

Lisa Bortolotti on clinical delusions

Dr Lisa Bortolotti discusses her research.

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My name is Lisa Bortolotti and I'm a Senior Lecturer in Philosophy in the University of Birmingham.

I've been at Birmingham for about five years and during this time my research has been primarily on the nature of clinical delusions. Delusions are a symptom of some psychiatric disorders, for instance schizophrenia, and they are normally characterised as irrational beliefs.

So for instance a person who thinks that his colleagues are hostile to him and are trying to get him fired without any good reason might have a delusion of persecution. Or a person who thinks her partner is being unfaithful to her without having any real reason to believe that then is becoming kind of obsessed with that idea might have a delusion of jealousy.

But some delusions are actually much more bizzare, than persecution and jealousy. So, some people think that they are dead, other people think that their spouse has been replaced by an impostor, maybe an alien abductor, or a clone. Now especially in the case of these latter delusions which are... people think more bizzare, people think that they are really different from ordinary beliefs.

A point in my research is really to argue that they're not so different from ordinary beliefs, and even when delusions are irrational, they are irrational in much the same way which ordinary beliefs can be irrational. For instance, they may be inconsistent with other things that we believe, they may be badly supported by evidence, or they may not be revised in the light of new evidence against the content of the belief. And if we are thinking about prejudice beliefs for instance, or superstitious beliefs, they seem to be irrational in these ways.

So, what I want to argue in my research is that delusions and irrational beliefs are of the more normal or generic kind, are really continuous. There is continuity between them. And I think this is quite important. It's important for philosophers because we're interested in how the human mind works.

And so we're interested in what makes the processes of belief formation working properly and what makes them deviate from normal functioning. But its also important for medicine because depending on what we think that delusions are, treatment of peoples' suffering from delusions might change.