

“Creative Methods and Participatory Arts Research in Medical Anthropology” – Conference Report of the 9th MAYS Meeting

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Introduction: Focusing on Junior Scholars' Perspectives

In medical anthropology, participatory action research, body mappings, various photography-based methods such as photovoice projects, and others have proven to be useful tools in researching health, illness, and wellbeing. At the same time, arts-based methods seem to allow for a more participatory or collaborative approach to research and knowledge transfers. As these creative and/or arts-based methods gain popularity, they also raise multiple questions about the (re)presentation of knowledge, the role(s) and position(s) of researchers and research participants, as well as the possible theoretical and methodological gains of such approaches for the field of medical anthropology. Since both these methods and the debates around them hold particular significance also for early career scholars, these questions were central to the 2018 annual meeting of the Medical Anthropology Young Scholars Network (MAYS) that took place on Oct 5th-6th 2018 at Freie Universität (FU) Berlin.

For almost 10 years MAYS brings together students and early career scholars with an interest in medical anthropology from various academic institutions in Europe and beyond to discuss ongoing research projects and share thoughts on current debates among peers. For the meeting in October 2018, the MAYS coordinators **Lilian Kennedy** (University of Edinburgh) and **Ursula Probst** (Freie Universität Berlin) chose creative methods as the theme to highlight junior scholars' perspectives and contributions to methodological debates in medical anthropology. Thirty-five medical anthropology M.A. and PhD students as well as early postdocs gathered at FU Berlin to share their experiences with creative methods and collaboration in their research projects and to discuss the (dis-)advantages of a more creative approach to knowledge production. To ensure that everybody could get substantial feedback on their work the meeting employed a tandem-presenter-format, where papers were not presented by their authors themselves, but by previously assigned tandem partners who summarized and commented on the previously circulated papers. These presentations took place in three parallel groups and were complemented with workshops on photography, mapping, and circus arts as well as a participatory brainstorming on the implications of creative methods for the researchers' politics of representation.

Group A: Connecting Worlds – Bringing together Artists and Anthropologists

Starting off the first group session, **Aleksandra Bartoszko** (VID Specialized University)

presented “The Virus”, an ethnographic comic book on Hepatitis C among (former) injecting drug-users, which was the product of a collaboration between her as a social anthropologist, a graphic artist, and one of the key interlocutors of her research (see image below). The group members subsequently discussed the promises and challenges of the “communication-triangle” arising in such a collaboration: Language, methods, perspectives, values, and goals needed to be negotiated among the three collaborators, as well as with the (potentially critical) perspective of medical personnel and future readers. **Carolina Avila Testa** (Christian-Albrechts-Universität zu Kiel) reflected on the inclusion of an artist as a third party in the ethnographic encounter and the use of his drawings and photography in the field as a methodological tool. In her experimental contribution, **Ritti Soncco** (University of Edinburgh) explored the intersection between surreal art and medical anthropology and its value for anthropological dissemination, emphasizing the element of “confusion” as potentially engendering critical engagement among the wider public. Finally, **Laura Perler** (University of St. Gallen) presented her “rhizomatic” dissertation on transnational egg donation, which incorporates the written material as well as a website featuring audio-collages of interviews, photographs and ambience-soundscapes.

Salient points in the group discussion were issues arising in the collaborative process such as how funding opportunities (or a lack thereof) might influence and restrict academic independence, artistic freedom, and the accessibility of the final product. The need to foster and promote connections and networking between artistic and anthropological circles was addressed as well, since despite the apparent “kinship” and overlap between the two disciplines there are still very few spaces in academia to develop this connection productively. Introducing creative and artistic actors and methods into ethnography was discussed as a multidirectionally enriching process that increases communication channels and paths of learning not just between the directly involved actors, but also for relevant professions and the lay-audience.

Group B: Affecting the Field and Letting Oneself be Affected

The discussions in the second group revolved around the affective dimensions of doing fieldwork and the question of how to translate corporeal and emotional experiences into representational forms. **Côme Ledésert** (University of Westminster) started the paper presentations with his reflections on producing ethnographic films in a collaborative manner. In his project about a woman’s recovery from drug addiction, he makes use of “event-led filmmaking” in which a filmmaker and his/her protagonist explore their positions in a mutually and affectively unfolding way. In a similar vein, **Miriam Eigenheer** (Freie Universität Berlin) framed her upcoming fieldwork project on shamanic healing in the Peruvian Amazon. By means of audio-visual methods, she aims at approaching the corporeal and sensorial dimensions of plant healing in the encounter between health-seeking tourists and two traditional healers.

