HEALTH, MONEY, COMMERCE, AND WEALTH

Anthropological Perspectives

Edited by Donald C. Wood
and Raja Swamy

RESEARCH IN ECONOMIC ANTHROPOLOGY

VOLUME 43

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RESEARCH IN ECONOMIC ANTHROPOLOGY VOLUME 43

HEALTH, MONEY, COMMERCE, AND WEALTH: ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

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This volume of REA is dedicated to the memory of anthropologist Carolyn K. Lesorogol (1965–2023). Carolyn was a member of REA's Editorial Advisory Board since its 2014 formation, and was instrumental in forging a connection between REA and the Society for Economic Anthropology that year, as president of the latter. Furthermore, she published in REA and served as a peer review referee. A true friend of REA, Carolyn's contributions to the series are much appreciated, and she is fondly remembered.

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documentaries, and has published some 150 articles and reviews in books and professional journals. He is currently engaged in a research project with a Brazilian colleague examining religious entrepreneurship among Brazilian immigrants in New York City and several applied projects in a favela (slum) in the Northeastern Brazilian city of Fortaleza in which he and colleagues are working to improve the mental health of the members of the community and help them to raise their own food.

Jessica R. Ham is an environmental anthropologist working with the theoretical tools of feminist political ecology to understand how people relate to and interact with their environments to produce meaningful and healthy lives. To date, her work has centered on the ways smallholders in northern Ghana are contending with a changing climate as they strive to continue growing the food that nourishes a household. This work conceptualizes hunger as relational – produced at the interface of changing landscapes, agrarian political economies, foodways, and the body. Currently on faculty at Oxford College, Emory University's liberal arts college, most of Dr Ham's time and energy is dedicated to helping first and second year undergraduates see the power of learning to think like an anthropologist.

Wesam Hassan is a medical doctor who turned to anthropology, and is currently a doctoral candidate in social anthropology at the University of Oxford. She thinks through concepts of uncertainty, temporality, speculation, risk analysis, material and visual culture, and human techniques of negotiating everyday life precariousness. Her doctoral research is investigating speculative economic activities, gambling, and state-regulated games of chance activities in Turkey. Her MA research examined the biomedical uncertainty of HIV and AIDS, the experiences of HIV-positive mothers in Egypt, and the biopolitics of HIV and AIDS in Egypt post-2011. Hassan is also animated by visual and material culture and anthropology of consumption with focus on affective relations with practices (shopping, money, gambling, and betting) in the virtual and real worlds. Prior to focusing on her academic career starting in 2019, she worked as a public health specialist and researcher for more than 10 years with development agencies, such as UNFPA and UNICEF, and academic entities including John Hopkins University.

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classification, politics, warfare, and material culture. She is now leading indigenous health care projects in collaboration with the Munduruku Indians, and ethno-development initiatives with the Warao, who are Venezuelan refugee Indians, in Santarém. Her main teaching subjects are economic anthropology, political anthropology, kinship relations, and Amerindian mythology.

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INTRODUCTION: ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON HEALTH, MONEY, COMMERCE, AND WEALTH

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As was the case with volume 41 of Research in Economic Anthropology (REA), the present installment is appearing more than a year later than originally expected, also due to effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on academia, on ethnographic research, and on scholarly writing and publishing. (Volume 42 was guest-edited and did not stem from a general call for papers.) Although somewhat smaller than the average for REA, this volume addresses a wide range of topics that are central to economic anthropology and has an equally broad geographic perspective, with articles grounded in fieldwork undertaken in West Africa, Asia, Europe, and North and South America. Money, commerce, and wealth emerge as major topics of concern, and health, work, and uncertainty receive more attention in certain essays. The volume is expected to leave its mark in the ever-unfolding REA narrative.

First, Jessica R. Ham investigates the connections between psychosocial health and anguish over educational expenses among agriculturalists in Ghana's Upper West Region, where she finds considerable concern among parents over their children's education, despite other endemic areas of uncertainty in daily life. Ham's ethnographically grounded article highlights education's special position as an enabler of hope due to its stabilizing quality and avoids a static discussion of education as a mere cause of distress by investigating it through general survey data as well as subjective, personal, explanations, and reflections. Children's education, and how parents feel about it, is a flexible bridge between past and present, and crisis and stability, and one which is constantly evaluated by mothers and fathers in terms of its relationship to these. Ham's article resonates with

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others on the economics of education that have appeared in REA in recent years (e.g., Goldín, 2014; Krabbe, 2020), which also point to the value of education amid uncertainty, and with volume 26 (2008), which focused on health and wellness.

