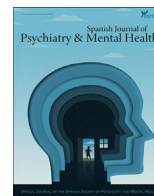




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From Cajal's Desk

### Julio Vallejo: The sovereignty of symptoms in psychiatry

Virginia Soria<sup>a,b,c,\*</sup>, José Manuel Menchón<sup>b,d,e</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Adult Mental Health Department, Hospital Universitari Parc Taulí, Institut d'Investigació i Innovació Parc Taulí (I3PT-CERCA), Sabadell, Barcelona, Spain

<sup>b</sup> Centro de Investigación Biomédica en Red de Salud Mental (CIBERSAM), Instituto de Salud Carlos III, Madrid, Spain

<sup>c</sup> Department of Psychiatry and Legal Medicine, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Bellaterra, Barcelona, Spain

<sup>d</sup> Hospital Universitari de Bellvitge-Bellvitge Biomedical Research Institute (IDIBELL), L'Hospitalet de Llobregat, Barcelona, Spain

<sup>e</sup> Department of Clinical Sciences, Universitat de Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain

Julio Vallejo Ruiloba (Barcelona, May 7, 1945–Barcelona, January 14, 2019) was a psychiatrist whose influence on the field of mental health, particularly within Spain and Latin America, remains profound. As a physician, academic, and leader, his contributions to psychiatry spanned clinical practice, research, and education. With 56 books and over 350 scientific articles to his name, Julio Vallejo's work, especially in depression and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), has left a lasting legacy.

#### Early life and education

Julio Vallejo began his medical journey at the University of Barcelona, graduating with a degree in medicine in 1969. His passion for understanding the complexities of the mind led him to specialize in psychiatry by 1971. By 1978, he had completed his doctorate from the same institution. His academic career soared when he became a Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Barcelona in 1980, a role that allowed him to mentor countless students and future psychiatrists. In 1996, he was appointed as a full professor, solidifying his reputation as an academic leader.

#### Professional career and impact

Julio Vallejo's professional career was marked by key roles at several prestigious institutions. He began as a psychiatrist at the Hospital Universitari Vall d'Hebrón in Barcelona from 1972 to 1977. His tenure as clinical chief at the Hospital Clínic de Barcelona from 1980 to 1989 was significant, allowing him to bridge clinical practice with academic research. In 1989, he became the head of the Psychiatry Department at the Hospital Universitari de Bellvitge, a position he held until 2008. His leadership advanced psychiatric care, integrating innovative research findings into everyday clinical practice.

#### Focus on depression and melancholic depression

Julio Vallejo's work on depression, particularly melancholic depression, was groundbreaking. He strongly advocated for distinguishing melancholic depression as a unique category from other forms of depression. His focus on melancholia stemmed from a belief that this specific type of depression required tailored treatment approaches. By promoting melancholic depression as a distinct entity, he contributed to a deeper understanding of the disorder and influenced treatment protocols to better address its unique characteristics.

Melancholic depression, characterized by profound sadness, lack of pleasure in almost all activities, altered circadian rhythms and physical symptoms such as weight loss and psychomotor retardation, had been somewhat overshadowed by other types of depression in psychiatric discourse and the dimensional vs categorical debate on the nature of depression. Julio Vallejo's work renewed focus on this form of depression, emphasizing its biological underpinnings and the necessity for specific treatment approaches. His previous research also included the study of circadian variations of the serotonin reuptake sites in delusional and non-delusional melancholic depression, suggesting that delusional depressions might have a different neurobiological substrate with loss of chronobiological rhythms.<sup>1</sup> His advocacy for this distinction in clinical practice remains influential, particularly in Spanish psychiatry, where his insights continue to guide treatment approaches.

#### Contributions to obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)

In addition to his work on depression, Julio Vallejo was also a recognized authority on OCD. His interest in OCD was deeply influenced by his mentor, Dr. Santiago Montserrat-Esteve, who instilled in him a rigorous approach to understanding and treating this complex condition. Julio Vallejo often spoke of Montserrat-Esteve with great respect, highlighting his mentor's serious demeanor and deep knowledge. This influence is evident in Julio Vallejo's dedication to OCD research throughout his career.

Julio Vallejo's commitment to OCD was further evidenced by his decision to include a chapter written by Montserrat-Esteve

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [virginia.soria@uab.cat](mailto:virginia.soria@uab.cat) (V. Soria).

in all editions of his book *Estados Obsesivos*.<sup>2</sup> As President of the National Association for Obsessive-Compulsive Disorders (ATOC) from 2001 onwards, Julio Vallejo played a pivotal role in raising awareness and promoting research on OCD in Spain. His clinical work and research provided significant insights into the disorder, particularly in understanding the psychological and neurobiological mechanisms underlying OCD.

