Panel ABSTRACT

Panel 10. Exploring healthcare and research as creative practices

Organizer: Annekatrin Skeide, Jeannette Pols

Abstract: In this panel we invite contributors to dive deeper into the creativity of healthcare practices and its medical anthropological articulations.
We welcome papers that:

- Explore socio-material approaches to conceptualizing health care practices and research as situated creative practices. How can we thoughtfully 'create' these practices through our research? What are conditions needed to make this creativity flourish, both in practice and research? What epistemologies can be developed with creativity as a starting point, and how do these relate to more standardized views of care and research? How can we engage with artistic forms of output? How can artistic methods be fruitfully used, and to what ends? How can creative methods allow for collaborations that invite research subjects to participate in ways they find acceptable, or even pleasant, while shifting or reframing researcher-research subject hierarchies?
- Examine the potential results of foregrounding creativity in healthcare. For instance, how does this focus blur the boundaries of what constitutes a healthy or sick individual physical body? How might it encourage us to conceptualize health and wellbeing in terms of navigating the complexities and enjoying the pleasures of everyday life? What are the socio-material consequences of creative healthcare practices? What role does creativity play in shaping ideas of the good life within medical anthropology? How might 'a good life' be defined, and how does this align with or diverge from medical understandings of health? Finally, what does creativity signify in this context?

SESSION SCHEDULE

18.09.2025 | Slot 1 & 2| 4-0-5

Sandra Baernreuther: Ghosts of Digitalization: Storying India's Digital Health Transformation

Tanja Bukovčan, Goran Koletić: Foregrounding Creativity in Later-Life Sexuality: Rethinking Health, Aging, and the Good Life

Rebecka Fleetwood-Smith: Hospital Reimagined: Using an artwork to explore the dynamic hospital environment

Claire Harris, Megan Warin, Tanya Zivkovic: Situating care and creative practice in research

Ella Hillström: A Praxis of the Tentacular Face: A Somatic Essay

Mizuki Igata: Uncertain Scripts: Exploring Theatre Practice as Care in Mental Health

Martin Høybye, Marie Hallager Andersen, Sarah Pini, Mette Terp Høybye: "Like being invited into another": A film about co-creative movement in cancer rehabilitation

Taylor Riley, Tatiane Muniz: "Not terribly arty": Some complexities of using photovoice in biosocial ethnographic research

SESSION PAPERS

Ghosts of Digitalization: Storying India's Digital Health Transformation

Sandra Baernreuther

Over the past five years, I researched the digital transformation of India's health sector and its resulting social changes within rural communities. Among my interlocutors, fears and anxieties frequently emerged as prominent themes when discussing digitalization. In West Bengal, where I conducted the majority of my research, ghost stories have long served as a popular literary genre for expressing anxieties about societal transformations (Almond 2017). For instance, Ujaan Ghosh (2022) illustrates how, with Kolkata's redesign in the late 19th century, Bengali ghost stories started to reflect concerns about rapid urbanization processes. This implies that ghost stories are not stable but serve as 'powerful mnemonic and didactical devices that [reflect] contemporary historical changes' (ibid. 2022, 835).

Recognizing digitalization as one such transformative historical change that profoundly shapes everyday lives, I am currently engaged in a speculative design project that draws from my academic research. What might ghost stories look like in an era when digital transformations and their accompanying social changes dominate lives in India? The narratives I co-create with my interlocutors as well as designers and illustrators in West Bengal showcase the impacts and frustrations tied to digitalization within rural communities. This paper interrogates the process of using artistic methods in ethnographic research and the role they can play in crafting new ways of collaboration. It asks in what ways storytelling techniques can make experiences of digitalization more tangible and research more meaning for interlocutors.

Foregrounding Creativity in Later-Life Sexuality: Rethinking Health, Aging, and the Good Life

Tanja Bukovčan, Goran Koletić

This presentation examines the potential of creativity to reshape how we understand

health and sexuality in later life. Drawing on the qualitative component of a mixed-methods study conducted in Croatian elderly care homes, it explores how older adults perceive and articulate changes in their sexuality. Through open-ended focus group interviews, participants shared personal narratives that challenge dominant framings of aging as a process of loss and decline. Instead, their accounts highlight adaptation, acceptance, intimacy, and, at times, continued sexual activity, offering a counter-narrative to “unsuccessful” aging.

