



Robert Koch Institute | Nordufer 20 | D-13353 Berlin

Outbreak preparedness and health emergencies: What has been and could be the contribution of German medical anthropology?

21.12.2021

Workshop with anthropologists working in Germany in the field of Global Health

Our reference:
ZIG

Background and focus:

The globally increasing frequency of infectious disease outbreaks coupled with persisting limitations of public health systems in many parts of the world have necessitated an enlargement of medical and public health humanitarian responses with a growing involvement of different types of social science expertise, in particular anthropology. This development is also evident in the German Global Health community.

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In Germany, the link of the anthropological and medical disciplines has a complex and particularly difficult history. It is well known and well documented in research that a primary goal of colonial medicine and also of the German research efforts was to protect colonial settlers and soldiers from local health risks and to preserve the local population as working force, which was often conscripted into forced labor. Tropical medicine institutes developed in this context in the main cities, often port cities of colonial powers. The origins of the clinical field of tropical medicine can be traced back to the emergence of these institutes.

The relationships between anthropology and medicine has been further darkened by the racial doctrine of naturally given evolutionary human races hierarchies of Nazi Germany, the resulting killing of millions of people and the related medical human experimentation. With decolonizing processes in many African countries, and security narratives associated with the Cold War in Western countries, the concept of international health – focusing mainly on infectious disease challenges and improvement of hygiene and clean water supply – developed as a sign of the commitment of high-income countries to support low-income and newly created states (Holst 2020). In Germany, the history of the [Bernhard Nocht Institute for Tropical Medicine](#), the [Paul-Ehrlich Institute](#) and the Robert Koch Institute itself summarizes this trajectory.

The Robert Koch Institute is a federal institute within the portfolio of the Federal Ministry of Health



The term Global Health consolidated during the past two decades with the realization that the world has become more globalized and more interconnected. Therefore, more vulnerable to the worldwide appearance of both infectious and non-infectious sanitary risks necessitating international collaboration to combat health inequalities and strengthen outbreak preparedness/responses. In Germany, this realization runs parallel with the country's emergence as a global player, as well as with the heightened geopolitical interest in counteracting Global Health threats (Holst 2020). New Global Health initiatives such as the [World Health Summit](#), the [German Platform for Global Health](#), the [German Alliance for Global Health Research](#) and the [WHO Hub for Pandemic and Epidemic Intelligence in Berlin](#) prove this point.



Medical anthropology's engagement with Global Health has been channeled through different research lines: 1) ethnographic studies of health inequalities, 2) diversity of knowledge regimes of health and medical systems, and 3) a critical look at international health programs and policies (Janes and Corbett 2009, Fassin 2020). Additionally, the impact of globally circulating science and technology – like the study of the interrelationship and (dis)connectivities of pathogens, epidemics, people, ideas, infrastructure and Western science – on local worlds has been a particular point of interest (Beisel 2015, Umlauf 2016, Dilger and Mattes 2018, H. Kelly and Marí-Sáez 2018).

Medical anthropology, as a sub-discipline, remains small in Germany, although its potential and constant growth are proven by the formation and consolidation of professorships and research groups in several universities across the country. Proof of this dynamism is the research mobilization around the Covid-19 pandemic to produce up-to-date information and foster anthropological debate. For example, the blog [Medizinethnologie](#), run by the [Working Group Medical Anthropology of the German Anthropological Association](#), has published insightful short articles addressing anthropological perspectives about the Covid-19 pandemic in Germany and globally.

Moreover, the ongoing crystallization of Berlin as a Global Health research and action center has brought medical anthropological research to the fore, and has revealed important questions about its role within interdisciplinary teams for Global Health emergency responses. In light of these sanitary and geopolitical events, it becomes ever more pressing to reflect on the future of Global Health and the changes these recent developments might bring for the medical anthropology research in order to highlight new challenges, perspectives and opportunities.

In the “Center for International Health Protection” (ZIG) at the Robert Koch Institute in Berlin, social sciences, and especially ethnographic research and knowledge production methods, are a growing expertise. They are considered a key element for the institute's main international objective of contributing to the right of all humans to health through long-term partnerships, based on respect and mutual support. Although ZIG has only been created two years ago, it has already successfully positioned itself as a key Global Health player in the field of epidemic preparedness and response by, among others, collaborating with [WHO's Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network \(GOARN\)](#).

