

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: University of Kent		
Unit of Assessment: 26: Modern Languages and Linguistics		
Title of case study: Transforming the Public Understanding of Human Exhaustion		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2013-2016		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Anna Katharina Schaffner	Professor of Cultural History	2007-present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2016-2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
1. Summary of the impact		
<p>Schaffner's research has challenged the widely shared view that feelings of burnout and fatigue are a distinctly modern phenomenon, specific to an age dominated by various communication and other technologies. Demonstrating that the experience of extreme fatigue recurs throughout history, her work has informed the representation and discussion of exhaustion in the national and international media. The significance of her impact – as underscored by worldwide feedback from readers and listeners, journalists and writers – lies in a significantly increased public awareness that exhaustion is constitutive of humanity in general, rather than being a mere epiphenomenon of modernity. This key insight has been disseminated via innumerable articles, interviews, and documentaries, reaching an audience of millions across the globe.</p>		
2. Underpinning research		
<p>In 2013, Schaffner noticed a sharp rise in media reports on stress and burnout in the UK and Germany. While the emphasis in the UK was more squarely on stress as a problem to be addressed by individual resilience, in Germany the media preferred to talk about burnout as a broader socio-political problem. The news reports had one thing in common, though: our own age, nearly all commentators claimed, was the most exhausting in history. This prompted Schaffner to begin researching the history of exhaustion. Counter to its media representation as a modern phenomenon, Schaffner soon found that writers throughout history and across cultures have reflected on exhaustion: its symptoms and causes are present, for example, in theories of melancholia in classical antiquity, in treatises on acedia in the medieval period and on neurasthenia in the nineteenth century, as well as in the literature on depression, stress, burnout, and Chronic Fatigue Syndrome in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In each period, the causes and effects of exhaustion were theorised in radically different ways.</p> <p>Following a widely read blog for the Centre for Medical Humanities at the University of Durham (May 2013), Schaffner published a journal article on 'Exhaustion and the Pathologization of Modernity' [R1]. She also shared her thesis about the longer history of exhaustion in the essay 'German Burnout' (<i>Times Literary Supplement</i>, February 2014), which reached over 30,000 readers (online and print). More important for the underpinning research, however, was her securing of Wellcome Trust funding for a conference on the topic (October 2013). At this conference, Schaffner became acquainted with Greta Wagner and Sighard Neckel, with both of whom she later collaborated in co-editing the interdisciplinary essay collection <i>Burnout, Fatigue, Exhaustion: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on a Modern Affliction</i> [R4, R6]. In the wake of the conference, Schaffner was invited to be an associate researcher at the Wellcome Trust Hubbub Rest project, to take part in a public panel discussion on 'Exhaustion Then and Now' with Sir Simon Wessely (chaired by BBC presenter Claudia Hammond, June 2015), and to deliver numerous</p>		

Impact case study (REF3)

public lectures on the topic.

The publication in 2016 of Schaffner's monograph *Exhaustion: A History* [R2] encouraged further public engagement with her work. Its key finding – that exhaustion has been present as an experience that has been reflected on, in varying forms, throughout history and across cultures – was received as ‘an impressive and important contribution to the growing field of medical humanities’ (*British Society for Literature and Science*, February 2018), deemed ‘a compelling and thought-provoking read for doctors’ (*History of Medicine*, December 2016), and considered ‘attractive - and accessible - to a wider readership’ (*British Medical Journal*, August 2016).

The publication of *Exhaustion: A History* generated wide public interest, and was followed by numerous radio interviews, as well as blogs and newspaper, magazine, and journal articles that would generate considerable impact, changing the media representation of exhaustion across the world and altering its public understanding. In addition, her research into the history of exhaustion led Schaffner to write her well-received novel *The Truth about Julia* [R3], in which she presents a creative engagement with the idea of political exhaustion.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

[R1] Schaffner, Anna Katharina (2014). ‘Exhaustion and the Pathologization of Modernity’. *Journal of Medical Humanities* 37(3): 327-341. ISSN 1041-3545. E-ISSN 1573-3645. doi:

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10912-014-9299-z>

[R2] Schaffner, Anna Katharina (2016). *Exhaustion: A History*. New York and London: Columbia University Press, 288pp. ISBN 9780231172301. E-ISBN 9780231538855.

