

Abstracts for Panel 6: Vocabularies of care

Conveners

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Panel

abstract:

As care became a global industry in recent decades, it has acquired a variety of meanings in the process, ranging from the neutral language of service provisioning to kin obligations and favours, and from gendered exploitation to the emotionally charged language of (seemingly) gratuitous subjective commitments. In short, the way in which people talk about caring for others, whether human or non-human, and being cared for is far from unambiguous. In fact, 'care' is so deeply embedded in our representations of the world that it develops its own vocabularies across social and geographical locations, making it difficult to translate across languages and contexts. In some languages, care can be phrased in terms of life and death, whereas the labor of care can be put in transactional or even pejorative terms. This polysemy points to the ambiguities that accrue across the social contexts of care: do we care for others out of love, charity, obligation, or merely because they pay us to? Is care prompted by emotions or by contracts? Whether it refers to wage labor, exploitation, or filial duty, and whether it is reserved to kin or extended onto strangers, care inhabits not only a multitude of social worlds, but also a variety of idioms. This panel explores the emic vocabularies in which care is expressed, by way of reckoning with the broader imaginaries of the social and the moral that various forms of care are embedded in.

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[Abstract: Ana Chirițoiu](#)

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Paper title: Heartache and etymology: approximating 'pity' across linguistic and social contexts

Abstract:

The southern Romanian Roma women that I worked with often approximated a vast repertoire of feelings of care as *milă*, which translates as 'pity,' 'charity,' 'grace,' or 'heartache.' This single word conveyed, variously, their love for their children, falling in love with their spouses, caring for them throughout the marriage, expectations to be cared for, and even the discovery of a shared humanity with random non-Roma, not to mention feelings for animals. At the same time, *milă* is something that this group of Roma hope to elicit from strangers when begging abroad. In this paper, I explore what makes *mila* so prevalent and mutable across social contexts and how it relates to other forms of care, amity (Fortes 1969) and grace (Pitt-Rivers 2017) inside and outside of one's group of belonging? This paper is, then, a reflection on the vacillations inherent to translating the word 'milă' from Romani and Romanian into English, and to representing the wide variety of contexts in which the word is used as well as its overtones, resulting from its etymology and history of usage.

[Abstract: Gudrun Dahl](#)

Gudrun Dahl

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Paper title: Care as an evaluative, descriptive and analytical concept

Abstract:

The paper presents a (friendly) attempt to reflectively look at the contemporary popularity of the concept of care as an analytical and descriptive tool in environmental anthropology. The concept has strong normative connotations. In a situation of wished-for ethical and moral change, its use can be terms of value promotion, but also of moral self-presentation as well as the ethics of recognition in relation to subaltern humans and non-human co-beings. Obviously, the goal of the discipline is both to improve our analytical understanding of people, their societies and interaction with the environment and to make a contribution against widespread ecological crisis. To what extent does the moralization of our discourse contribute to our goals?

In dominant Western conceptualisations of care, the initial motivation for caring action is closely integrated with care as practice and consequence. This is the point of departure for much writing on how to secure sustainability. The initial attitude and intention are on one side expected to bring forward practice and effects and apparent consequences are seen as signs of the performer's meaning and intent, the very basis of the moral dimension of the concept. I would like to argue that this everyday conceptual merge makes it even more urgent to distinguish in our analysis between intent-agency and a Latourian effect-agency. Chains of consequences are central to ecosystem understanding, but in a situation of rapid knowledge change, ecological results of action may diverge substantially from the emic understanding of "care", for better or worse. In order to meaningfully use "care" as a concept for

classifying action, we need to decide whether it is the beneficial consequences that counts or the good intent, making very clear the distinction between the ideology and practices of care.

While the influence of “ethics of care” is relatively new to anthropology, it has a longer prior history e.g. in the philosophy of human nursing and charity. In an article on development discourse, I have argued that policy buzzwords tend to age and be discarded in response to the problems that arise in their being put into practice. The “source fields” for the “ethics of care” have in this way seen the development of different streams of criticism, where the initial morally appreciated connotations of the concept are challenged by pointing to the negative aspects of practice. Examples concern the “moral-washing” of oppression, the invisibilising and underpaying of the labor of care etc. A final question is therefore if similar issues are relevant to environmental anthropology. Do we have anything to learn from other disciplines who have followed the leading star of “ethics of care”?

Abstract: von Essen and Redmalm

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Paper title: Natural Born Cullers: Culling and Caring for Wildlife by Municipal Hunters in Swedish Cities

Abstract:

The intersection of care and violence has long been a topic for biopolitical scholarship. In the everyday cases in which non-human studies have recently engaged, we have seen how the killing of wildlife has been framed not only as a societal service, but as acts of kindness for wildlife populations on different levels: as providing humane euthanasia to wild animals that would otherwise suffer worse fates, as protecting valued wildlife by culling the ‘pest’ species that prey on them, and as keeping a balance in the ecosystem. In Germanic hunting cultures there is a strong tradition of caring, such that hunting is literally framed as ‘caring with the rifle’, and in Swedish, the term for wildlife management is *viltvård* (wildlife care), the same term used for healthcare and the act of nursing.

In the study ‘License to Cull: Rural and urban geographies of wild animal culling’, we conducted participant observation and twenty interviews with municipally contracted hunters across Sweden, and ten interviews with municipal officials responsible for wildlife management. Hence, we focused on hunters whose express mandate is to ‘care’ for and manage wildlife, rather than hunting for sport. Rather than reproduce notions of these cullers as cold-blooded executioners, we present their unease and personal beliefs that sometimes go against cull orders, pressure from the public to remove problem animals, and the situations and circumstances in which they feel that care tips too far into control.