In the second article, Wesam Hassan investigates the upsurge of cryptocurrency trading in Istanbul, Turkey, amid traders' concerns with the value of the national currency and the domestic economy in general. Here, as with Ham's study, concern for the future translates into action in the present. However, although the traders studied by Hassan do appear to be pursuing hope for the future in their activities, they are taking greater chances amid high financial unease, where risk may be high but where profits may also be very high – if luck is with them. Further, the article highlights the ambivalent place of currency trading in a moral order where speculative economic activity is likened to gambling. It is especially interesting that Wessam finds a situation of high volatility and great uncertainty leading to increased risk-taking rather than the opposite, especially given that said activities are subject to interpretation regarding potential conflict with Islamic law (cf. Tobin, 2014).

The third paper of this volume, by David A. Dayton, Nathan Draper, and Maureen Snow Andrade, also investigates currency exchanges amid uncertainty but with a narrower focus and encompassing local community ties and relations: the individual transactions of a small-scale informal lender in Bangkok, Thailand. Here, the social meaning of money, the relationship between creditor and debtor, and borrowers' community reputations take precedence and guide and define the entire enterprise. The authors' approach is notable for its focus on the lender, as distinct from studies that usually focus on the borrower. Further, it stands apart for illuminating a lending/borrowing situation that is not rural but urban and which is neither one of institutional microcredit loans nor necessarily viewed by borrowers as inherently exploitative. REA volumes have to date featured a number of studies of microcredit and other instances of lending and borrowing among disadvantaged people facing uncertainty in urban and rural locations (e.g., Hinrichsen, 2019; Lawrence, 2008; Murphy, 2019; Olayiwola, 2022); Dayton, Draper, and Andrade's contribution to the present volume is a welcome addition to this perspective. Furthermore, one cannot help but be reminded of the classic arguments on the embeddedness of economic activities in social relations by their article.

Next, Samuel Weeks discusses his approaches to investigating the world of financial elites in Luxembourg, which has developed into a major center of commerce in recent decades and even more so in the wake of Brexit. Weeks explores the process of tracing elites' networks while developing research networks, earning and building trust in a way similar to the subjects of his research, illuminating the insights and possibilities of actor-network theory. Notably, this article provides a vivid example of how to conduct research in a complex international political economic context such as offshore finance while remaining attentive to the intricate social worlds that shape the everyday lives and activities of its key actors, financial elites. As Parkinson (2014, p. 161) has noted, there is an inherent difficulty in accessing financial institutions for the purpose of conducting

ethnographic fieldwork; Weeks' contribution to this volume offers insight into this problem, how it might be overcome, and compliments studies of similar situations published in past REA volumes (e.g., Parkinson, 2014; Pitluck, 2016).

In the following essay, Dawn Rivers investigates the work strategies of non-employer business proprietors, people commonly identified as self-employed who do not employ others, in North Carolina and upstate New York, shedding light on their adaptations to the COVID-19 pandemic while also addressing its effects on her ethnographic research. In focusing on the flexibility and relative peripherality of this distinct subcategory of the self-employed in the United States, Rivers helps to continue REA's long-standing interest in self-employment in different situations and geographic locations (e.g., Gordon, 2009; Little, 2002; Spurles, 2007; Wilson, 2014; Zhong & Di, 2017).

The sixth article in this collection, by Helena Moreira Schiel, considers the adoption of cash and position and form of commerce among indigenous people of South America – specifically, the Xambioá people of Brazil, one among hundreds of native groups in the country. Notably, Schiel avoids viewing the Xambioá people as a single homogenous group by exploring the differences between several subgroups and eschews a static interpretation by tracing change over time. Schiel's account provides an ethnographically rich view into how indigenous communities in the contemporary Amazon confront and engage with money, recalling an important point made in the third essay of this volume – that social/cultural meanings of money often take precedence over its intrinsic value or utility (see Kus & Raharijaona, 2008; Truitt, 2006, for related studies of cultural/social meanings and uses of cash money in urban Vietnam and rural Madagascar, respectively).

Finally, distinguished anthropologist Sidney Greenfield wraps up the volume with a stimulating treatise on the alleviation of poverty on a global scale and a concrete proposal for achieving this. In addition to presenting a novel argument that is deserving of considerable rumination and debate, Greenfield reminds us of the undercurrent of wealth (concepts, absence, pursuit, etc.) that flows through the articles in this volume, to varying degrees. Moreover, the present essay seems to follow, rather naturally, from a series of arguments that Greenfield made in volumes 30, 32, and 34 of REA (2010, 2012, 2014). Interested readers are urged to consult this body of work as well. It is hoped that Greenfield's overture will inspire engagement, spark debate, and generate change.

