

# Delusions

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## Understanding the Un-understandable

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Dedicated to the memory of Richard Marley, my  
commissioning editor at Cambridge University  
Press ... for encouraging me to write the book in the  
first place.

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## Preface

To a significant extent, this book came about as a result of a series of encounters with different people, the majority of which occurred by chance.

The first and the least random encounter was with my editor at Cambridge University Press Richard Marley. Sometime after a colleague, Tomasina Oh, and I had written a book that he had handled, he and I were talking casually about a possible next project. At some point in the conversation he said something along the lines of, 'What about a book on delusions?'

A year or so later, having just moved to an academic job in Glasgow, and still labouring under the delusion that universities valued output in the form of books (which actually come a distant third after grants and papers in high-impact journals, at least in medical faculties), I sat down to write an outline for such a book. Then I sat down to do it again two or three more times. Each time it seemed flat; the more I wrote, the more I felt I was committing myself to a stodgy review of a large set of experimental psychological studies which had had less than electrifying findings.

What propelled the book forward during this period was a meeting with a psychiatrist colleague, Millia Begum. She asked for my comments on a review article she had nearly finished on an uncommon disorder, the olfactory reference syndrome. In Cambridge, I had previously been a regular attendee at meetings that the distinguished historian of psychiatry, German Berrios, used to hold in his home, and from him I had learnt that the only way to really advance knowledge on uncommon disorders was to do a systematic review of all the reported cases in the world literature. It took us two years and Millia had to make several trips to Barcelona, where I had since moved to, but we finally managed to do this. Her enthusiasm (and our many arguments) rekindled an interest I had had thirty years ago in the distinction between delusions and overvalued ideas. She also introduced me to the knots DSM-IV was tying itself in over the classification of body dysmorphic disorder (not resolved in DSM-5). So if nothing else, this book owes a debt of gratitude to her.

Some time in 2012, it occurred to me that the best way to deal with the problems of a book on delusions was to try and write a draft of it and see how it looked. By then I had been working in Barcelona for four years and had met with the next person in the chain, Victor Vicens. He had the idea of doing an imaging study of delusional disorder, something I was sceptical about given that it is such an uncommon disorder. He also kept telling me that many such patients showed comorbidity with major affective disorder, something I was if anything even more sceptical about. I was half-right about the former – it took us several years to find and scan 22 patients with delusional disorder – and completely wrong about the latter. The relationship with affective disorder, which is almost one that dare not speak its name (it is referred without any explanation in DSM-III-R through DSM-5 and in ICD-10), made me think that someone ought to at least try and say something about the existence and implications of the association.

This brings me to the last encounter, which really was completely by chance. Wolfram Hinzen, a philosopher and linguist, came to work in Barcelona on an international fellowship. I will never forget our first meeting, where he explained to me how he thought formal thought disorder was definitely due to a problem with grammar. Since Tomasina Oh

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and I had argued strongly in our previous Cambridge University Press book that syntax was not affected in patients with the symptom, this was not exactly what I wanted to hear. Fortunately, it turned out that what he meant by grammar was something deeper and more wide ranging than syntax, so honour was satisfied. Together with another colleague, Joana Rosselló, we went on to have an extended series of discussions about delusions in the tapas bars (and sometimes just the bars) of Barcelona. It is fair to say that without Wolfram’s input, what this book says on dopamine and the salience theory would have been considerably less thought through than it is, and I probably wouldn’t have been able to say anything much at all about several issues raised in the final chapter.

Other people who deserve thanks are Tony David for discussions about delusions and pointing me to Gray’s response to Kapur’s article on aberrant salience, and more importantly for being one of the editors of the journal *Cognitive Neuropsychiatry*, without which the literature on delusions would be considerably poorer. While I was in Glasgow I also met Sammy Jauhar, who I went on to collaborate with and who has been a continual source of support, not to mention getting hold of many papers and book chapters that I couldn’t access. Benedikt Amann was kind enough to translate Wernicke’s original writing on over-valued ideas. Last but not least, three years or so ago, I started spending some of my time in Yorkshire, coincidentally about 20 minutes’ drive from the British Library Document Store in Boston Spa. This has a reading room with very friendly staff, who repeatedly went out of their way to help me get the papers that not even Sammy Jauhar could access. *Israel Annals of Psychiatry and Allied Disciplines* in the 1960s – no problem!

So, eight years after I first started thinking about it, I finally sent Richard Marley an outline of a book on delusions. He was gracious enough to approve it. Sadly, he did not live to see the final product, as he died prematurely in 2016.

The book does not work towards a theory of delusions. Instead I have tried to tell a story which has various themes that overlap without interlocking particularly. Nor should the fact that the penultimate chapter is on the salience theory be taken to imply that I think this is more important than other approaches to delusions (though I admit to having a certain weakness for it). In the end, writing the book turned out to be a more interesting exercise than I anticipated. At any rate, I hope the result isn’t too stodgy.