

## Call for papers: Culture-nature revisited (June 8-11, 2011, Grenå, Denmark)

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By

*The following announcement has been circulated by [Mette Bech Risør](#):*

The 7th Conference in Nordic Anthropology of Health and Medicine will be held June 8-11, 2011 in Grenå, Denmark, under the auspices of the University of Copenhagen and University of Aarhus. The conference is organized by: Department of Anthropology and Ethnography, Aarhus University; [Department of Anthropology, Copenhagen University](#) and VIA University College.

The opposition or dichotomy between culture and nature has been central through much of the history of anthropology, especially in defining what anthropology is about and defining cultural versus natural phenomena in specific cultures, not to speak of the interaction between the two. With [Latour](#) in mind it is now, however difficult to maintain a distinction that may belong only to an outdated vision of modernity that we have never reached.

As with many other fields in anthropology, the culture-nature distinction has now entered a more complex state where it is worth a closer inspection. This is especially the case for medical anthropology where new research fields in medicine, biochemistry, biotechnology, genetics, etc. with the use of e.g. animal spare parts in human bodies or the invention of cyborg-technology, makes it obvious that the borderlines between nature and culture are apt to rethinking in anthropological terms. Another development going on is an expanding physiologization of processes until now thought of as primarily or exclusively social, cultural or psychological. These developments are very visible e.g. within the field of psychiatry where the brain and neuro-chemical processes are given priority to the psyche and psychological mal-adaptation. In these research fields, as well as in others, the distinction is constantly challenged, directly or indirectly, and the possible changes, socially and culturally, contain a huge potential for critical thinking and analysis by medical anthropology. Some rethinking already takes place – the concept of ‘local biology’ has for instance been suggested by [Margaret Lock](#) to encompass the

biological body, social reality and cultural discourse to overcome both the arbitrariness of the material, biological body and the cultural body. But also concepts such as cyborgs, bio-sociality etc. point in new directions for the relationship between nature and culture.

With the conference we call for an exploration of both new lines of thought along the distinction, still holding it alive, and lines of thought that dissolve it or criticize it. We wish to invite for discussions that address the topic both philosophically and theoretically as well as pointing to the impact of changes an analysis of culture versus nature may show to have on everyday social processes, illness perceptions, health management, dialogues on illness and health, health strategies and citizenship in general. Exploring the cultural and societal dimensions of these new configurations of the culture-nature relationship is not only relevant from a scientific, anthropological point of view, but is also important in a broader societal perspective. With the following sub-themes we hope to cover the most important fields where medical anthropology plays a part:

### **Borderlines**

Animals and humans share phenotypic as well as genotypic features. In the health sciences this similarity has increasingly made animals stand in as “models” for human disease states. Another aspect of this interconnection between animals and people is about combining human and animal biology. Transplantation of animal tissue to humans has taken place since the early 20th century. Recently, human DNA has been transferred to animals resulting in for instance the famous Danish transgenic “[Alzheimer's pigs](#)” that with an added human gene is hoped to develop symptoms similar to Alzheimer's patients. Simultaneously with biological similarity, animal experiments (as well as agricultural breeding in general) assume that humans differ fundamentally from animals in moral terms. These recent developments within the health sciences probe anthropological questions about boundary demarcation and relationships. How do relations and demarcations between humans and animals unfold in specific empirical fields? In what ways are movement and boundary demarcation mutually reinforcing? How are health, humanness and species configured in research practices that seek to enhance public health? How does care for animals coexist with practices that instrumentalize them (as part of nature) to serve human needs?

### **Technology**

It is well known that technology has great impact on both health care professionals and lay people's perceptions of what constitute disease and treatment. The issue of technologization of health care also opens the question of where it leaves more old fashioned virtues of medicine: care, clinical knowledge, clinical diagnosing of patients etc. How is the 'culture' of medicine being changed, as the medical technology of scientists is gaining importance at the expense of more experience-near knowledge of clinicians?