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DISTRESSED IN HOPE: SCHOOL FEES AND THE STRUCTURAL SHAPING OF HEALTH IN UPPER WEST GHANA

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ABSTRACT

This study assesses distress in the lives of farming population in Ghana's northern interior. Whereas recent studies addressing mental health in Africa produce evidentially sound analyses of the correlated role of food and water insecurity, this study engages with how and why worries over educational costs feature so prominently in a measure of psychosocial well-being. While it is significant that education identifiably figures in escalating the experience with distress, my contention is that what is more important is putting that escalation into the context of why. I use Narotzky and Besnier's framework for understanding the economy as the interactions between crisis, value, and hope to situate a mixed methods study concerned with how distress is proximately shaped by the interactive socioeconomic features of daily life (paying school fees, buying food, cultivating maize, etc.) but ultimately shaped by structural features of the political economy that direct people's objectives amid chronic crisis. My proposition is that because education is where value resides, it is a primary vehicle by which people are acting in crisis in a hopeful manner. In this way, this study leverages the tools of economic anthropology within debates about how to best assess the ways in which health and illness are shaped by socioeconomic realms.

Keywords: Distress; social determinants of health; crisis; hope; Upper West Ghana

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INTRODUCTION

In 2017, newly elected Ghanaian President Nana Akufo-Addo put his Free Senior High School (FSHS) policy into action. An ambitious endeavor, the FSHS outlines that all students who qualify for and are placed into a public senior high school will have their fees absorbed by the government. Whereas primary school has been subsidized in Ghana since 1996 (to mixed effect), secondary school remained the obligation of students and their families (Akyeampong, 2009). That such a policy was a prominent feature of Akufo-Addo's campaign was not at all surprising; as simultaneous to his promotion of this political pledge, my fieldwork with voters in Ghana's northern interior between 2013 and 2015 was uncovering very vocal concerns about educational costs. In fact, worries about costs associated with school proved more severely worrisome than many other aspects of daily, rural life such as food insecurity, changing rainfall patterns, or fertilizer costs (Ham, 2016). It was not uncommon to hear from my interlocutors that food that would have been of pleasurable and nutritional benefit to a household was being sold to direct the money earned to school fees. While my inquiry was designed to interrogate the centrality of food insecurity as a worrying condition, the emergence of education as an intersecting variable forces a reconsideration of the ways in which poor mental health outcomes in rural West Africa are socially shaped.

As such, this article unpacks why education features so prominently as a distressing concern – especially considering recent attention within anthropology and human geography regarding the role of food insecurity in affecting mental health among rural African populations (Atuoye & Luginaah, 2017; Hadley & Patil, 2006). Though I do not wish to diminish the extent to which food insecurity is a telling indicator of socioeconomic marginalization or a causal feature of poor mental health, here I engage with important concerns about how researchers can better inquire into the social shaping of health. My goal is not to prove that education is the most distressing feature of people's daily life but rather to contextualize why people are more worried by educational costs than other issues or concerns to underscore the complexity of a distressing context rather than the isolation of an etiological variable. Distress is considered here less as a particular health outcome and more as an affective state demonstrative of how apprehension and anticipation shape the experience of life under late-stage capitalism (Molé, 2010).

I anchor my approach by engaging with recent critiques of the social determinants of health framework, critiques that question the extent to which socially infused health research is usefully outlining pathways to equity. While medical anthropologists have turned to semiotic frameworks (Yates-Doerr, 2020) and assemblage analyses (Chenhall & Senior, 2018), I take up a tool kit of economic anthropology, specifically Narotzky and Besnier's (2014) framing of the economy as the interrelationships between crisis, value, and hope to underscore the structural and relational dimensions of health. I argue that to make sense of why education is distressing, it is essential to understand how it is a feature prominently figuring in socioeconomic strategy (and imagination) within the context of

crisis. These navigations, in turn, should be seen as not just adaptive or a coping response but also about envisioning and enacting a future hoped to be better.