Given its interest of enhancing anthropological know-how for Global Health emergency response, ZIG seeks to establish long-lasting and strategic partnerships with already existing anthropological health emergency response networks and social science analytical cells. As such, ZIG would like to offer its specific expertise and a space that could act as a binding element for German Global Health anthropologists. The need to create synergies with the German expertise has already been highlighted by the different existing international response platforms. A thorough mapping of the relevant actors, knowledge and expertise in Germany could contribute to consolidating this expertise, as well as identifying synergies and create new collaboration within the country and at the international level.

**References:**

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H. Kelly, A. and A. Marí-Sáez (2018). "Shadowlands and dark corners." Medicine Anthropology Theory **5**(3).

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Janes, C. R. and K. K. Corbett (2009). "Anthropology and Global Health." Annual review of anthropology **38**(1): 167-183.

Umlauf, R. a. B., Uli (2016). "Translating Technologies in Global Health: Diagnostic Spaces between Standardization and Adaptation in Uganda's Malaria Control Programme." Working Papers of the Priority Programme 1448 of the German Research Foundation: Adaptation and Creativity in Africa: Technologies and Significations in the making of Order and Disorder **20**.

Workshop objectives:

Being aware that the positioning of the German anthropological expertise in Global Health emergency response is an ongoing process, ZIG offers an online workshop through which past experiences and possibilities for future development could be put on the table. The main goal is to enable the exchange of ideas as to why and how to create a directory of Germany-based researchers in Global Health and anthropology who are ready to contribute, including through deployment, to health emergency response globally.

Besides exchanging experiences, including on methods, the workshop will encourage participants to reflect on how to carry out anthropological research during health emergencies and outbreaks aimed at mitigating the public health impact at the local level. Furthermore, the challenges related to what is expected of anthropologists and what their actual contribution is, as well as the actual need of creating a network based in Germany, will be addressed.

Target audience:

The workshop is directed to anthropologists having an affiliation with a German institution or working in Germany who have been involved in outbreak response anywhere (including in Germany) or work on Global Health issues. Space is also available for other anthropologists, especially students, interested in the field of Global Health and in outbreak response deployments.



Workshop set-up:

Speakers: Dr. Hansjörg Dilger, Dr. Uli Beisel, Dr. Sung-Joon Park and Dr. Almudena Marí-Sáez.

Moderation: Dr. Almudena Marí-Sáez and Carlos Rocha

Format of the workshop: The workshop will take place online. We will begin with presentations about previous experiences and theoretical reflections related to Global Health followed by questions and answers (**Moment 1**). We will continue with small group discussions on the different challenges related to anthropological expertise during health emergency response and a moderated sharing of ideas on the best way forward for German anthropological expertise in outbreak response (**Moment 2**). **Participation in Moment 2 is limited to 42 participants.**

Duration: from 10:00 to 17:00 CTE

Technology: WebEx

<https://rki.webex.com/rki/j.php?MTID=mff6oef0578b3docfca278953b24e9b8b>

Date: **Wednesday, February 2nd 2022**

Please confirm attendance to the presentations and interest to take part in the afternoon session (**moment 2 is limited to 42 participants**) to one of the following email addresses: zig.anthropology@rki.de or rochac@rki.de



Agenda

Introduction:

10:00 – 10:20 Opening words by Dr. Johanna Hanefeld, Head of ZIG- Robert Koch Institute and participants presentation.

Moment 1: anthropological perspectives on Global Health

10:20 – 10:50 Dr. Hansjörg Dilger (Freie Universität Berlin): Medical Anthropology and Global Health in Germany.

10:50 – 11: 20 Dr. Sung-Joon Park (Bernhard Nocht Institute for Tropical Medicine – AG Medical Anthropology): Revisiting the politics of epidemics.

11:20 – 11:40 Discussion.

11:40 – 12:00 Break

12:00 – 12:30 Dr. Uli Beisel (Bayreuth Universität): Interdisciplinarity and collaborations in Global Health.

12:30 – 13:00 Dr. Almudena Marí-Sáez (Robert Koch Institute – ZIG): Situating anthropology and response to health emergencies.

13:00 – 13:20 Discussion.

13:20 – 14:00 Lunch break.

Moment 2: discussing the way forward (limited participation).

14:00 – 14:10 Back to plenary and distribution in small groups

14:10 – 15:30 Main challenges about anthropological contributions and expectations (small groups).

15:30 – 16:30 Open discussion about anthropological contributions and ways forward (moderated by Dr. Almudena Marí-Sáez, Robert Koch Institute – ZIG)

16:30 – 17:00 Wrap up and conclusions

17:00 Thanks, good-byes and end of workshop.