Interdisciplinary Workshop on Pain Narratives and Patient Identity

Subversive Suffering: Pain and Patient Identity in Ancient and Modern Autobiographies

Friday, 28 June 2019, 10.00-18.30
Arthur West Room, 8-11 Abercromby Square, University of Liverpool, L69 7WZ

Jusepe de Ribera’s Studies of the Nose and Mouth, a detailed study of a mouth screaming in pain, circa 1622. Source: Wikipedia Commons.

Confirmed Speakers:

Dr Josie Billington (English, University of Liverpool),
Prof. Paul Dieppe (Exeter Medical School, Exeter)
Prof. Brian Hurwitz (Centre for Humanities and Health, King’s College London),
Dr Ciara Kierans (Public Health and Policy, University of Liverpool),
Dr Daniel King (Classics and Ancient History, University of Exeter),
Prof. Christian Laes (Ancient History, University of Antwerp/Manchester).
Dr Georgia Petridou (Archaeology, Classics and Ancient History, University of Liverpool),
Prof. Katharina Waldner (History of Religions, University of Erfurt)
Recent developments in medical anthropology and sociology (e.g.: Throop 2010; Bell, Kierans, and Kingdon 2016), patient history (e.g.: Petridou and Thumiger 2016), pain history (e.g.: Cobb 2017, King 2018, Waldner 2019), and pain management (Billington, J., Farrington, G., Lampropoulou, S. et al. 2017) have emphasised the mutually productive relationship between physical and psychological suffering, illness and communication. Autobiographical representations of pain from the ancient world point to a process in which individuals continually renegotiate and revise their understandings of their experiences in light of their evolving personal history and the need to create different meanings for, and understandings of, pain and illness. Analogous conclusions about the polyvalence and the centrality of pain in signifying and subverting meaning for both the patient and their healthcare provider have also emerged from recent developments in narrative based medicine (e.g.: Charon 2006; Hurwitz & Spinozzi 2011; Hurwitz and Charon 2013). The workshop brings together ancient and the modern pain narratives and explores, in particular, the ways in which pain offers individuals the capacity to revise and transform their understanding of themselves, their experiences, and their relationships with others. This mutually productive relationship, we maintain, leads to different understandings of pain and individual identity, but it also stretches the boundaries of narrative, leading to new and different ways to effective communicate what one experiences.


This event is supported by the Centre for the Humanities and Social Sciences of Health, Medicine and Technology, University of Liverpool and the A. G. Leventis Foundation through the Leventis Initiative in the Impact of Greek Culture at Exeter University.

There is no fee for this event, which is open to all. If you are planning to attend, please contact the organisers: Daniel King D.King@exeter.ac.uk and Georgia Petridou Georgia.Petridou@liv.ac.uk
Programme

10.00-10.15 Arrival and Coffee/Tea

10.15-10.30 Welcome and Introduction (DK and GP)

Panel 1: Pain Narratives and ‘I’ narratives: Intricacies and Complexities

Chair: Fiona Hobden (Classics and Ancient History, Liverpool)

10.30-11.00 Josie Billington, ‘Literary Narrative and the Experience of Pain’

11.00-11.30 Daniel King, ‘Something to write home about: pain in the letters of Fronto and Marcus Aurelius’

11.30-12.00 Katharina Waldner, ‘Pain, Suffering and Identity in Christian and Jewish Martyrdom of the 2nd century CE’

12.00-12.30 Discussion

12.30-13.30 Buffet Lunch

Panel 2: Subversive Suffering and Subversive Treatment

Chair: Kimberly Plomp (Palaeoarchaeology, Liverpool)

13.30-14.00 Paul Dieppe, ‘Pain, Placebos, and the ‘Meaning Response’

14.00-14.30 Christian Laes, ‘Most subversive suffering: pain and the reversal of roles in Graeco-Roman Antiquity’

14.30-15.00 Ciara Kierans, Public Health and Policy, ‘Subversive Suffering: Kidneys, Regimes of Care and the State in Mexico’

15.00-15.30 Discussion

15.30 16.00 Coffee/Tea Break

Panel 3: Subverting Pain and Signifying Power

Chair: Matthew FitzJohn (Archaeology and Classics, Liverpool)

16.00-16.30 Brian Hurwitz, ‘The Proximity of Pain to Epistemic Switches in Clinical Cases’

16.30-17.00 Georgia Petridou, ‘Subversive Suffering and the Sacred in Aelius Aristides’ Sacred Discourses’

17.00-17.30 Discussion

17.30-18.00 Round-Table Discussion (Chair: DK and GP)

18.30 Dinner for Speakers and Chairs http://www.therefinery-liverpool.co.uk/

The Refinery, Josephine Butler Building, Hope St, Liverpool L1 9BQ.
Dr Josie Billington, English, University of Liverpool

**Literary Narrative and the Experience of Pain**

This presentation is concerned with the power of literary narrative to turn the passive experience of suffering emotion into articulate contemplation of painful matter. It is based on empirical research showing that literary reading can alleviate mental and physical health symptoms, and can do so more effectively than standard ‘talk’ therapies. Specific examples will demonstrate literature’s capacity to ‘find’ hidden or implicit pain at its personal-emotional source, as an involuntary (rather than intended or programmatic) therapeutic outcome.

