Anthropological Contributions to SRHR Future(s): From Theory to Practice and Back

A Transdisciplinary Conference

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University of Amsterdam
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Abstract

We are at a critical juncture in time. Whilst sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) are increasingly threatened by conservative right-wing politics, multiple crises (humanitarian, economic, environmental), and persistent race, gender and class-based inequities, rapid technological advances are creating new opportunities for achieving sexual and reproductive health and justice. Now more than ever, anthropology can play a critical role in strengthening sexual and reproductive well-being in the Global South and North by interrogating these threats, crises, injustices, and technological developments. Anthropologists can help formulate more meaningful SRHR policies, programmes, and interventions by paying attention to social rather than individual bodies, examining the moralities at stake and imposed, and exploring the social lives of technologies. We contend, however, that anthropology's potential is not fully realized, because anthropological findings get lost in translation when transitioning into policies and practices, and because of certain blind spots amongst anthropologists, public health experts, SRHR practitioners, NGO representatives, policymakers and funders alike. How can anthropologists collaborate more effectively with other stakeholders in SRHR? This conference seeks to offer a platform to engage in productive transdisciplinary conversations to enhance anthropological contributions to SRHR future(s).

Introduction

We are at a critical juncture in time. Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) are increasingly threatened by conservative right-wing politics, multiple crises (humanitarian, economic, environmental), and persistent race, gender and class-based inequities (Han & Tomori 2021). At the same time, rapid technological advances are creating new opportunities for achieving sexual and reproductive health and justice. Now more than ever, anthropologists can and should play a critical role in strengthening sexual and reproductive well-being in the Global South and North by interrogating these threats, crises, injustices, and technological developments.

Anthropologists can contribute to more meaningful SRHR policies, programmes and interventions, by attending to social rather than individual bodies, examining the moralities at stake and imposed, and exploring the social lives of technologies. Ethnographic work has shown that sexual and reproductive desires and behaviours are entangled with local norms, social relationships (van der Sijpt 2014) and moralities (Undie & Izugbara 2011; De Kok 2019; Unnithan et al 2023). For instance, ethnographic studies have illustrated how strong pronatalist norms push couples to pursue pregnancy – transnationally – at great financial and emotional cost. This underscores the need to increase access to and regulate assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs) (Whittaker et al. 2022). Anthropologists of reproductive governance (Morgan & Roberts 2012; Suh 2018) have interrogated the moral regimes and rationalities underpinning particular SRHR agendas and policies: what are the moral, political and economic stakes, and who wins and who loses? Such questions facilitate critique of seemingly 'benign' SRHR policies and interventions (Lorist 2020). Insights into how technologies (e.g., ultrasound, ARTs, fertility tracker apps), their use and effects change when they travel, and enact various realities, relationships, and subjectivities (Hörbst & Gerrits 2016; Müller-Rockstroh 2012), point to the importance of detailed process evaluations that can chart interventions' unintended consequences. Those studying technological advances like artificial intelligence (Curchoe et al. 2023) have sounded alarm bells about their potential to reproduce racist biases or increase the digital divide and socio-economic inequalities. This calls for corrections to algorithms and their applications. At the same time, ethnographic studies have also articulated more hopeful and liberatory bottom-up changes in the SRHR landscape, such as the 'queering of families' (Morison, Lynch & Reddy 2020; Twine & Smietana 2021).

However, we contend that anthropology's potential is not fully realized because anthropological insights may get 'lost in translation' when transitioning into policies and practices (Elliott & Thomas 2017; Yates-Doerr 2019), and because of certain blind spots amongst anthropologists and other SRHR stakeholders alike. Decolonial thinking has emerged only recently; ableist and heteronormative assumptions still affect SRHR research and practice; and we rely too much on 'single stories' (Mkhwanazi 2016), such as stereotypical portrayals of sex in the Global South as problematic (Spronk & Hendriks 2020).

How can we do a better job of translating insights into practice, overcoming blind spots, and maximizing anthropology's contribution to sexual and reproductive well-being and justice? How can we improve collaborations between anthropologists, public health experts, SRHR practitioners, policymakers, and funders? This conference seeks to offer a platform to address such questions and engage in productive transdisciplinary conversations to enhance anthropological contributions to SRHR future(s).

Conference Aim/Objectives

We invite, firstly, anthropologists working in academia and SRHR practice to exchange research or practice-based insights, and discuss challenges and opportunities in transdisciplinary efforts to foster positive, equitable sexual and reproductive futures in the Global South and North. Secondly, we also invite NGO representatives, public health experts, and other stakeholders in SRHR to reflect on their experiences of, and views on, collaborations with anthropologists. Together, we intend to reflect on and discuss the field of SRHR, in order to:

- Exchange insights into how social bodies, moralities and the social lives of technologies matter for SRHR;
- Articulate and address blind spots within the anthropology of sexuality, sexual health and reproduction;
- Identify translational and other challenges for transdisciplinary work on SRHR, and develop suggestions for improvements;
- Publish an edited volume or special issue based on the conference papers to strengthen the SRHR agenda.

Presentations can pertain to all domains within SRHR (e.g., assisted reproductive technologies; reproductive loss; abortion; PrEP; maternity care; sexual violence). Those that seek to queer and decolonize SRHR and address neglected issues (e.g., SRHR and men; SRHR and disability; SRHR beyond the 'reproductive age') are particularly welcome.

We would like presenters to address some of the questions below, listed under three themes.

Social bodies, moralities and inequalities

- What and whose (local) moralities shape the design, implementation, and uptake of SRHR policies, programmes, and interventions? What happens, and to whom, if these moralities are ignored?
- How do anthropological studies, and SRHR policies, programmes and interventions, reproduce colonial assumptions and inequalities related to gender, sexualities, race, class and economy?
- How can anthropologists make these moralities, assumptions and inequalities relevant in transdisciplinary collaborations/projects?

The social lives of technologies

- How might the social lives of technologies matter for SRHR policies, programmes, and people's daily lives? What happens, and to whom, if these social lives are ignored?
- How are travelling technologies appropriated and/or resisted?
- How do technologies reproduce, or create new, inequalities and injustices?
- How does unequal access to technologies affect global SRHR programmes, interventions and collaborations?

Transdisciplinary collaboration and blind spots

- What gets lost in translation in transdisciplinary work?
- What anthropological terms and concepts make it into collaborations, which ones do not? How do interpretations of terms change, and with what consequences?
- What theoretical concepts can illuminate threats to sexual and reproductive justice? How can we think with these new lenses in ways that are still productive on the ground?
- What sorts of critical theoretical lenses help us understand transdisciplinary collaborations and associated challenges?
- How can anthropologists, public health experts, NGO representatives and other stakeholders in SRHR collaborate in more productive ways?
- What are the blind spots in SRHR research and practice and how can we address them?
- How can we foster epistemic justice in SRHR research and practice?

We invite 300-word abstracts for papers or panels that address one or more of these questions.

Abstracts are to be sent to AnthroSRHRConf2024@googlegroups.com by **February 15th, 2024.**

Registration will open from **January 15th, 2024**; see our website for updates: https://www.aanmelder.nl/anthrosrhrconf2024/

We hope to welcome you at the University of Amsterdam in July 2024, and are looking forward to an inspiring event that will take forward the agenda for equitable and just SRHR for all.

Members of the organizing committee for the conference are:

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