Soula Marinoudi’s (University of Thessaly) paper dealt with expressional forms that go beyond language. Making the sensory experiences and creativity of her autistic interlocutors the topic of her presentation, she asked how autistic forms of subject formation might challenge the

hegemony of ableist modes of communication and empathy. The last two presentations explored creative ways of investigating “the body” as a socio-material entity. With her filmic research about her grandmother’s “corporeal itinerary”, **Edurne Urrestarazu Garcia** (Aarhus University) discussed the potential of visual methodologies for approaching age-related bodily changes that are embedded in kin networks of care – including the ethnographer herself. **Max Schnepf** (University of Amsterdam) explored the potential of photography and queer sensibilities for understanding the performative and affective qualities of body-making projects. Introducing “[writing sexy](#)” as a form of representation, he asked how the sexual repertoire of his field might provide tools to attend to [reality as being constantly in the making](#) within the practices and relationalities of his field.

<https://twitter.com/medethnoblog/status/1048195153004040192>

Overall, the papers in this group were concerned with what Stodulka, Selim, and Mattes (2018) call “epistemic affects” – that is with questions regarding the affective qualities of research and how to productively make use of them. In the discussions, this encompassed not only suggestions for challenging power hierarchies by engaging with one’s affective involvement in the field. The participants also inquired how to do justice to their interlocutors’ concerns in conveying what easily evades the academic text – the corporeal, sensorial, and emotional.

Group C: Addressing Power Differentials

In the third group, **Dalia Iskander** (University College London) and **Annigje van Dijk** (Leuven University) presented some insights on the potentials and challenges of using (participatory) photography in the field. The subsequent discussion addressed the question of how participation is or can be defined in participatory research projects. This thought was taken up by Francesca Cancelliere (University of Lisbon) in her presentation of methodological dilemmas of visual methods, which added the issue of stigma and visual representation to the discussion. **Rayan Korri** (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität Munich) shared similar concerns about the limitations of creative methods in dealing with (potentially) highly stigmatized topics such as sexual and reproductive health. Lastly, **Caroline Contentin El Masri** (Freie Universität Berlin) provided insight into her experiences with various participatory research projects in Berlin (e.g., on healthy eating and kitchen remedies) that faced similar problems.

In summary, a central issue in this group was the potential of creative methods for challenging power structures and dynamics of empowerment, especially when working with marginalized research participants: While creative methods can certainly contribute to a theoretical as well as practical critique of power relations in our fields, they are themselves embedded in these very structures. Therefore, the application of creative methods requires thorough reflection on how participation is or can be defined as well as addressing the question of who or what might be in- or excluded by these methods.

Experiencing Creative Methods: Workshops, Participatory Brainstorming, and Open Exhibition Space

In between group sessions, the participants had the opportunity to attend four workshops in which researchers presented their own experiences in using creative and participatory methods. **Franziska Seise** (Freie Universität Berlin) discussed the use of photo elicitation interviews in a research project about the formation of feelings in a Berlin secondary school, while **Stefan Reinsch** (University of Lübeck), drawing on his own research, more generally reflected on the use of photography as a model of collaboration. Questions of ethics, confidentiality and consent were discussed, which attain a heightened relevance when working with children and teenagers. These questions were also extended to a situation where photographs might be used for “non-traditional” ways of dissemination, e.g. in the form of exhibitions or other visual publications that can pose a challenge especially when such opportunities arise after “conventional” consent was obtained prior to data collection.

On the second conference day, **Maayan Ash** (London School of Tropical Health and Medicine) introduced the participants to socio-spatial methods and principles, based on her experience as an anthropologist and urban designer. The fourth workshop was led by **Maria Ibiß** (Quadria University of Applied Sciences), who talked about the potential of “circus exercises” for an applied anthropology with a child-centered research approach. At the end of the first conference day, **Judith Albrecht**, **Nasima Selim** (both Freie Universität Berlin), and **Maria Ibiß** led a participatory brainstorming on the core themes of the workshop. In particular, they invited the participants to reflect upon broader societal and academic contexts within which the use of creative and participatory methods has to be situated.

