

Report

The ‘Abnormality and the Abnormal in the Nineteenth Century’ postgraduate conference opened with an engaging keynote address by Professor Martin Willis (University of Westminster) entitled ‘The Case of the Soho Sleeper: Catalepsy, Care, and the Politics of Seizures’. Professor Willis used a high-profile case of catalepsy from 1887, known to the Victorian press as the Soho Sleeper, to argue that such conditions produce conceptions of the abnormal, and also of the normal from which the cataleptic was understood to have moved away.

Professor Willis’s talk initiated a productive conversation ranging from the ethics of care to the methodology of research. The first panel of the day, ‘The Social and Political Function of Abnormality’, featured three methodologically diverse papers, which each dissected various ways in which a concept of abnormality can be created in the service of a particular ideology. The second panel, ‘Abnormality and the Body’, offered literary, archaeological, and philosophical analyses of bodily and mental deviations from a norm in terms of an implicit association between normalcy and morality. The last panel of the day, ‘Gender and Sexuality’, addressed a topical nexus between embodiment and social norms; each paper offered an analysis of the construction, communication, and celebration, of a particular instance of gendered or sexual abnormality.

All three postgraduate panels generated stimulating and wide-ranging discussion; the continuity between contemporary and nineteenth-century ideas about abnormality, and the connections between abnormality, morality, and power were recurrent themes. Despite a programme which endeavoured to maximise opportunities for conversation, the conference ended with many more questions than answers. The Abnormality Research Network, launched at this conference, will facilitate the continuation of this conversation; this postgraduate-led initiative will explore conceptualisations of abnormality across disciplines from the early modern period to the present day.