

London PUS Seminars

Speaker: Prof Helene Joffe (UCL)

Wednesday 27 November 2019, 4.15pm

Queen's House 3.28

55-56 Lincoln's Inn Fields

London WC2A 3LJ

**Open to all, no booking required*

<https://londonpus.wordpress.com/>

Abstract

Neuroscience's prominence in the public sphere from the start of this millennium provides rich pickings for the study of the public uptake of science. This talk will reflect on studies of how the media and lay people represent neuroscience, and then on a systematic study of the journey of a specific paper in the scientific journal PNAS through a press release, into the traditional and social media and then into public expression by way of comments on these media. Taken together, the aim will be to show how science is assimilated by publics.

Like much public uptake of science before it, the newly encountered science of the brain was represented in terms of existing value systems in both the media and public thinking. The primary focus in media reporting was on the importance of optimising brain capacity; this is linked to the valuing of self-control over mind, body and destiny. In the public uptake of neuroscience, this was a key association too, though people were sceptical about whether one could optimise brain capacity. Many of the other ideas relayed by the mass media about neuroscience were seen as irrelevant by members of the public, unless they had personal, direct experience of brain-related disorders.

Regarding the specific journey of one piece of neuroscience concerning sex differences in neural connectivity, as the information moved further from the scientific paper that was its source, so it became more infused with the values of those who assimilated it: women were portrayed as more able to multi-task – putatively seen as an asset - yet this was represented as conflicting with the linear, logical reasoning needed for the world of work outside the home. Thus benevolent sexism and some misogynistic sexism manifested in social representations of this scientific article

The paper will discuss how the journey of neuroscience into the public sphere fits with social representations of much science where the new is understood in terms of known tropes and infused with the values of those who assimilate it. It will evaluate the role played by 'neuromyths' in this process.

Biography

Helene Joffe is Professor of Psychology at UCL. She has studied public engagement with a range of social issues ranging from emerging infectious diseases to earthquakes, from city living to neuroscience. She has also led a successful intervention to change earthquake and fire preparedness cross-culturally. She currently holds UKRI-ESRC and Society of Risk Analysis funding where the focus is not only on studying how publics position themselves but on implementing change in their representations.