Foregrounding creativity in healthcare invites us to rethink health and wellbeing not only in terms of physical function but also through pleasure, resilience, and the capacity to navigate complexity. This perspective blurs the boundaries between the “healthy” and the “sick” body, emphasizing lived experience over normative assumptions. It also raises critical questions: What role does creativity play in shaping ideas of the good life within medical anthropology? How do older adults’ visions of wellbeing align with or resist dominant medical models?

The study reveals gendered patterns and individual interpretations of sexual aging, underscoring the socio-material consequences of healthcare practices. Co-creative methodologies are proposed as ethical and transformative tools to challenge systemic ageism and engage older adults as active participants in knowledge production. By unwriting entrenched hierarchies, this presentation advocates for more inclusive and flexible models of aging—ones that center agency, dignity, and the creative potential of later life.

Hospital Reimagined: Using an artwork to explore the dynamic hospital environment

Rebecka Fleetwood-smith

This paper details the opportunities that artworks afford in healthcare settings and proposes that artworks in-situ are a valuable site of knowledge production. The artwork under study is ‘Hospital Reimagined’ an interactive sculpture created by artist Jonathan Van Beek, commissioned for the Sensing Spaces of Healthcare travelling exhibition. The Sensing Spaces of Healthcare project explores the sensory past, present and future of the National Health Service (NHS) hospital. Rather than use the project’s research findings and commission artworks in response to such findings, we used the project’s creative research methods to inspire the creation of new works. The creative research methods used drew upon arts-based and design-led approaches to work with NHS staff and patients and explore their hopes and wants for the hospital environment. The methods foregrounded embodied, sensory, and aesthetic knowledge. ‘Hospital Reimagined’ was created in response to the creative approach ‘Mapping your Dream Hospital’ in which NHS staff and patients used an imaginary floor plan to explore aspirations and identify opportunities for change within the hospital environment. ‘Hospital Reimagined’ is on permanent display in the Maternity Department at Southmead Hospital, North Bristol NHS Trust, UK. This paper brings together researcher reflections and evaluative feedback from NHS staff to demonstrate the myriad ways in which the artwork is engaged with and manipulated within the setting. These insights speak to notions of autonomy, care, temporality and creativity, and are of great interest when considering material and social interactions within the broader hospital environment.

Situating care and creative practice in research

Claire Harris, Megan Warin, Tanya Zivkovic

Creative practice in qualitative research, health and community contexts are increasingly valued as a way to enhance experiences and understandings of care. Drawing on ethnographic research with a unique Australian program that supports families in crisis, this paper considers how intentional and collaborative creative practices seek to capture 'glimpses of alternative livable relationalities, with other possible worlds in the making' (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017). Foregrounding care-informed principles of art-making and feminist curating (Millner & Coombs 2022), we demonstrate the ways embodied and situated knowledge is generated and visualised through shared engagement of researchers, participants and artists. The affective tactile qualities of stitching, threading, inking, and cutting into everyday woollen blankets evokes memories, and in doing so honours the collective processes of turning and overlaying, creating spaces for small and intimate gestures of care to come into focus. In collaborating and working with, these spaces afford conceptual thinking and reflection through a non-hierarchical creative process. Coming together to share ideas and skills, to experiment and gain confidence, we seek to bring forth what lies at our peripheral vision (Carter 2009), the barely visible and often-inaudible voices through embedding co-creative practices deeply within our research methodology.

A Praxis of the Tentacular Face: A Somatic Essay

Ella Hillström

This paper reflects on a Body-Mind Centering (BMC) workshop I organized with two other individuals born with cleft lip and palate, as part of my PhD fieldwork. BMC, a somatic approach developed by Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, prioritizes embodied experience over academic anatomical knowledge. We used this method to explore Amade M'charek's call for a "praxiography" of the tentacular face (2020: 370), investigating how alternative methods might generate new understandings of faciality. In Sweden, individuals born with cleft lip and palate typically undergo primary surgeries in early childhood, but continue the treatment with corrective and enhancing measures up until adulthood. Within the medical framework cephalometric measurements, ideals of symmetry and function, and stigma inform how the face is "known." This project asks: What new ways of knowing the face emerge through somatic practices like BMC? What embodied, historical, or affective insights emerge when the face is considered something that does rather than "is" or represents (M'charek, 2020). Drawing on theories of collective situated knowledges (McKittrick, 2021), healing (Cohen, 2023), and praxiography (Mol, 2002), I argue that somatic and experiential methods offer valuable epistemologies that challenge and expand the dominant medical/cosmetic gaze. These insights, often occluded in clinical settings, could be meaningfully integrated into healthcare to reframe how facial difference is understood and consequentially treated.

