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# Crazy Standards: The WHO and the Rise of Descriptive Psychiatry

JUN 2, 2022 · 15:00–16:30 · SEMINAR

14.2.151

**MENTAL HEALTH SERVICE**  
**Hospital Index Card 1 — Mental Disorder**  
(Confidential record for statistical purposes only)

**PART A. To be completed for all admissions**

1. Date of Admission and Birth Admission ... Day Mth. Year Birth ...		2. Hospital		3. Region		4. Patient's General Reference Number	
5. Surname (Block Capitals) Christian Names		6. Home Address		7. Sex Male 1 Female 2		8. Age (last birthday) at admission	
				9. Marital State Single 1 Married 2 Widowed 3 Judicially separated 4 Divorced 5 Not known V		10. Religion C of E 1 R.C. 2 Non-Con. 3 Jewish 4 Other 5 No religion 6 Not known V	
11. Status Vol. 1 Temp. 2 Cert. 3 Other 4		12. Type of Admission Direct 1 Transfer from Hospital 2 Single care 3		13. Classification Health Service 1 Private 2		14. Special Category None 1 Criminal 2 C.J. Act (Sec. 4) 3 C.J. Act (Sec. 24) 4	
				15. Previous Direct Admissions To this Hospital To other Hospitals This year Before this year Date of last previous admission to to this hospital:—		16. Occupation and Industry Patient's own 1 Other person's 2 None stated 3 A. Immediately before admission Occupation..... Industry..... B. Regular (if different from A) Occupation..... Industry..... Code Number (leave blank)	

Hospital Index Card 1 - Mental Disorder. (c) Hospital Index Cards: Their Evolution from 30 Dec 1947 to 3 Dec 1948. Carlos Paton Blaker Collection, Wellcome Collection, London, p.86.

Historians of psychiatry have often argued that the publication of DSM-III in 1980 was a revolutionary moment in the history of the discipline. By creating discrete mental disorder categories akin to the disease entities of other branches of medicine, DSM-III is presented as a historical rupture from psychoanalytic to descriptive understandings of mental illness. In this presentation I focus on an aspect of this history which has received considerably less attention, but which challenges this American-centered narrative. I argue that the resurgence of interest in a descriptive approach to the investigation of mental disorders began earlier than the established timeline suggests and that its origins were international. In the late 1950s, the WHO began creating universal standards for the epidemiological investigation of mental disorders. This reflected growing concerns over the reliability of mental hospital data, particularly for making comparisons between countries. Psychiatrists and statisticians inside the WHO attempted to resolve the reliability problem by developing a descriptive approach to the classification and diagnosis of mental disorders. This work was closely tied to revisions to the organization's own classification, the ICD, and to groundbreaking epidemiological inquiries such as the International Pilot Study of Schizophrenia (1968). Preceding and, in fact, informing the revisions in DSM-III, these events form a crucial historical backdrop to the growing international dominance of descriptive psychiatry in the latter twentieth century.

This research seminar is hosted by the *Bordeaux-Berlin Working Group on Translating Validity in Psychiatric Research* and brings together historians, philosophers, psychiatrists and biomedical researchers.

The seminar series is open to all. To receive the zoom link, please email Birgitta von Mallinckrodt (officekeuck@mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de).