<https://twitter.com/medethnoblog/status/1048226113888112642>

Judging from the participants’ feedback, one of the highlights of the meeting turned out to be the open exhibition space of some of the creative output of the presented research projects. While not all participants were able to bring their materials to the meeting, a variety of methods, materials, and practices could be seen and experienced in this open space. It provided all participants with an opportunity to engage in less formal conversations about their work, ask practical questions about different methods and experiences, and exchange ideas about further developments of the presented works. In this regard, the exhibition served not only as a platform to present different projects, but also illustrated the potentials of creative methods and their outputs to display different forms of knowledge and instigate discussions and ideas.

First, the [video reflexive ethnography “Kashi Labh”](#) by **Rajat Nayyar** was screened. Then **Edurne Urrestarazu Garcia** showed a part of the ethnographic film she made accompanying her grandmother in her everyday life, and **Laura Perler** presented some pictures and soundscapes from her research on egg donation arrangements in Spain and Switzerland. **Carolina Avila Testa** and her partner exhibited pictures of their research on therapeutic complementaries among Peruvian immigrants, where they employed drawing, photography and digital tools as methods. Lastly, **Aleksandra Bartoszko** brought a few copies of the comic she created in collaboration with an artist and a former drug user on [drug consumption and Hepatitis C](#) (see gallery below).

What You See is What You Get? Potentials and Dangers of Creative Methods for Junior Scholars

The exhibition of materials also made apparent the meeting's tacit emphasis on visual methods, which, however, was not a deliberate choice of the organizers, but occurred based on the proposed papers. This shows that many of the so far established and/or employed creative arts-based methods rely on visuality and visual representations of research findings. This aspect itself needs to be critically analyzed, as the conversations at the meeting showed: Firstly, visual methods and the visual (re)presentation of research participants and/or their realities raise many ethical questions, and while new technologies make these methods easy to use, we also have to ask what happens to those people who do not want to be seen. Secondly, methods working with other senses like touch or sound, or bodily movement seem to hold a lot of potential especially for medical anthropology, as they could be a very productive source for investigating the lived experiences of health and illness or the body.

While young scholars seem especially prone to using creative methods due to their promise of a "fresh perspective" on ethnographic research, the participants also addressed difficulties in employing innovative methodologies. Apart from the various methodological and ethical concerns raised throughout the meeting, in the final discussion we also talked about the issue that conducting (collaborative) research projects and/or employing creative methods in many cases requires (financial) resources, which especially junior scholars often do not have access to, making it difficult to realize creative ideas. Furthermore, the point was raised that the potential of creative methods to produce material, better suited for public engagement than conventional academic texts, may also hold the danger of making it yet another requirement especially for junior scholars to build a career, thereby potentially increasing [the current pressures in academia](#) instead of making space for creative exploration and innovation.

While the discussions throughout the meeting made clear that there are many questions on theoretical, methodological, ethical, and political levels around creative methods that need to be addressed and negotiated in each case, the contributions also emphasized the necessity to continue the critical conversation on creative and collaborative methodologies. Although they might not serve as a mere replacement of more "conventional" methods like participant observation and different forms of conversations and interviews, arts-based methods do offer new and different ways of engaging with our fields and research participants, and encourage us to rethink definitions of knowledge and its production.

The next MAYS meeting will take place on 4-5 July 2019 at the University of Turin, Italy. The theme of the meeting will be "Being there. Medical Anthropology in Action". For further information and the CfP visit [our website](#) or our [Facebook group](#).

Bio statements

Ursula Probst is one of the current MAYS coordinators and a PhD student at the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology at Freie Universität Berlin. She is currently conducting research on the lived realities of people from Central and Eastern European countries engaged in sex work in Berlin, which often confronted her with the limitations of creative methods.

Karoline Buchner is an MA student at the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology at Freie Universität Berlin as well as a student assistant at the institute's Medical Anthropology Research Area. She conducted field research on informal and professional Chinese medicine in Taiwan. She is also a research associate at the Institute of Chinese Life Sciences at Charité Berlin.

Max Schnepf has obtained his Master of Science at the University of Amsterdam. As part of the master's program in Social Sciences, he conducted ethnographic fieldwork at an upmarket hairdressing salon in Berlin about bodies in styling practices. He documents his research on the fieldwork blog www.anthrobod.net.

References

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