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Splitting and coming together:
A transdisciplinary approach to 'schizophrenia'

Abstract for 'History of Medicine in Practice' (Uppsala University, 26th-28th March 2014)

'Schizophrenia' - 'splitting of the mind': a mental illness; a term and metaphor to express deviance, contradiction and tension; a concept travelling between clinical, political and cultural discourses. What happens if one looks at 'schizophrenia' with the 'split mind(s)' of different disciplines?

In this presentation, we wish to give an overview of the transdisciplinary project "'Schizophrenia': reception, semantic shift and criticism of a concept in the 20th century.' The project, based in Zurich where in 1908, Eugen Bleuler introduced the term 'schizophrenia' into medical discourse, involves researchers not only from history and psychiatry, but also from linguistics, film studies and philosophy. It aims to provide an analysis of the reception of this powerful term and of its constant re-negotiation between clinical psychiatry and society.

Focusing on challenges as well as opportunities implied in transdisciplinary work, we will argue that transdisciplinarity in this area is a coming together of prima facie split perspectives and that this is the only way to tentatively grasp the meaning of 'schizophrenia' in its complexity. We will argue for example that (mental) illness needs to be contextualised culturally and historically. Moreover the power of technical and everyday language in shaping the reality of (mental) illness needs to be considered as well as the epistemological assumptions underlying nosological categories in psychiatry.

The split of perspectives regarding the content of 'schizophrenia' finds an equivalent in tensions between the different disciplinary approaches: theory encounters practice, experience distance, humanities (natural) science. We will suggest that only a combination of different methodological approaches, such as discourse analysis, corpus linguistics, phenomenological analysis, science studies and (neuro)scientific methods, can provide a nuanced picture of a complex phenomenon like 'schizophrenia'.

Thus supporting the relevance of transdisciplinary work, we will show in a final step how the latter productively challenges disciplinary conceptions of relevance itself.