<http://kar.kent.ac.uk/51820/>

[R3] Schaffner, Anna Katharina (2016). *The Truth About Julia*. London: Allen and Unwin, 304pp. ISBN 9781760294403. <http://kar.kent.ac.uk/59480/>

[R4] Schaffner, Anna Katharina, Wagner, Greta, and Neckel, Sighard (2017). ‘Introduction’. In: Schaffner, Anna Katharina, Wagner, Greta, and Neckel, Sighard, eds. *Burnout, Fatigue, Exhaustion: An Interdisciplinary Perspective on a Modern Affliction*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 1-23. ISBN 9783319528861. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-52887-8>

[R5] Schaffner, Anna Katharina (2017). “‘Catastrophe Sociology’ and the Metaphors We Live by: On Kathrin Röggla’s *Wir schlafen nicht*”. *Modern Language Review* 112: 205-222. ISSN 0026-7937. E-ISSN 2222-4319. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5699/modelangrevi.112.1.0205>

[R6] Schaffner, Anna Katharina, Wagner, Greta, and Neckel, Sighard, eds. (2017). *Burnout, Fatigue, Exhaustion: An Interdisciplinary Perspective on a Modern Affliction*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 316pp. ISBN 9783319528861. <http://kar.kent.ac.uk/59468/>

Grants

[G1] Wellcome Trust Small Grant in Medical Humanities / Society and Ethics. ‘Medical Theories of Exhaustion: A Historical Analysis’ (2013). PI: Schaffner. Value: £3,715.

[G2] Leverhulme Trust Research Fellowship, 2019-20. PI: Schaffner. Value: £45k.

4. Details of the impact

Schaffner’s research has intervened decisively in the public discourse on tiredness, fatigue, and exhaustion, offering an alternative perspective to the notion that ours is the most exhausting age in history. Journalists and commentators worldwide have seen her work as transforming the public understanding of exhaustion; by drawing productive comparisons to historic experiences of tiredness, they suggest, it mitigates some of the negative consequences of the widespread media

and public focus on contemporary exhaustion. As journalist Maggie Puniewska puts it, what is 'comforting to the fried, 21st-century worker is that regardless of the epoch, regardless of whether humans were living in agrarian societies or were bystanders to a world that was modernizing at an unprecedented velocity, people were tired' [a].

Schaffner's most significant impact on public understanding was via the BBC Radio 4 documentary *Exhaustion: A History* (November 2019). This programme was based almost entirely on her book, as evidenced not only by the title but also by the presenter Phillip Ball's tweet that 'it is really Anna's fantastic work that created it' [j]. The documentary follows exactly the structure of Schaffner's study: from Greek antiquity, via the spiritual failings of the desert-dwelling monks of early Christianity, the celestial bodies of Renaissance thinking, and the moralistic sexual messages of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to the modern obsessions with nerves, neurasthenia, and burnout. Just like her book, *Exhaustion: A History* [R2], the Radio 4 documentary ends with Schaffner's thesis that fears of exhaustion are actually fears about mortality. As well as being selected for the 'BBC's Seriously podcast' (and thus made available internationally), the programme was selected as both BBC Radio 4's and the *Observer's* 'Pick of the week'. Twitter feedback was also very strong, with personal development coach Lynette Goodcare recommending it to anyone interested in 'developing [their] understanding of the concept of fatigue/exhaustion' [j].

Beyond the UK, Schaffner's work has influenced discussion of exhaustion on a global scale. Following the publication of her book [R2], she has been interviewed by journals, magazines, and newspapers across the world, including *BBC Future* (July 2016, translated into various languages), *New Scientist* (October 2016), *National Geographic* (August 2016), *Psychology Today* (June 2016), *Metro* (July 2016), *The Irish Times* (September 2017), *The Week* (August 2016), *Knack Belgium* (October 2016), *New Zealand Listener* (December 2016), *Die Welt am Sonntag* (December 2016), *Le Matin Dimanche* (December 2016), *Philosophie Magazine* (December 2019), and *Kurier* (July 2020). In addition, Schaffner has spoken about her work on six major radio shows in the UK, the US, Canada, and Ireland, including Radio 4's *Thinking Allowed* (July 2017), the award-winning American investigative journalism show *On Point* (August 2016), CBC's *The Current* (September 2016), and Wisconsin Public Radio's *To the Best of Our Knowledge* (November 2017). She was also interviewed for 'The Art of Manliness' podcast series (January 2019) and for the Dutch Newspaper *De Volkskrant* (January 2019).

The titles given to these many podcasts, reviews, and interviews – including 'Is Exhaustion a Modern Phenomenon?' [b], 'Are Modern People the Most Exhausted in History?' [b], 'Feeling Exhausted? Historically, You're Not Alone' [b], 'Now We're Stressed Out? History Shows It's the Oldest Emotion' [c], 'Burnt Out? Relax, We've Been Exhausted for Centuries' [d], and 'Tired All the Time? Join the World's Oldest Club' [d] – demonstrate a step change in the media portrayal of our age as the most exhausting in history. As Thomas Dixon wrote in the *Times Literary Supplement*, for instance, 'the long-term approach allows Schaffner to show that theories of exhaustion have, for centuries, been linked to nostalgic narratives about an earlier, slower, more natural, less technological and less exhausted form of life. [...] Schaffner's ambitious work [...] lets us engage in imaginative emotional time-travel of a kind that acknowledges a shared humanity as well as cultural difference' (TLS, June 2016 [f]).