### Clinical trials in psychopharmacology

Julio Vallejo's contributions to psychiatry extended beyond clinical and theoretical work; he was also actively involved in psychopharmacological research, especially concerning melancholic depression and OCD. His work in this area emphasized the importance of pharmacological treatments, such as monoamine oxidase inhibitors (MAOIs), which he found particularly effective for these conditions, as effective as imipramine for melancholic depression<sup>3</sup> and as clomipramine for OCD.<sup>4</sup> His work in this area further solidified his reputation as a leading figure in psychopharmacology, particularly in the treatment of complex and treatment-resistant mental health conditions.

### The sovereignty of clinical symptoms: the need of refining descriptive psychopathology

Professor Julio Vallejo frequently emphasized that “clinical symptoms are sovereign”, highlighting the essential role of psychopathology in clinical practice. He consistently underscored the importance of precise clinical symptom profiling and a detailed understanding of psychopathological concepts to maintain the integrity of psychiatric diagnosis and guide the treatments in an effective manner amidst evolving diagnostic criteria.

Julio Vallejo's work also underscored the importance of refining descriptive psychopathology and maintaining diagnostic precision (Vallejo, 2007). He advocated for a clearer delineation of symptoms within diagnostic categories and emphasized the need to better define clinical elements to enhance diagnostic accuracy. For instance, he promoted the differentiation of genuine obsessive thoughts in OCD from other obsessive-like symptoms (“*obsesivoide*”) in the OCD spectrum. This approach aligns with the critique of current diagnostic systems, which have been criticized for their lax criteria and the resulting increase in comorbidity.

Furthermore, Julio Vallejo's clinical and research work highlighted the necessity of integrating biological and clinical data. He stressed that future research should focus on providing more specific biological insights into mental disorders, moving beyond vague categorizations to address concrete symptoms and potential subgroups within each disorder. This approach would help clarify the role of biological, psychological, and social factors in the onset and progression of psychiatric conditions.

Julio Vallejo's work also addressed the issues of comorbidity and the imprecise use of spectrum concepts in psychiatric diagnoses. He was critical of how current diagnostic practices often result in unclear etiopathogenic and therapeutic directions due to an overemphasis on excessive comorbidity and ambiguous spectrum classifications. He advocated for a more rigorous and precise use of these terms to prevent confusion and ensure clearer diagnostic and therapeutic guidelines.

### A prolific writer and communicator

Julio Vallejo was known not only for his prolific writing but also for his exceptional communication skills. He had an incredible ability to convey his ideas clearly and effectively, whether

through his writings or during his lectures. His books and articles were often written by hand with minimal need for corrections, a testament to his clarity of thought and mastery of the subject matter. This high divulgative activity led him to write and lead a very well known educational textbook, “*Introducción a la Psicopatología y la Psiquiatría*” (“Introduction to Psychopathology and Psychiatry”), with eight editions between 1980 and 2015,<sup>5</sup> which has been widely used in Medical and Psychology schools.

As a lecturer, he was in high demand. His talks often drew large audiences eager to hear his insights. He had a unique talent for making complex ideas accessible and engaging, often using humour in an elegant and lively manner. His ability to connect with his audience, combined with his deep knowledge of psychiatry, made him one of the most respected and beloved figures in the field.

### Influence and mentorship

Julio Vallejo was more than just a brilliant psychiatrist; he was a mentor and role model to many. His accessible and sociable nature made him a popular figure among his peers and students. He had a profound influence on those who worked with him, fostering a school of psychiatry that emphasized the combination of scientific knowledge with clinical practice. His teachings and mentorship have left a lasting impact on numerous professionals in the field, many of whom continue to carry forward his legacy in their own work.

His passion for life extended beyond psychiatry. One of his great loves was tango, reflecting his vibrant personality and zest for life. This passion for music, like his work, demonstrated his ability to find joy and meaning in both the professional and personal aspects of life.

### Legacy and lasting impact

Julio Vallejo's legacy is one of innovation, compassion, and dedication to the field of psychiatry. His work on melancholic depression and OCD has had a lasting impact on how these conditions are understood and treated. His contributions to psychiatric education, particularly through his textbooks and lectures, have shaped the careers of countless professionals.

Julio Vallejo's influence extended beyond his immediate circle of colleagues and students. His leadership roles in various psychiatric organizations, as past president of the Spanish Society of Psychiatry and the Spanish Society of Biological Psychiatry, allowed him to shape the direction of psychiatric research and practice in Spain. Additionally, he was an academician of the Royal Academy of Medicine of Catalonia and past president of the Catalan Society of Psychiatry. His emphasis on clinical symptoms as sovereign in understanding mental health conditions has left an indelible mark on the field, ensuring that his insights and approaches continue to inform and guide future generations of psychiatrists.

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