“Thistle, Violet, Madness: the influence of botanical classification on our understanding of mental illness.”

Daniel Mason
Stanford University
December 6, 2017, 5:30-7:00
Building 50, Room 51A

The question of how to classify mental illness remains one of the most contentious in medicine. In this talk we will approach psychiatric classification from a historical perspective, finding the roots of today’s system in the botanical taxonomies of the Enlightenment. For thinkers ranging from Linnaeus, to Darwin, to the founders of modern psychiatry, the metaphor of “disease as plant” has provided the dominant model for classifying disease. But what to make of this legacy? Has it helped or hindered our understanding of mental suffering?

Daniel Mason is a Clinical Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychiatry, and teaches two undergraduate courses on mental health, “Culture and Madness” (with Tanya Luhrmann, Winter) and “The Literature of Psychosis” (Spring). A fiction writer, he is the author of The Piano Tuner (2002) and A Far Country (2007); his third novel, The Winter Soldier, will be published in 2019.

Cultures, Minds and Medicines

The Cultures, Minds and Medicines workshop series meets four to five times each term on Wednesdays from 5:30-7 for dinner and talks about culture and healing. We hear from artists, scientists, ethnographers, literature scholars and more, with the goal of understanding not only what they say, but also what counts as data for them and how they understand their task in communicating to their primary audience. Talks take place in Anthropology, Building 50, room 51A (the conference room).

The workshop is associated with a certificate program for graduate students. Students must attend the biweekly workshops in Cultures, Minds and Medicines over the course of a year, and take at least one relevant course outside of their degree-granting program, as approved by the faculty certificate committee. In most cases, non-anthropologists should enroll in a graduate level anthropology course, and anthropologists should enroll in a course in medicine, psychology or some other discipline.

For students enrolled in the class each quarter, the requirement is to attend the workshops.