The Director of the Klassik Weimar Stiftung has stated that Schaffner's work 'shines a new light on the contribution of literary history and criticism to medical and socio-political issues such as fatigue, burnout, and resilience' [h], a view shared by sociologist Sighard Neckel, for whom 'what is most striking is that Professor Schaffner appears to have changed the perspective from which journalists think about exhaustion and subsequently reported and wrote about the topic. As a result of her work, media debates on exhaustion took a different form, referring to a much broader historical perspective' [i]. BBC journalist David Robson echoes this diagnosis, stating that 'Schaffner's book, and the subsequent interview, challenged my assumption that exhaustion is a modern phenomenon, and demonstrated how many people, throughout history, have suffered from fatigue [...]. Since the interview I have written about exhaustion and other related conditions (such as stress, insomnia and loneliness) with more historical awareness – for the BBC, *New Scientist* and

the *i*. [...]. Anna's research, but more generally, her approach has inspired me to think more carefully about the role of culture in our medical understanding of disease' [e].

Further international voices reinforce the impact that Schaffner's work has had in changing the public perception of exhaustion. In 'Burnout – Warum viele Menschen so erschöpft sind' (NEWS, 2017), Carina Pachner states that: 'Burnout is a real problem of our age, but not only of ours' [a], while Marcel Lepper, writing in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, notes that 'Schaffner has lately shown that diagnoses relating to exhaustion are not a modern phenomenon' [h].

Jenny Stallard summarises the impact of Schaffner's work when she suggests that 'it's time to accept we're not the only generation to feel exhausted' (*Metro*, 21 July 2016) [g], even if our generation's challenge now takes the unprecedented form as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, as a recent interview with Schaffner in the Austrian newspaper *Kurier* suggests [g]. Through these many interviews and articles – which have reached an audience reach of over 6 million people worldwide [j] – Schaffner's work has shown that exhaustion, far from being a mere millennial fashion, is in fact an ever-present historical phenomenon.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

[a] Newspaper articles: 'The Myth of Modern Burnout', *The Week*, 17 August 2016; and 'Burnout – Warum viele Menschen so erschöpft sind', *News*, 22 May 2017. These two articles reflect a changed understanding of exhaustion among journalists as a result of their encounter with Schaffner's research.

[b] Radio interviews and podcast with Schaffner: BBC Radio 4's *Thinking Allowed* (July 2017); *On Point* (August 2016); CBC's *The Current* (September 2016); Wisconsin Public Radio's *To the Best of Our Knowledge* (November 2017); and 'The Art of Manliness' podcast (January 2019). The titles of these radio interviews indicate a step change in the representation of our age as the most exhausting one in human history as a result of Schaffner's research.

[c] 'Now We're Stressed Out? History Shows It's the Oldest Emotion', *How Stuff Works*, 19 July 2016; and 'Fatigue – Le mal du siècle?', *Le Matin Dimanche*, 4 December 2016. Two media articles showing that Schaffner's work informed the representation and discussion of exhaustion in the national and international media, the titles indicating a step change in the representation of exhaustion.

[d] 'Burnt Out? Relax, We've Been Exhausted for Centuries', *Irish Times* (online), 16 September 2017; and 'Exhausted? Join the World's Oldest Club', *Medical Xpress*, June 2016. Two media articles showing that Schaffner's work informed the representation and discussion of exhaustion in the national and international media, the titles indicating a step change in the representation of exhaustion.

[e] Testimony from a journalist writing for the BBC, *New Scientist*, and the *i*, and an article by the journalist: 'The Reason Why Exhaustion and Burnout are so Common', *BBC Future*, 22 July 2016.

[f] 'Running Out of Steam', *Times Literary Supplement*, 29 June 2016, on Schaffner's research on the history of exhaustion.

[g] 'Are You Tired of Exhaustion?', *Metro*, 21 July 2016; and 'Von Melancholikern, Sündern und Nerasthenikern', *Kurier*, 5 July 2020. Media articles showing that Schaffner's work is shaping the public discourse on exhaustion, and that interest in her work continues in 2020, in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

[h] Letter from the Director at Klassik Weimar Stiftung and an article written by him: 'Als Bartabschneiden auch nicht mer half', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 4 October 2017, demonstrating that Schaffner's research has 'put current debates into perspective'.

Impact case study (REF3)

[i] Letter from the sociologist Sighard Neckel, reflecting the sociological perspective on the impact of Schaffner's research.

[j] Twitter feedback on the BBC Radio 4 documentary *Exhaustion: A History* (November 2019). These responses (both professional and public) to the BBC documentary demonstrate the reach of Schaffner's impact and the changed views of exhaustion achieved by her research.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000blxd>