Panel ABSTRACT

Panel 38: The Politics and Epistemologies of Collaboration: Inter/Transdisciplinarity as Method in Techno-Human Data Assemblages

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Abstract: Work in medical anthropology increasingly takes place within the context and frameworks of third-party funded projects and inter- or transdisciplinary collaboration—especially researching the entanglements of technologies and (non)humans. This raises the question what an anthropological approach is, how its knowledges are produced and contribute, where its boundaries lie—with other social sciences like STS or with life/medical sciences, policymaking, activism—and which boundaries it can(not) or should (not) transgress. At the same time, academic institutions and funding agencies are among the strictest conservators of disciplinary bounds despite prevailing rhetoric praising interdisciplinarity's value.

In this panel, we propose to open a discussion on the boundaries, possibilities, and underlying epistemologies of medical anthropology, its approaches, and the data it produces within the context of inter/transdisciplinary research in techno-human assemblages. We seek research, ethnographies, reflections, experiential accounts, or similar in different multi-media formats on and beyond the following questions:

- How might we think and do inter-/transdisciplinarity as method(s) from an anthropological perspective?
- What conflicts or practices inhere in different data epistemologies; what might be their transgressive potential?
- What can we learn from politics and epistemologies of collaboration in which so many of us are entangled?
- How are the boundaries of medical anthropology (re)made and transgressed in collaborative research and/or vis-à-vis other scholarly approaches to science and technology?
- What is the role of medical anthropologists, especially in light of democratic backsliding, economic recessions, and techno-capitalist ruination?

We welcome contributions from researchers at all career stages in and outside of the

academy.

SESSION SCHEDULE

17.09.2025 | Slot 3 | 4-0-2

Andrea Butcher: Opportunity or Iconoclasm? Moments of inspiration and doubt in interdisciplinary collaboration and innovation

Andrea Kaiser-Grolimund: Medical anthropologists in global 'One Health' assemblages: Interrogating science-driven collaborations

Hana Porkertová: ConceptLeaks: Reflections on the collaboration across disciplinary membranes

SESSION PAPERS

Opportunity or Iconoclasm? Moments of inspiration and doubt in interdisciplinary collaboration and innovation

Andrea Butcher

Advances in digital communications are transforming and redefining ethnographic practice. Interdisciplinarity is the primary means for conducting research which engages multiple fronts in finding solutions to global challenges. Such moves inspire novel collaborations and methodologies across social science, technoscience and bioscience communities. Outcomes of this process include the new transdisciplinary fields of bioethnography (a platform combining ethnographic and biological methods, Roberts and Sanz 2018) or machine anthropology (that integrates ethnography with data science and machine learning, Bjerre-Nielsen & Glavind 2022; Munk et al. 2021; Pedersen 2021). Such inventiveness excites but also unsettles ethnographers, concerned for the integrity of ethnographic data production, and positioning such innovations in an uncomfortable space between pioneering practice and methodological iconoclasm.
This presentation reflects upon one such experimental design in a multidisciplinary science collaboration devoted to innovation in antimicrobial resistance research. As ethnographers, we collaborate with clinicians, biologists, and data scientists to co-design an integrative tool for simultaneous collection and combining of ethnographic data and biological samples. The resulting data integration is used for machine learning and evolutionary biology experiments. Doubt appears in the disciplinary handwringing we experience when negotiating data formats, when fears for data quality come to the fore. Such doubts persist momentarily but not continuously, oscillating between scepticism and opportunity as we work through possibilities and make (un?)reasonable adjustments. Advances in technoscience keep us methodologically agile in today's digitally mediated and data driven world. Doubt keeps us focused upon the question of how much is too much, and how we will know.

Medical anthropologists in global 'One Health' assemblages: Interrogating science-driven collaborations

Andrea Kaiser-Grolimund

In the midst of multiple global health crises, biomedically trained practitioners are currently promoting 'One Health', an approach that aims to 'optimise' the health of humans, animals and the environment. At first glance, a holistic One Health approach seems to align well with anthropology's recent attempts to explore more-than-human worlds. A closer look, however, reveals that an engagement with One Health is not without methodological and ethical dilemmas that arise for medical anthropologists when they involve themselves in such complex inter- and transdisciplinary endeavours that hit a particular local context involving not only human actors. Drawing on insights from ethnographic research on global One Health assemblages and long-term research collaborations in One Health projects, this paper attempts to critically explore the space of (posthuman) anthropologists in this globally emerging field that is currently receiving funding and recognition from various international stakeholders. The paper asks how anthropologists can create opportunities to study entanglements and care across species in such multidisciplinary (and mostly science-driven) collaborations. It explores how the knowledge they produce can or should be translatable to researchers and policy makers who are mostly interested in separations between species to optimise (human) health, and who may see anthropologists in a supportive role to achieve such separations. Finally, this paper explores how methodological boundaries and epistemological positions become ethical issues when shifting the gaze to more-than-human health.

ConceptLeaks: Reflections on the collaboration across disciplinary membranes

Hana Porkertová

The paper examines the ongoing collaboration on the project "Technocultures of Extended Metabolism", which brings together ethnographers of medicine at the Institute of Sociology of the Czech Academy of Sciences and clinicians from the Centre for Research on Nutrition, Metabolism, and Diabetes at the Third Faculty of Medicine, Charles University. Building on the "metabolic turn" in the life and social sciences, we engage metabolism as biosocial, malleable, complex, and extended beyond individual bodies (cf. Solomon, 2016; Kolářová, Stöckelová, Senft, 2022; Landecker, 2024). This conceptualization transgresses the realms of both life and social sciences and calls for interdisciplinary approaches and understandings.
Based on an ethnographic study of how techno-human assemblages shape metabolism in the contexts of home parenteral nutrition and type 1 diabetes, we explore the potential of two biomedical concepts—(metabolic) compartmentalization and inflammation—for social analysis. What do these concepts enable us to notice, analyze, and theorize that goes beyond what established conceptual tools of the social sciences allow? How does the use of biomedical terminology facilitate or, conversely, complicate interdisciplinary research based on collaboration between social scientists and clinicians? What needs to be negotiated or clarified, and where do potential misunderstandings and frictions lie? What epistemologies emerge when biomedical concepts are extended beyond their fields of origin, and how might these epistemologies permeate the disciplinary

membranes of both the social sciences and biomedicine?