

Roundtable at SLSAeu 2017 Conference Empathies

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University of Basel, Kollegienhaus, Friday, 23 June, 16.30-18:30

Empathy and Self-Control in the Temporo-Parietal Junction and in the Structures of Narrative Fiction

This roundtable will explore the connections between empathy and self-control in human consciousness and in the structures of narrative fiction. The role of empathy in human behavior and in narrative fiction has been explored both fruitfully and controversially by cognitive scientists and literary scholars, working separately and together, for the last 30 years. The recent study by Soutschek et al., "Brain stimulation reveals crucial role of overcoming self-centeredness in self-control" (2016), which finds a connection between our capacity for empathy and our capacity for self-control, adds a new layer of complexity to this conversation. Three cognitive scientists and three literary scholars will present their work and discuss with the audience what cognitive science has revealed about how empathy and self-control might be connected in the wiring of our brains and how this connection might be thematized, represented, and stylistically embodied in literary texts.

David Kidd, from The New School for Social Research and author of empirical studies of the effects of reading literary fiction on mentalizing (Kidd & Castano, 2013; Kidd & Castano, 2016) will give a brief overview of the history of cognitive studies of the readers of literary texts and then report on his most recent research about the effects of reading literary fiction on intention-based moral judgments.

Sheila Bauer-Gatsos, from Dominican University, will provide a brief overview of the study of empathy in literary texts and then discuss her research on how empathy is engaged, confounded, and redirected in novels by 19th century women writers.

Anjali Raja Beharelle, from the University of Zurich, will provide a brief overview of cognitive studies of self-control and then describe her research on the neural connections and information processing mechanisms that are important for making better long-term dietary choices.

Keegan Lannon, from Dominican University, will explore how minimalist fiction demands that readers more fully investigate narrative clues to determine characters' intentions and emotional states, which in turn leads to a greater empathic experience.

Alexander Soutschek, from the University of Zurich, will discuss the study "Brain stimulation reveals crucial role of overcoming self-centeredness in self-control" (2016) and the implications of its findings that exercising self-control may depend on whether we can have empathy for our future selves.

Ellen McManus, from Dominican University, will discuss how 21st century science fiction may explore human capacities and limitations for empathy with our Darwinian future selves, that is, our descendants, whose quality of life and very existence may depend on whether we are able to exercise empathic self-control today.