Prof. Paul Dieppe, University of Exeter Medical School, University of Exeter

**Pain, Placebos, and the ‘Meaning Response’**

Placebo is the best treatment we have for chronic pain; studies show that some 70% of the effect of most conventional treatments for pain can be attributed to the placebo component of the intervention. But what is a placebo and how does the placebo effect work? Whilst we know a lot about that, we understand very little of it. One approach, put forward by Dan Moerman, an American anthropologist, is that the placebo effect should be called the ‘meaning response’, because what is going on in any health care intervention is the opportunity to reframe the meaning of symptoms in your life. The meaning response is facilitated in part, by being able to tell your story. This presentation will discuss these issues, using patient’s stories.

Prof. Brian Hurwitz, Centre for Humanities and Health, King’s College London

**The Proximity of Pain to Epistemic Switches in Clinical Cases**

This paper notices the proximity of pain to switches in perspective and understanding recounted in clinical cases. It examines the role of observation, inference, imagination and deception in depicting dramatic epistemic shifts in understanding clinical phenomena, and asks whether pain as a symptom carries special significance and meaning in heralding sudden changes in recognition within ancient and modern cases.

Dr Ciara Kierans, Public Health and Policy, University of Liverpool

**Subversive Suffering: Kidneys, Regimes of Care and the State in Mexico**

In Mexico, the kidneys of poor and marginalised communities are failing with little warning and no explanation. Commonly referred to as Chronic Kidney Disease of Unknown Origin (CKDu), this new variant of kidney disease has been described as a ‘medical enigma’. CKDu cannot be accounted for in conventional aetiological terms but is variously held to be a consequence of aggressive economic development, environmental degradation and precarious working and living conditions. The suffering that this engenders is made much worse by profound challenges in accessing technological care particularly for those families with minimal social entitlement and protection. As they carry the costs (moral, social and economic) and the burden of care, the practices of Mexican patients and their families offer a critical vantage point from which to assess the dynamic interplay between the state, the market and the sick body, subverting ideas of care and cure in the process.
Dr Daniel King, Classics and Ancient History, University of Exeter

**Something to write home about: pain in the letters of Fronto and Marcus Aurelius**

This paper explores the relationship between narrative form and pain experience by exploring the way in which Fronto and Marcus Aurelius discuss gout symptoms in their letters to each other. By focussing on the letters, we will not only be able to see the relationship between the epistolary form—with all its brevity, fragmentation, and play on absence and presence—and painful experience. We will see to what extent this communicative form helps subvert other contemporary ways of expressing pain or constructing the meaning of pain symptoms. We will also be able to see the relationship constructed in these texts, revealing how painful experience connects different individuals, often separated by time and place, helping to shape communal or joint understandings of pain?

Prof. Chistian Laes, Ancient History, University of Antwerp/University of Manchester

**Most subversive suffering: pain and the reversal of roles in Graeco-Roman Antiquity**

This paper asks whether Graeco-Roman culture bears any traces of a sort of voluntary indulging in pain and punishment as a form of sexual game. In order to answer such question, the context of slavery and the use of violence in education needs to be acknowledged first. After this, I look for traces in ceremonies, iconography, love poetry, and role playing by children. More than a century ago, scholars have already tried to identify sadomasochism in Antiquity. Though such is surely an anachronistic approach, a careful inquiry of pain and reversal of roles can reveal vital features of ancient society.

Dr Georgia Petridou, Classics and Ancient History, University of Liverpool

**Subversive Pain and the Sacred in Aelius Aristides’ Sacred Discourses**

This paper brings home the power and the predicaments of first-person illness narratives by revisiting Aelius Aristides’ Sacred Discourses (Hieroi Logoi). In the five extant books and fragments of a sixth, Aristides details his struggles with multiple bouts of illness and pain, and describes the privileged relationship he established with the healing deity Asclepius. Despite using traditional discourses widely attested in both the literature and epigraphy of the second century CE (in particular, aretalogical discourse, healing pilgrimage narratives, and medical paradoxography), Aristides succeeds in emphasising his exceptional status as a divinely inspired *scriptor*. This paper argues that the main rhetorical strategy that drives home Aristides’ exceptionality is the anchoring of his physical and emotional suffering onto the sacred, in general, and the mapping of his medical experience at the temple of Asclepius in Pergamum onto the language of the mysteries, in particular. In that sense, Aristides is not far off modern registers of human suffering, which strive to find salvational orientations to loss, illness, and death.

Prof. Katharina Waldner, History of Religions, University of Erfurt

**Pain, Suffering and Identity in Christian and Jewish Martyrdom of the 2nd century CE**

The letters of Ignatius of Antioch, the Martyrdom of Polycarp and 4 Maccabees were probably all produced in the 2nd century Imperial Greek Culture of Asia Minor. They share the idea of enduring torture and even death as a mean to “impersonate” (Tim Whitmarsh) religious
authority and identity in a very intensive way. I will argue that these texts differ in a highly interesting way when it comes to the description of pain and bodily sufferings of their protagonists. Whereas the Christian martyrs show a kind of “dissociative identity” which allows them to impersonate or perform immortal bodies to overcome the pains of torture and the fear of death, their Jewish counterparts practice “pious rationality” (eusebēs logismós) to overcome the pāthe (“affects”) with the same result. It can be shown that both strategies form part of a broader discourse on pain, suffering and the body analysed by Daniel King in his monograph on Experiencing Pain in Imperial Greek Culture. The authors of the Jewish-Christian martyrdom accounts use this discourse to construct in a new way christianismós and iudaismós as religious (and not only ethnic) identities.