Uncertain Scripts: Exploring Theatre Practice as Care in Mental Health

Mizuki Igata

Living with mental illness is marked by uncertainty. Its causes and trajectories are shaped by heterogeneous factors—ranging from biological conditions to personal trauma. Given

such complexity, this paper asks: how can creative practices as mental healthcare engage with such uncertainties? Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork with a Japanese theatre company where participants co-create performances based on their lived experiences of mental illness, I examine how such practices mediate the knowledge production of illness experiences, simultaneously becoming a practice of care.

Owing to the uncertainty described above, mental illness narratives often employ the subjunctive mode, exploring multiple causalities and future hopes rather than a linear model of causality (Good, 1994). In the theatrical workshops, it is precisely this subjunctivity that enables creativity in ongoing reinterpretation: illness experiences are not simply recounted but are collectively reimagined and re-performed. Through this process, new vocabularies emerge to articulate what was unspeakable, contributing to knowledge production of illness between participants and healthcare practitioners. Moreover, the creative process handles another form of uncertainty—participants' mental and physical health. They may experience knee pain due to lack of exercise from insomnia, or have difficulty articulating lines due to dysarthria. Rather than framing these conditions as limitations, direction and props are continually adapted, embodying a practice of care on the premise of living with illness (Mol, 2008). Through these ethnographic descriptions, this paper demonstrates how co-creation offers a way of making the uncertainty surrounding mental illness a shared condition to be worked with, rather than a problem to be overcome.

"Like being invited into another": A film about co-creative movement in cancer rehabilitation

Martin Høybye, Marie Hallager Andersen, Sarah Pini, Mette Terp Høybye

This paper presents a documentary film co-produced with research participants who are young adult cancer survivors. Our team – a professional dancer, an arts-based ethnographer, and two medical anthropologists – investigated the potential of co-creative movement practices to work with the transformation of self and body impacted by severe illness. We worked with six young adults with cancer between 29 and 39 years of age: four women and two men, exploring co-creative movement with peers in cancer rehabilitation, while consciously working to reframe hierarchies between researcher and the researched. The research project developed movement scores to enhance bodily awareness, and to gradually introduce greater bodily proximity with others during five workshops. Voice-overs from group reflections following the movement sessions; from individual reflective work; and from ethnographic interviews, bring participant voices to the front, while the footage shows how the co-creative movement practice unfolded to further reconnection of mind and body, including also artwork and music produced by participants. Participant reflections unequivocally describe a reclaiming of bodily autonomy through the co-creative dance, after having gone through serious treatment. To become a "whole human being" after treatment takes transformation both mentally and bodily. We hear, in the participants own words, how they experienced a co-creative movement practice to be helpful towards forging mind-body reconnection, reclaiming bodily autonomy and agency, with some likening the co-creation to "being invited into another." We further present team reflections on positionality and theoretical tenets of contact improvisation, continuous becoming, and perceptions of intrinsic bodily intelligence.

“Not terribly arty”: Some complexities of using photovoice in biosocial ethnographic research

Taylor Riley

The Biosocial Lives of Birth Cohorts, a four-year multi-site ethnographic study, engaged intergenerational participants (parents and their adult children) in a photovoice project over a period of a few months across four sites: Bristol, UK; Pelotas, Brazil; Rotterdam, Netherlands; and Porto, Portugal. As a community-based action research method, the application of photovoice can easily obfuscate the authenticity such methods exist in the name of, requiring a “consideration of the artistry and aesthetics inherent to images, in how images not only describe reality, but also produce it” (Shankar 2016: 159). This is especially interesting to consider when, for example, a photovoice participant stresses that they are “not terribly arty” while producing what could easily be considered art, and begs the questions: what is art and what is not, and what is ‘face value,’ in photovoice? This paper considers photovoice methods and productive tensions between notions of authenticity and truth-telling in the analysis of photographs taken and elaborated on by participants in longitudinal birth cohort studies, or long-term medical and social studies that follow participants and their parents and potentially children throughout most, if not all, of their lives. We will address questions of 1. How do we as researchers grapple with intended and decoded meanings found in photovoice images and their making, and 2. What can the results of that struggle tell us about the practical and ethical use of creative methods like photovoice in the social study of health and biomedical research?

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