HISTORICAL PAPER

MALINGERING AND RETROGRADE AMNESIA: THE HISTORIC CASE OF THE COLLEGNO AMNESIC

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Abstract

Assessment of feigned cognitive disorders is an important field of neuropsychology because of its applications to forensic settings. Strategies for detecting malingering in amnesia are available for anterograde amnesia. Less attention has been given to malingering in retrograde amnesia. The case of the 'Smemorato di Collegno' (The Collegno Amnesic) is probably the most famous case of malingered retrograde amnesia ever known in Italy. In 1926, a man who appeared to have lost all his autobiographical memories and identity spent nearly a year in the Collegno asylum of Turin without a name. He was later initially identified as Giulio Canella, Director of the 'Scuola Normale di Verona' who had disappeared during the war in 1916. He was suspected of later identified as being Mario Bruneri, a petty crook from Turin who played the part of an amnesic whose retrograde memory gradually returned. A lengthy investigation was required before this conclusion was reached. Several clinicians and renowned academics evaluated the case, but only Alfredo Coppola, diagnosed "malingered retrograde amnesia" using a method that was extremely innovative for the times. The aim of the present paper is to review the original cognitive evaluation and the strategies used for malingering detection in the "Collegno case". The outcome of the case is then discussed in the light of present-day forensic neuropsychology and the level of advancement of mental examination achieved in the 1920s in Europe is highlighted.

Key words: Collegno's amnesic, retrograde amnesia, malingering amnesia

Introduction

Psychological symptoms are also called subjective symptoms, as their documentation relies directly or indirectly on the subject's report of internal mental states or behaviour. Subjective symptoms which can be faked include cognitive and behavioural symptoms. The issue of malingering or "faking" of mental symptoms comes up in a number of legal contexts, including but not limited to criminal cases involving competency, insanity, or diminished capacity; personal injury cases; worker's compensation claims; and Social Security Disability claims.

As clinical evaluation of malingering is inaccurate (e.g., Rawling, 1992; Sweet, 1999), contemporary forensic neuropsychology is faced with the problem of devising techniques allowing the detection of faked cognitive disorders, and this problem has been addressed extensively in the last few years. Most of these techniques have been developed to detect malingering in anterograde amnesia (e.g., Bolan et al., 2002); fewer investigations address the issue of malingering in retrograde amnesia and the optimal strategies for its detection.

Here we report a historic case of malingered pure retrograde amnesia, known in Italy as the "Collegno amnesic" case (see also Della Sala et al., 1996), which may be considered interesting for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is an old, well-documented and intriguing malingering case; secondly it may be used to depict the state-of-the-art of malingering detection strategies as they were available to the European scientific community in the 1920s. To anticipate our conclusions, unsuspected sophisticated cognitive assessment strategies were available to European forensic experts more than 70 years ago, but were rediscovered and investigated only many decades later. More specifically, this sophistication spans from cognitive tests to methods for detecting feigned cognitive disorders, particularly feigned retrograde amnesia.

The Story of the "Collegno Amnesic"

On 10 March 1926, an unknown man of the apparent age of 45 was admitted to the Collegno asylum in Turin. He was taken there by the police after being arrested by the guardian of the Turin Jewish Cemetery while attempting to steal a copper vase from a tomb. The man was unable to give his name, refused to answer any questions and, without any document, could not be identified. He became violent and tried to throw himself down the stairs and beat his head against the wall. The police doctor diagnosed "symptoms of mental alienation with suicidal intentions'' and recommended urgent admittance to the asylum. Upon being admitted to

† Died on 17 July 2002.

Fig. 1 – *Photos of the amnesic published in Italian newspapers.*

Fig. 2 – *Photos of Prof. Canella during his time in the Italian Army.*

the Collegno Asylum, he was found to be: "anxious, confused, amnesic, negativist, very depressed, and emotional". Nothing abnormal was found at neurological examination.

The man's mental status progressively improved, and after a while he had adapted perfectly to the lifestyle of the asylum. He established good relations with the other patients, nurses and doctors, and took up gardening and reading. However, a complete amnesia concerning his past life remained unchanged for a full year.

In February 1927, the asylum published his photograph in the "Domenica del Corriere" and the "Illustrazione del Popolo", two popular weeklies, in the hope that someone would be able to recognise him (see Figure 1).

Many people responded and some even went to visit the man. Among these was Prof. Renzo Canella, who had noticed a certain resemblance between the amnesic and his brother Giulio, Professor of Philosophy at the 'Scuola Normale di Verona', reported missing on the Macedonian war front in 1916 while serving as a captain (see Figure 2).

The unknown man was later visited by many friends and relatives of the missing professor. After these visits, the amnesic started recovering lacunar memories which more and more closely identified him with the missing Prof. Canella. He finally met

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