Abstract: Sverker Finnström

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Paper title: To kill and care for the dead: wartime burials across time, continents and oceans

Abstract

In this paper I focus on death, care and burial in times of war. With stories from the First World War in East Africa, the Second World War in Southeast Asia, and the more recent civil war in Acholiland, northern Uganda, I argue the obvious: as anywhere in the world, death and burial are of existential concern for those Acholi individuals who crossed continents and oceans to live and die in these wars. In any war, an old declared, “you must kill your enemy before he kills you.” During the First World War, the British colonial power didn’t care much about the massive number of allied African fatalities on the East African battlefields, arguing that any care for the African dead would be a waste of time and tax money. During the Second World War in Burma, thousands of soldiers from Africa, Japan and elsewhere died or were forever lost to roam the jungles, left behind, abandoned with little or no care. Indeed, a man in rural northern Uganda once told me that of all wartime violence and deaths he had seen throughout the years of war there, “the most painful thing is to die like an animal,” that is, a truly bad death without a proper burial and the intimacy of ritual whereby the living care for the dead, also the enemy, and the dead – again, friend and foe – care for the living.

Abstract: Emma Rimpiläinen

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Paper title: “Nobody needs us:” left-behind people’s frustrated expectations of reciprocal care

Abstract:

This paper examines an emic way of articulating frustrated expectations of care in the Russian-speaking post-Soviet space: *‘my nikomu ne nuzhny,’* or ‘nobody needs us.’ During my fieldwork in Ukraine and Russia with people displaced by war in the Donbas region since 2014, this sentence was evoked to lament how the war had ruined normal lives or to criticise the state’s failure to care for its subjects appropriately. After my fieldwork, I have come to notice this sentence in various post-Soviet contexts, voiced especially by the unemployed, impoverished pensioners, and other left-behind people. ‘Nobody needs us’ is used to lament the disappearance of social support and employment, but also of the whole forward-facing project of building socialism, to which all worker-citizens contributed (Buck-Morss 2000; Semigina, Yurochko, and Stopolyanska 2022; Zakirova & Zakus 2016).

I argue that ‘nobody needs us’ articulates not just the unravelling of a social contract in which citizens contributed their labour and taxes to the state and got housing, subsidies, or guaranteed employment in return. ‘Nobody needs us’ is also about the desire to *feel needed* by society, that is, it shows that care between state and citizen should be reciprocal. Indeed, one-directional care in the form of charity wounds because it cannot be repaid (Muehlebach 2012). ‘Nobody needs us’ thus integrates several ideas: not having one’s needs met and not being needed are intertwined with a sense of existential ‘stuckness,’ or of ‘not going anywhere in life’ (see also Hage 2009).

[Abstract: Molly Sundberg](#)

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Paper title: Who Cares about the Global South?

Abstract:

In the world of international development, profit-making actors and instruments are gravitating towards the center of aid policy and practice. This presentation is an anthropological attempt at understanding how capitalist interests are increasingly interwoven into the fabric of development work. It takes its empirical point of departure in the perspectives of the new creed of private sector experts who are carving out a space for themselves in the aid industry. Based on the testimonies of investment managers in Development Finance Institutions and public agency staff working with private sector instruments, I discuss how commercial enterprises are claiming a superior ability to care for the needs and interests of developing economies, compared to non-profit actors. In so called 'development investments', financial investment is partly equated with relational investment, and financial risk-taking with a sign of faith in the recipient's ability to reciprocate. This is contrasted with the 'disinterested alms' of grant-based aid that expect nothing in return, take no risk, and are thus not as relationally invested. Development investments, in other words, offer a new interpretation of the relationship between profit-seeking and financial risk-taking, on the hand, and self-interest and reciprocity, on the other. All in all, the growth of profit-making aid reflects changes in perspectives about the place of morality in aid, the meaning of reciprocity, and also foreign aid's relationship to European colonial history. As such, private sector aid may contribute to three areas of anthropological theorization: on economic morality in neoliberal capitalism, risk-taking in financial investment, and aid as a Maussian gift.

[Abstract: Aliaksandra Shrubok](#)

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Paper title: 'Looking after' and 'playing with' the plants: expressions and modalities of care for vegetal beings in the Belarusian countryside

Abstract:

Recent philosophical and anthropological reflections try not to reduce human-nature relationships to economy, history, or politics and focus instead on both embodiment engagement with the environment and the affinity established between humans and non-humans (inter alia: Ingold 1993, 2000; Haraway 2008; Kirksey and Helmreich 2010; Kohn 2013; Tsing 2015). Such relational perspectives emphasize the active, agential role of non-human nature in these relationships and acknowledge the recursive, mutually transformative nature of human-environment interactions. At the same time, the anthropology's postulate to shift from the human-centered utilitarian epistemologies towards a more attentive approach to non-human agency often prioritizes the study of hands-on bodily experience and

practices of interactions with nature over the analysis of its symbolic representations. Nevertheless, neither plants nor other natural objects are involved in relations with humans in a linguistically or symbolically neutral arena. Plants and the relationships of care they are embedded in are discursively qualified as well. In the paper, I discuss the concepts employed by rural Belarusian women to refer to caring for plants in order to show the different modalities and meanings of care, which are based on various representations of and sensibilities towards plants. I stress the importance of bridging approaches to the examination of non-human agency with theories that take into account (non-essentialist) human capacities for imagination.