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The Interrogative Imperative: State, Community, and Individual as Bodies and Subjectivities

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The interrogative imperative at the heart of basic scientific inquiry flourishes in this issue of *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, one we organized to question the constitution and intersection of bodies (state, institutional, community, and individual) and subjectivities. Indeed, the dictum of Pierre-Marc Gaston,¹ “Judge others by their questions rather than by their answers,” and of Lévi-Strauss, “The wise man doesn't give the right answers, he poses the right questions” appears well met by these medical anthropologists. They pose and pursue powerful foundational questions about assumptions that guide communities of scholars as well as the social life of persons in communities through ethnography. This brief preface points to some shared threads.

First, Fusar-Poli and Stanghellini celebrate Maurice Merleau-Ponty, on the centennial of his birth, whose formative conceptualization of a tripartite embodied human experience opens the questions raised in this issue. Perhaps, too, William James's “Whenever two people meet, there are really six people present. There is each man as he sees himself, each man as the other person sees him, and each man as he really is” locates the multiply determined and fluid nature of individual, collective, and institutional subjectivities explored in the medical anthropology presented here. Next, Little examines the scientists who were assigned by the U.S. Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry to one afflicted community. He highlights tensions in the authorship and social legitimation of “expert experience” in the body of the federal scientific agency, in the scientist–local community partnerships, and among the local community members. Next, Pollock's critical commentary amplifies and redirects interpretations in Little's article. He provokes us to ask, for example, what are the limitation and prospects for bridging medical anthropology and science studies. In the next articles, Goodman, Lorway, Reza-Paul, and Pasha, and Mishtal each ask how do cultural ideals, powerful social institutions, and experts relate to the situated and contested constructions of the body, subjectivity, and intentionality or conscience. Goodman explores mental health rehabilitation in an ultra-Orthodox setting in Israel to question how staff caretakers work with clients to creatively coconstruct an idealized self and the social Other. Rejecting a simplistic therapeutic discourse of resistance–accommodation to disability, he portrays a flow of mimesis and transformations toward culturally ideal selves within the social praxis of healing. This therapy itself embodies conflicts within the Orthodox community and in its relationships to others. Next, for Lorway, Reza-Paul, and Pasha, unquestioned assumptions in Mysore, India, about male sex workers' subjectivities (for, among other things, entering or continuing sex work) stymied HIV prevention efforts.

Fieldwork to discover the narrative, a moral *Bildungsroman*, of becoming and being a male sex worker reveals the layered social, political, and erotic landscapes of individual construction, which undermine public health presumptions that poverty alone dictates the start and trajectory of sex work and risk behaviors. Thus, effective public health interventions emerged after, not without, knowledge of the complex lifelong interplay among self-realization, social interactions, and sexual desire. Mishtal addresses the politics of reproductive health care in Poland by tracing how the construction of the “Conscience” law was shaped by the Catholic Church, which gave license to physicians to refuse to perform abortions. She powerfully evokes the tension interplay between the states definitions and control of the body of women in Poland, the collective acts of public and clandestine resistance claiming self-determination, and the church-based morality and postsocialist governmentality.

Last, two book reviews extend the conversations on this topic. Rödlach discusses Epprecht's study of the history and notion of a normative heterosexual Africa; and Nakamura considers Borovoy's study of idealizations of women, their use of alcohol, and the complexities of nurturance in Japan.

As editors, we indulge in the pleasure of learning early about these authors' work, their enticing questions and complaints about what we currently do, and do not, understand about bodies and subjectivities, and the scholarship that brought us to this point. Readers can now share this pleasure in the medical anthropology's interrogative imperative.

Citations and Notes

1. This quote is commonly misattributed to Voltaire. Pierre-Marc-Gaston, duc de Lévis (1764-1830), *Maximes et réflexions sur différents sujets de morale et de politique* (Paris, 1808): Maxim xvii. Il est encore plus facile de juger de l'esprit d'un homme par ses questions que par ses réponses. (It is easier to judge the mind of a man by his questions rather than his answers). William James's maxim, “Whenever two people meet, there are really six people present. There is each man as he sees himself, each man as the other person sees him, and each man as he really is,” has also been also attributed by some scholars to Oliver Wendell Holmes in “The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table,” Boston: Phillips, Sampson and Company, 1861.