

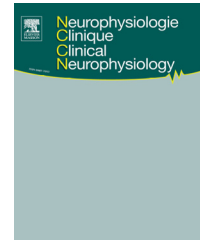


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PERSONAL VIEW/MISE AU POINT

# A sociological stance on fatigue and tiredness: Social inequalities, norms and representations



*Un regard sociologique sur la fatigue : inégalités sociales, normes et représentations*

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**Summary** Fatigue is complex, representing simultaneously a physiological, psychological and social phenomenon. The sociological approach attempts to understand the experience of fatigue and its characterization at diverse periods and in various social contexts. After giving a sociological history of different forms of fatigue through the ages (acedia, melancholy, neurasthenia, chronic fatigue syndrome, etc.), this article proposes a social epidemiology of fatigue in the current period. Objectification of working and living conditions allows us to illustrate social inequalities in fatigue and exhaustion, but seems to contradict dominant social representations of fatigue today. It invites a critical discussion of contemporary theories of fatigue (such those of Alain Ehrenberg or Byung-Chul Han), which consider that fatigue is a condition of modern man, overwhelmed by his freedom. More modestly, analysis of the fatigue presented here rests on the capacity to be able to find a good balance between too much investment in work or life (which is exhausting) and not enough investment (which leads to boredom and lack of self-fulfillment). This balance depends on fragile and specific social norms in different professional or social circles and cannot be defined a priori.

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## MOTS CLÉS

Acédie ;  
Burn-out ;  
Épidémiologie ;

**Résumé** La fatigue est un phénomène complexe, à la fois physiologique, psychologique et social. L'approche sociologique s'attache à comprendre l'expérience de la fatigue et sa mise en forme à diverses époques et dans différents contextes sociaux. Après une sociohistoire des formes de fatigue à travers les âges (acédie, mélancolie, neurasthénie, syndrome de fatigue chronique, etc.), cet article propose une épidémiologie sociale de la fatigue dans la période

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actuelle. Cette objectivation des conditions de vie et de travail permet de mettre en avant les inégalités sociales face à la fatigue et à l'épuisement, mais semble entrer en contradiction avec les représentations sociales dominantes de la fatigue aujourd'hui. Cela invite à une discussion critique des théories contemporaines de la fatigue (telles celles d'Alain Ehrenberg ou de Byung-Chul Han) qui font de la fatigue la condition de l'homme moderne écrasé par sa liberté. Plus modestement, l'analyse de la fatigue présentée ici repose sur la capacité à trouver collectivement un bon équilibre entre trop d'investissement dans le travail ou la vie (qui épuise) et pas assez d'investissement (qui conduit à l'ennui et au manque d'accomplissement de soi). Cet équilibre dépend de normes sociales fragiles et spécifiques à chaque milieu professionnel ou social et ne peut être défini a priori.

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According to Robert Hockey [10], one of the difficulties in scientifically studying fatigue is that "the term appears to have institutionalized meaning among scientific groups: the medical profession think of fatigue as a debilitating consequence of a wide range of diseases and systemic conditions, neurophysiologists focus on the loss of motor control leading to reduced muscular strength, exercise physiologists talk of fatigue as a limiting factor in physical performance and endurance, and sleep researchers regard it as a condition brought on by impaired sleep quality or duration." As a psychologist, he adds that fatigue must be studied as a subjective feeling of tiredness related in complex and diverse manners to physical muscular effort, motivation processes and performances, and subject to socio-historical framing.

Sociologists generally do not want to propose new definitions of fatigue and tiredness, but rather try to understand how people, through history or among different social groups, experience fatigue and construct different meanings of tiredness [1,13,15,16]. Historically, the oldest representation of tiredness is the wear, which results from the accumulation of the efforts, illnesses and difficult living conditions and hardships at work that overpower human capacities and more or less quickly lead to death. In the Hesiod poem *Works and days* (written about 700 BC), as in the biblical account of Adam and Eve driven out of paradise, the tiredness and weariness of work constitute a divine punishment. Tiredness is then seen as a vital energy expense (both physical and nervous) to restrain the life and the work, which wear the body if it exceeds its rest and recovery capacities [16].

While this representation has continued over centuries, new conceptualization of fatigue has progressively appeared as the link between level of tiredness and level of energy expense has become gradually blurred through the effect of various evolutions. First, experts in different domains (theologian, doctors, etc.) throughout history have described various pathological forms of fatigue that are not directly related to the effort expended. Second, at the end of the nineteenth century, the science of fatigue failed to demonstrate that only one kind of fatigue exists, and only one form of human energy, which may be linked to this fatigue. Third, the nature of work has changed, with the development of greater intellectual and nervous (and not essentially physical) working activities, or work that is perceived as such (physical work having not disappeared, but being less taken into account).

In the first part of this article, I will approach these three points, in order to better understand the modern and postmodern concept of fatigue. I will then propose some reflections on the current period and give a contemporary or a postmodern view of fatigue in the second part.

## Lessons from a social history of fatigue

### Ancient but very modern pathological forms of "bad fatigue"

In ancient Greece, *akedia* meant the carelessness or negligence of others and oneself, for example the abandonment of deceased relatives without giving them a grave. In Christianity this became *acedia*, that is, the painful experience by monks with a crisis of faith, in which their religious efforts are no longer legitimized: why bear so many constraints if God does not exist? Evagre le Pontique (4th century) wrote: "as the sick person does not take care of heavy burdens, so, the *acediac* does not perform God's work diligently. The first, indeed, is deprived of the strength of the body, and the second has the dynamism of the soul relaxed". First a disease of anchorite monks (hermits living in solitude), *acedia* became a sin when it was described for the cenobite monks (living in communities). The definition of *acedia* as an illness corresponds to a situation where self-control was the main way to discipline isolated monks. When social and hierarchical controls take over, *acedia* is no longer a menace for health, but a moral fault [16].

The courtesan's melancholy in the XVIth and XVIIth centuries testifies to the nervously exhausting life of the royal court intrigues, the reign of the appearance and the necessary self-control. Timothy Bright (In his *Treatise on Melancholy*, published in 1586) said: "Among different kind of spiritual works, studies, when they are fascinating and concern difficult or highly mysterious subjects, are the main cause of melancholy. Consequently, it is necessary to avoid them. It is necessary to free the understanding of all labor of this kind, so that those of the spirits who has been consumed can regenerate, and so that the other part, busy with difficult reasoning, is freed, for the biggest good of the heart and the clarification of the blood [16]. Besides, as these activities affect or establish the inorganic element of the soul, they bring the spirit to neglect the body: this is the way he

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