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Vital Queries in Medical Anthropology: Still Goaded by the “Person”

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What is at stake and for whom and how is the ‘whom’ defined and constituted? These queries are foundational to, and deliver valuable contributions from, medical anthropology as it seeks to understand the entire range of naturally occurring conditions of life and health over the lifespan and especially how these are defined by peoples in particular times and locales. Much scholarship remains to be done to open up medical anthropology’s gaze to include the widest range of the human condition, from conception and birth through the social and actual endings of life and the contours of these as local categories (vs. a taken-for-granted generality applicable across human cultures).

The articles and book reviews we selected for this issue of *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* probe critically the sense of what is at stake, for whom, and the social practices in the contestations and collaborations around the cultural category of full moral *personhood*. Ethnographically, they span from troubled articulations between the biological individual and culturally valued person (Jenkins); to the social corrosions, both opposed and acquiesced to, eroding the social legitimation of the person of the aged parent by child, family, and community (Taylor; Cohen; McLean reviewed by Pohlman); emerging institution-level narratives for care that reconstitute a ‘person’ where formerly only the cancerous body was treated (Hansen and Tjørnhøj-Thomsen); to formulating accountability and consequence in the person defined at the level of the “corporation sole” of a shared public commons and humanity in health and war (respectively, Nichter and Pfeiffer; Inhorn; also Konrad reviewed by Speirs). These pieces focus on diverse conditions, including differences, construed locally as “limitations” that people experience in bodily health, or in capacity to organize thoughts in a “normative” fashion, to remember and deploy “normal” psychosocial skills, and notably to feel content about their lives. These articles push at the margins of concepts, knowledge, and discourse idioms required for us to be able to fully gain an appreciation of people with a range of capacities to engage in a personally and socially meaningful cultural life.

A worthwhile takeaway point highlighted here is the still formative value of the core anthropology construct of personhood as a goad to sharpen our questions about limits to our working concepts. The ethnography and discussions of person-hood in each article highlight pernicious, entrenched flaws in Western society that infuse health scholarship with now gravely moribund simplistic notions such as “individual” rather than personhood and “identity” rather than identification process. Some focal concerns emerge from the

ethnography presented here that readily negate monadic static notions of the person, supplanting them with a view of multiple people and institutions vigorously engaged in the tussles around social legitimation of persons who have some limitation in social performative ability. Read these articles to learn of the inescapable capabilities and vast richness of collective and individual disciplining directed toward personhood that is a vital occupation enduring across life and the conditions of life.

Notably, the forms of discourse in this issue of *MAQ* are diverse. They are not ground down to that homogenous Fordist boilerplate design of contemporary behavioral science and public health journal articles. Rather, in the most scientifically rigorous fashion, the discourse form of each author's text here is multiply determined. The forms used are best suited to accessing and exploring the particular kinds of phenomena and ways of knowing on which it focuses; it is also reflective of the state of development of knowledge on that topic. An essay is the most appropriate form for Taylor's dialectic (critical–personal) exploration of new knowledge of experiences in coming to know the worlds of collaborating and negotiating her stance and of intimate experiences of continuing life together with a mother developing Alzheimer's. Similarly, Cohen's form is a reflective commentary to situate and evoke further framings for the nature of insights from Taylor's essay. The case-oriented form of Castañeda's article is suited to the extended long-term fieldwork locating issues of personhood and citizenship in assigning paternity for pregnant noncitizens in Germany, whereas the article–report style of Jenkins presents core domains from content analysis of long-term research derived from engagements that question and extend knowledge in a more mature field of inquiry.

Thus, an Anthropology of powerful curiosity and insight is illuminated by the articles, essays, and book reviews in this issue. They seek out fundamental categories that powerfully shape a people's sense of values to transform and preserve over the span of human conditions (ones that are not homogenous, simple, and readily knowable), which must be discovered as comprised of multiple traditions and negotiated complexly within the localities of particular communities. What more exciting locus is there for basic research and debate than one where that knowledge can give substantial credibility to taking action by socially engaged scholars!