Panel ABSTRACT

Panel 24: Decoupling health and well-being in contexts of conflict and environmental distress

Organizer: Ahmad Moradi, Letizia Bonanno

Abstract: Health and well-being are often treated as inseparable, yet there are circumstances where this connection is disrupted, exposing the fragility of "living well," particularly in contexts marked by conflict, inequality, and environmental distress. While health typically refers to an individual's physical or mental condition, well-being encompasses broader social and embodied experiences that may diverge from biomedical norms. Decoupling health from well-being in these contexts foregrounds how people navigate prescribed rules, embodying what Ghassan Hage calls 'negotiated being' (2018), and adapting to 'uncertain terrains' (Vigh 2009).

We invite ethnographically grounded contributions that highlight moments where the pursuit of well-being—whether individual or collective—clashes with public health frameworks, revealing the ethical and political stakes of living well in a troubled world.

We are thus interested in those ethnographic examples in which well-being is forged through compromised individual's health, as seen in Humanitarian literature, or in James R. Welch's (2023) work in the Central Brazilian Cerrados, where collective loss and suffering paradoxically become the bedrock of living well. By exploring these dynamics, the panel welcomes critical engagement with how people inhabit and sustain themselves and others amidst persistent threats to life and thriving. To deepen this discussion, the panel poses the following questions:

- Is there well-being in absence of health?
- How is well-being sustained when health is compromised, especially in conflict or environmental distress?
- What does well-being look like for those with chronic conditions or dealing with treatment side effects and shortages?
- How is well-being redefined when health is unattainable, and what alternatives arise?

SESSION SCHEDULE

18.09.2025 | Slot 2| 2 - 0 - 4

Yasmynn Chowdhury: Remaking life otherwise: Relational well-being across the Rohingya diaspora [working title]

Roos Metselaar: In the absence of a solution. An ethnographic study on living a good life with PFAS.

Gauri Pathak: "We have been raised on dust, we come from dust": Toxic exposures and permeable bodies in a South Asian cement factory

Gloria Perez-Rivera: Being Alive or Having a Life: Colombian Displaced Older Adults' Understandings of Rural Lives, Well-Being and Health

SESSION PAPERS

Remaking life otherwise: Relational well-being across the Rohingya diaspora [working title]

Yasmynn Chowdhury

This paper explores how well-being is reconstituted, narrated, and lived within the everyday lives of Rohingya refugees navigating the ongoing aftermath of genocidal violence, forced displacement, and protracted statelessness. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork with resettled Rohingya communities in the United Kingdom, alongside a meta-ethnographic reading of narratives from camps in Bangladesh, I attend to how well-being circulates across diasporic lives in ways that contest and exceed dominant humanitarian and public health framings of 'refugee health.'

Among interlocutors, individual health is rarely foregrounded. Often, it is deferred, downplayed, or mentioned only in passing—sometimes out of discomfort with what is perceived as excessive self-concern. Instead, well-being is experienced as relational and co-constituted, through care for others and practices generative of collective vitality, including togetherness with loved ones both within domestic spaces and across borders (virtually), hospitality, mutual aid, and the nurturing of local and transnational solidarities—often within conditions that require a continual negotiation of one's right to exist and belong. It also emerges, in many cases, through the active holding of suffering, manifest in practices of memorialisation, bearing witness to ongoing violence, and striving for recognition on both interpersonal and political scales. Critical to living well is also the preservation and transmission of 'Rohingya-ness,' both an act of refusal in the face of historical erasure and a reproductive endeavour toward alternative futures.

This paper reflects on how, even when biophysical health is elusive, well-being may take root in the fragile but vital work of remaking collective life otherwise: materially, affectively, and existentially.

In the absence of a solution. An ethnographic study on living a good life with

PFAS.

Roos Metselaar

Per- and Polyfluoroalkyl Substances (PFAS), also referred to as “forever chemicals”, are designed to be persistent. Next to this "foreverness", PFAS also seem to be everywhere; in the words of an ecotoxicologist I encountered in my research: “The more you look for it, the more you find.”
While scientists, engineers, and activists are trying to solve the problem of PFAS – by mapping them, finding alternatives, cleaning up, and fighting for justice – for people living and working in areas particularly polluted with PFAS, the “foreverness” and “everywhereness” of these chemicals are not problems they can solve, often leading to desperation. How to eat, drink, swim, farm, and fish when these potentially harmful chemicals are everywhere? What to do when complete removal of PFAS from the environment is not possible yet? Based on ethnographic research with gardeners, swimmers, farmers, and firefighters in the Netherlands, and inspired by medical anthropological studies about living with incurable illnesses, I ask the question: in the absence of a solution right now, how to deal with PFAS in the meantime?
The people I encountered in my research have different strategies for living a good life in this “permanently polluted world” (Liboiron, Tironi & Calvillo 2018), such as adapting, avoiding, or ignoring. I explore how different “goods” and “bads” – such as “health” and “pleasure” – sometimes come together and sometimes clash in these practices (cf. Heuts & Mol 2013), to gain insight in alternative ways of living with chronic/unsolvable problems beyond the public health paradigm.

"We have been raised on dust, we come from dust”: Toxic exposures and permeable bodies in a South Asian cement factory

Gauri Pathak

Exposure draws attention to the unstable and porous boundaries between bodies and their environments. In Surajpur, an industrial village serving a cement factory in Bihar, North India, cement dust exposure is an inescapable feature of everyday life. Migrant workers attribute their persistent coughs and chronic respiratory issues to the dust and try to manage their exposure by covering their mouths with gamcha cloth or eating jaggery to soothe their throats. At the same time, however, they speak of dust as intimate and familiar, constitutive of their fields, their homes, their childhoods, and even themselves. This paper draws from ethnographic fieldwork among migrant workers at the factory to engage with the anthropological literature on toxicity and South Asian notions of permeable personhood and to theorize exposure as simultaneously constitutive of body-selves and threatening to them. In the face of such exposure, health, rather than being a state to be achieved, becomes a constant and continuous negotiation between that which sustains and that which undoes.

Being Alive or Having a Life: Colombian Displaced Older Adults' Understandings of Rural Lives, Well-Being and Health

Gloria Perez-Rivera

The Colombian internal conflict has displaced eight million people, mostly from rural areas to urban locations. The peak of displacement occurred roughly between 2000 and 2005, and since then, large numbers of peasants and small farmers have tried to rebuild their lives in cities away from their land and agriculture. The heads of households at the moment of displacement are now older adults, many of whom suffer from illnesses associated with old age. While cities represent a relatively safe place away from the armed groups that displaced them, for many, cities are the cause of their poor health and well-being. Through ethnographic data collected during 18 months in Cartagena, Colombia, this paper illustrates that the understandings of life, well-being and health for older displaced adults are tied to their ideas of land and rural lives. I examine how displaced people negotiate the fact that returning to their agricultural lives is nearly impossible due to rural violence and economic, labour and legal challenges. These negotiations recognize that the city enables displaced people to be alive, but the city and the government programs do not contribute to their well-being or health. I offer a discussion concerning populations that have faced conflict and armed violence, who establish a clear divide between being alive and being well and healthy. The discussion shows the elements that determine a life with well-being for displaced people and how that life with well-being would permit them to accept and deal with old age health conditions.