In the section that follows, I outline critiques of social determinants of health research to then position my uptake of crisis as a foundation for understanding how health is structurally shaped. With this framing in place, I then briefly relay the context of crisis in the Upper West Region (UWR) of Ghana and detail the methods used to bring the responses to this context of crisis into action. In exploring results from survey data and qualitative accounts, I present an interpretation of economic action deferent to costly school fees as the enactment of the valuation of education. By comparing across data sets and as aided by the crisis-value-hope dynamic, I argue that education enables hope because it is a stabilizing feature. It is my contention that education, despite being distressing, is envisioned to better enable diverse rural livelihoods in the future in ways that might even portend improved household well-being. By way of supporting this analysis in the discussion, I engage with a rich body of anthropological literature on the role of formal education in the human experience of navigating political economic realities. My culminating thoughts speak to how economic anthropology is vital for rehabilitating a social determinants of health framework capable of discerning the complex, intersecting, and always historically contingent features of social life that shape health.

STRUCTURALLY ENTANGLED DETERMINANTS OF HEATH: THE CASE FOR RELATING CRISIS AND VALUE

That there are social determinants that shape whether a population is healthy or ill is now widely recognized within the broad terrain of public health. The regard for this conceptual framing now influences the priorities of prominent global health bodies, including The World Health Organization (Marmot, 2005). What makes this a remarkable feature of the growth of public health is that by design, the social determinants of health perspective (SDH) is concerned with equity. To declare a commitment to understanding the role of the SDH is to state concern with why health disparities exist, not just that they do. The intent of the framework is to discern what is causing a certain health outcome (especially disparately) within a particular population by understanding the ways in which a population is shaped by intersecting social, political, economic, and environmental realms.

Social epidemiologist Nancy Krieger (2008) is an early and critical interrogator of the integrity of the SDH framework, concerned particularly with the extent to which researchers are engaging with interactive social and environmental dimensions across time and space. She challenges the language that has become commonplace in SDH research. Instead of proximate/downstream and ultimate/upstream, words that suggest linear pathways to and from our social worlds, she presents levels, pathways, and power as concepts that nurture multidimensional engagements that encourage analytical meanderings. Similarly, Michelle Parsons (2022) suggests that a successful SDH framing requires

relinquishing models and methods designed to identify risk factors. Her suggestion is for public health to be more embracing of concepts from medical anthropology such as multiplicity and indeterminacy.

Chenhall and Senior (2018) fall in step with these ideas by embracing the concept of assemblage to show that what is social is not isolatable. Working with Aboriginal populations in Australia, they underscore how their interlocutors do not perceive health or illness to stem from a uniform experience. Furthermore, this work demonstrates that the interplay between different facets of social environment can sometimes result in unexpected effects. For example, whereas improved housing facilities would be presumed to positively affect perceptions of health, those living within the changed living conditions find otherwise – that new housing destabilizes the social relations that are perceived to be more prominent in shaping health than material infrastructure.

Another prominent point of contention entails the failure of a SDH perspective to engage in analysis that finds resolution to health disparities. Medical anthropologist Emily Yates-Doerr (2020, p. 381) argues that when a health problem is imagined beginning at a measurable point that then advances to determined point, prescriptive solutions, not structural transformation, result. Her work clearly outlines the ways in which nutritional education has been such a failed prescriptive solution related to malnutrition in rural Guatemala. Instead of directing attention to why Guatemalans cannot access the foods they desire to be eating – to the policies and practices that have prominently shaped the realities of what foods they have access to – projects instead assume that the telling social determinant is a lack of knowledge or education on how to eat.

Cumulatively, what critiques of the SDH point out is that if equity is to remain a guiding principle in the SDH, it is necessary for analyses to account for the articulations of the political economy in people's lives. Understanding and acknowledging the structures that shape any social condition is vital for remediation and transformation to occur. True transformation requires not linking a social life to a singular event (which may conceal as much as it reveals) but to instead look to the political–economic framing of life in a context of past, present, and future (Griffin, 2020). Mindful of this work, my attendance to a context of distress in Upper West Ghana aims to bring awareness to decision-making patterns and socioeconomic habits within people's daily lives in a food insecure context. And I do so sensitive to how these daily actions are not mere reactions to present situations but are decisions and actions contingent upon deeply rooted processes of socioeconomic inequity.

In this goal, I find guidance in the careful conceptualization of crisis that Narotzky and Besnier (2014) outline. In their relaying, what underscores the unpredictability of life in late-stage capitalism is not risk of a particular or isolated predicament (such as food insecurity) but rather how people navigate and negotiate life in an uncertain context. As described by Achille Mbembe, uncertainty describes a process by which people must direct most of their energy into working against the constant corrosion of the present in a manner that also upholds the production of one's own humanity (Mbembe in Goldsone & Obarrio, 2016, p. 222). He makes the case that temporariness is the analytic most useful for