The expanding biomedical technology furthermore raises more fundamental questions concerning what constitute a human being, how much can be changed before humanity is called into question, how adaptive is the human body and the human mind, what is treatment and what is improvement, how are we to understand medical technology that aim at improve the performances of the human body and human mind – and below these questions – what is human normality?

### **Environmental and climate change**

The last couple of years, climate changes and its consequences for human life have become a growing topic in all kinds of research fields because of its major impact on everyday life. Climate changes affect living in ultimately basic ways and require for example insight into the understanding of new disease patterns, changed food consumption and agriculture and new social life processes in general. Most of this research today takes place in relation to populations dependent on direct natural resources, that is indigenous people in many countries, especially visible in the Arctic, the Pacific Islands, on the borders of large deserts etc. But also in other areas we are to expect changes – e.g. the re-introduction of malaria in Northern Europe.

Basically one could ask: how is culture changed by nature? What kind of society or culture will be a result of global climate changes? However, to go a little further, climate change also specifically invokes our understanding of the concept of culture and nature – this could be addressed critically. Cultures and societies adapt or do they? To what? The question of adaptation makes it pertinent to challenge the roles of culture and nature in this process. Finally the pre-understanding of the concepts that may guide our research as well as the research of other disciplines may be scrutinized.

### **Bio-sociality**

In some areas of life, biology seems to play an increasing important part in our perception of who we are and what we are. As mentioned above, the brain and neurochemistry is gaining importance at the expense of the mind and psychology. As we gain

access to the brain and its internal processes through different kind of scanners our perception of neurological and cognitive processes changes and presumably also of the concept of what a person/human being is and what an illness is.

As a growing body of literature has pointed out our social identities are to an increasing degree defined through biology. Bio-sociality, bio-citizenship and bio-nationality are central terms in the social science of the 21st century.

But also in an old fashion field such as gender, biology seems to expand its territory. When boys in school can not behave, it is not any longer due to a bad upbringing; it is due to the testosterone level in their brains, that their brains are developing slower than girls etc. Not to mention the increasing number of especially boys being diagnosed with ADHD and medicated accordingly.

For this conference we call for papers from the medical anthropological field exploring the culture nature relationship from one of the four fields described above. The papers can be either theoretical or empirical but should be based on research and aim at expanding the anthropological understanding of where the culture-nature distinction stands at the beginning of the 21st century.

Key note speaker(s) will be announced later.

**Abstracts:**

Abstracts, no more than 300 words in length, should be submitted to [line.jorgensen@anthro.ku.dk](mailto:line.jorgensen@anthro.ku.dk) Deadline for submission of abstracts is October 1st 2010

**Registration**

Full details regarding registration and costs will be available to participants at time of announcement of accepted abstracts. Registration costs will cover accommodation – as the conference place is also a hotel – as well as breakfast, lunches, coffee breaks, opening reception and banquet. The final price will depend on final funding but will not exceed 500 EURO in total and probably be less.

**Venue**

[Kystvejens Hotel and Conference Centre](#), Grenå, Denmark.

**Brief history of the network**

The Network of Nordic Medical Anthropologists was established in September 1997 in Gothenburg. The workshop was a kind of

inventory of anthropologists working within the subfield of medical anthropology in Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Norway and Iceland. The second meeting was held in Denmark in February 2000. It had three main themes: 1) Body, senses, and experience, 2) Health systems, medicines, and technology, and 3) Handicap, rehabilitation, and competence. The third conference, under the heading Expressions of suffering was held in February 2002 in Finland. The fourth conference was held in Norway, August 2004 with a title Health and Identity in Risky Times. The fifth conference was held in June 2007 in Iceland, with a title Medical Anthropology in the 21st Century. The sixth conference was held in Sweden in June 2009, with the title Ethics and Medical Anthropology: Probing Moral Universes and Pinpointing Moral Dilemmas.

**AMA citation**

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