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Special Issue: Cognitive Disability

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By Anna Zogas

The most recent issue of [The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology](#) is a special issue on [Cognitive Disability](#), edited by Patrick McKearney and Tyler Zoanni. Enjoy!

[Introduction: For an Anthropology of Cognitive Disability](#) (*open access*)
Patrick McKearney and Tyler Zoanni

How can we study significant cognitive differences within social groups anthropologically? Attempting to do so challenges some of the discipline's most cherished methodological, analytical and ethical commitments, raising questions about how we understand difference, both between and within societies. Such challenges both explain the neglect of the topic up until now and suggest its scholarly potential. In this article, we move to lay the groundwork for an anthropology that takes seriously cognitive differences (such as autism, dementia and intellectual disability), as well as their potentially disabling consequences. We ask: what kind of cross-cultural reality does cognitive variation have, and how problematic are such differences for those who live with them? We spell out at greater length some of the difficulties involved in developing this conversation, attempt to address these issues, and delineate some of the important benefits that follow from doing so.

[Pleasure and Dementia: On Becoming an Appreciating Subject](#)
Annelieke Driessen

What can pleasure in the nursing home teach us about dementia and subjectivity? In this article I seek to challenge the assumption that the 'fourth age' involves the loss of subjectivity. In presenting dementia as a single pathway towards loss and decline, alternative pathways that provide more hopeful imaginaries become obscured. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in residential dementia care, I show how care professionals craft conditions that invite residents to take pleasure in, for example, dancing and bathing, and thus to become what I call 'appreciating subjects'. Although residents do not craft these conditions themselves, they are active in accepting the invitations offered and enacting their appreciations. I argue that pleasure is a relational achievement, one that is contagious for those who let themselves be affected.

[Receiving the Gift of Cognitive Disability: Recognizing Agency in the Limits of the Rational Subject](#)

Patrick McKearney

How valuable can people with mental disabilities be to others? In this article I present ethnographic material on L'Arche, a Christian charity that provides care. I describe how carers there are trained to see cognitive disability as producing not simply an absence of rational agency, but also the presence of a quite different way of actively inhabiting the world. I argue that, by learning to recognize and value this unusual kind of agency, carers in L'Arche subvert the terms of a recent philosophical debate about the worth of people with cognitive disabilities. They demonstrate that people can value others not just as rational moral subjects, or simply as passive objects of care, but also as charismatic and intuitive agents who actively depart from standard norms of personhood.

[The Possibilities of Failure: Personhood and Cognitive Disability in Urban Uganda](#)

Tyler Zoanni

This article offers a person-centred analysis that closely attends to lives shaped by cognitive disability in Uganda. It reflects on the most widely used Ugandan term for disability, obulemu, which literally means 'state of failure'. Ugandans with cognitive disabilities are often perceived as failed people (abalemu) insofar as they depart from dominant scripts for being human. Yet departures are also beginnings, and I attempt to think failure otherwise. Rather than understand these supposed failures in negative terms – as loss and diminishment of collective and personal possibilities – I focus on the possibilities of failure, tracing what arises around 'failed people' in terms of therapeutics, care and personhood. The article intervenes in a wider anthropological conversation about personhood. Rather than privileging cultural concepts of the person or the successful social realization of personhood, as much of that conversation does, the article takes inspiration from Meyer Fortes and makes 'failures' of personhood central.

[Thinking about Thinking: Mild Traumatic Brain Injury and Finding Continuity in US Military Veterans' Embodied Minds](#)

Anna Zogas

This article examines American military veterans' metacognition – their 'thinking about thinking'. After sustaining mild traumatic brain injuries (mild TBI), some veterans experience impaired memory, poor concentration and other cognitive problems that surface when they begin attending colleges and trade schools. In response, clinicians at a specialized TBI clinic at a Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Medical

Centre created a programme that encourages veterans to become reflexive about their cognition. Symptoms that veterans experience as cognitive impairments are reframed by clinicians as conflicts between their military-minded bodies and their new civilian environments. We have seen the growing influence of the neuro-disciplines on the government of populations, but newly materialist understandings of the mind also shift the boundaries of what constitutes 'the body', suggesting new terrains for the disciplinary techniques of institutions. Analysing veterans' experiences of their injuries and clinicians' efforts to help them reveals cognition as a site of discipline.

[On Misfitness: Reflections in and out of Fashion](#)

James D. Faubion

'Misfits' are proof positive that the anthropological chestnut of 'the psychic unity of mankind' glosses over the actual psychic disunity of the anthropic. The proof militates against rendering misfitness merely as a social construction even as it militates in favour of rendering it as a 'polythetic class', the unity of which is not based in the common features of all tokens of a given type but instead in their 'family resemblance'. Members of the family include those who are deemed incompetent, but also those deemed best suited to specific social stations. Misfitness may also be sought and not merely ascribed. In every case, misfitness has an ethically ambiguous status – and so offers us a lesson of the systemic place of the 'irritant' within but also at the edge of and beyond the bounds of any current anthropology of ordinary ethics.

[Beyond the Social](#)

Michele Friedner

Through engaging with this collection of articles devoted to cognitive disability, I offer concluding remarks concerned specifically with the heuristic and experiential value of the concept of 'the social'. I argue that an exploration of cognitive disability opens up a space for anthropologists to consider their own language and semiotic ideologies and to consider how to attend to and produce knowledge with nonlinguistic subjects. Beyond this, how might anthropologists also consider how to make their own works cognitively accessible?

[Cognitive Disability: Towards an Ethics of Possibility](#)

Faye Ginsburg and Rayna Rapp

This afterword to this special issue of The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology, entitled 'For an Anthropology of Cognitive Disability', explores the intersections of disability studies and ethnographic research on cognitive difference. We offer a brief scholarly genealogy, discuss how

these articles provide recognition for 'the disarticulate', and consider how anthropologists working on this subject might contribute to an ethics of possibility.

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