientific discoveries, which have been of minor importance. Unlike the rest of medicine, the history of psychiatry is not a progressive accumulation of knowledge. As with society, it has been punctuated by liberal breakthroughs and authoritarian withdrawals. Hence, history has some importance in understanding how psychiatry has evolved. In addition, it has a common epistemology with history, even if its purpose and methods are different. Finally, in practice, it widely uses methods whereby events affecting individuals are put into historical context. These are the three aspects we would like to discuss here.

2. Psychiatry and society: a perturbed history

Psychiatry was the first medical speciality. *Special medicine*, as one of its founders, Philippe Pinel, described it, was the first branch of medicine in France to have from the beginning of the 19th century a body of *special* doctors: the *alienists*. Stemming from a new view of the insane in the era of Enlightenment, which brought insanity closer to passion, assuming that alienated people

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