



A MINOR EPIPHANY
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I arrived in Berlin with a plan, an expectation, and a wish. The plan was to finish a book on the history of traumatic memory. The expectation was that I would progress toward finishing the book, but would fall short of completing it. The wish was for an epiphany, an insight into my subject that would turn my tired old *Gestalt* inside out. When I left the

Wissenschaftskolleg ten months later, I had fulfilled my expectation and obtained one epiphany.

My project at the Wissenschaftskolleg focused on the efforts by researchers to provide a biological basis for a problematic psychiatric diagnostic classification, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In a book published in 1995, I described the difficulties that researchers were experiencing in producing facts (results that meet the prevailing standards, such as statistical significance). PTSD researchers and their audiences are committed to the epistemology of Popperian falsificationism. They see themselves as starting with conjectures, then translating them into falsifiable hypotheses, and then rejecting the hypotheses that consistently failed to pass the test. I was confident that the situation circa 1995 – i.e., the researchers' chronic failure to meet their own standards – was temporary. Researchers would soon succeed in creating a “harmony of illusions”; their technologies, raw materials (mainly patient populations), ideas, and outcomes would be made to mesh. Knowledge production would shift from substandard findings to making facts.

By 2002, the predicted transformation had failed to materialize. But researchers and clinicians had not lost faith in the validity of PTSD. On the contrary, PTSD had become one of the most commonly diagnosed psychiatric disorders worldwide and remained a subject of intense research. There are economic, psychological, and social incentives that explain why clinicians, patients, and researchers would want to retain this classification even though the research findings are inconclusive. In these circumstances, could one conclude that researchers and their readers nonchalantly ignored the problems and inconsistencies that seem obvious to an outsider (me)? The conclusion is implausible. Hence my pleasure when the epiphany occurred.

What was the epiphany? – that the researchers' attempts to explain their ambiguous and initially disappointing results were essential to the process of making facts. My mistake had been to assume that researchers were in the business of producing, culling, and accumulating facts and that the self-vindicating narratives that they appended to their publications were ancillary to the knowledge-making enterprise.

The epiphany took place seven months after my arrival at the Wissenschaftskolleg and just in time for the paper I presented at the Tuesday colloquium. The path to enlightenment was cleared with the help of the handful of scholars who share my interests in epistemology. My greatest debt is to Martin Kusch, a Wiko Fellow and a first-class philosopher of science. Throughout our first months at the Kolleg, we exchanged manuscripts and debated our respective positions. (The debates were rather one-sided.) Martin was generous

with his own time and also introduced me to a helpful discussion group based at the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy (BBA), under the direction of Mitchell Asch.

I had already known two researchers at the Max Planck Institute (MPI) for the History of Science, Michael Hamner and Cornelius Borck, and I was delighted to renew our association. Through Martin Kusch, I also met a superb historian of psychiatry, Andreas Mayer, also at the MPI. During the year, I spent many happy and informative hours with Andreas.

Soon after my arrival in Berlin, I was contacted by colleagues at the Free University (FU Berlin) and the Humboldt University. By December, my circle of contacts in Berlin greatly expanded, and I accepted invitations to numerous conferences and workshops related to my own project.

I subsequently presented papers at the MPI, BBA, and the FU Berlin. David Becker (FU Berlin) invited me to a plenary paper at an international conference, held near Wiesbaden and organized by a trauma studies network based in Hamburg. And during the spring, I gave talks at the Universities of Tel Aviv, Naples, Perugia, and Rome.

To this fairly full schedule, there were the events taking place within the Wissenschaftskolleg. I was not a member of any of the weekly working groups at the Kolleg, but I attended nearly all of the workshops and seminars that were organized by these groups. The sessions organized by Martin Kusch (philosophy of science) and Sheila Jasanoff (science studies) were predictably the most relevant to my own work.

The Kolleg generously agreed to host two scholars at my request – a forensic psychiatrist and a historian. Their visit was of inestimable value to me and no doubt contributed significantly to the little epiphany mentioned a moment ago.

While on the subject of epiphanies, I must not forget our daily lunches. These were most welcomed occasions, not only for the excellent food and cheerful ambiance of the Kolleg's dining room, but also because they provided one with the opportunity to hear Fellows (especially the scientists) talk casually about their work.

Thursday night dinners were altogether different occasions. They were welcomed because they were beyond the reach of anthropology and epistemology. One could enjoy an unreflective fellowship (when seated with certain jolly Fellows and charming partners) together with delicious German white wines, without fear of being asked to explain how, in the course of hominid evolution, our predecessors had come to prefer this condition over other possibilities (e.g., murder, mayhem, self-reflective inquiry) and how the preference for convivial chatter and Riesling translated into a reproductive advantage.