

What's At Stake

in the ethnography of human experience?

Phenomenological and Psychoanalytic Perspectives

September 21-23, 2008

Emory Conference Center

Emory University • Atlanta, GA

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• Conference Sessions •

- Culture and Experience • Suffering, Healing and Medicine •
- Subjectivity in a Disordered World • Is Religion a Special Case? •
- Bridging Psychoanalytic and Phenomenological Anthropology •

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The Society for Psychological Anthropology's Lemelson Conference Fund, the Provost's Conference Subvention Fund, the Graduate Division of Religion, and the Department of Religion, Emory University. Also sponsored by Psychoanalytic Studies, the Tam Institute for Jewish Studies, Ethics and Servant Leadership, the Center for Health, Culture, and Society, and the Department of Anthropology.



EMORY
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International Conference

**WHAT'S AT STAKE IN THE ETHNOGRAPHY OF
HUMAN EXPERIENCE?
PHENOMENOLOGICAL AND PSYCHOANALYTIC PERSPECTIVES**

Sunday, September 21, 2008 – Tuesday, September 23, 2008
Emory University Conference Center
Atlanta, Georgia

Organizers:

Don Seeman, Department of Religion and Tam Institute for Jewish
Studies, Emory University
Sarah Willen, Departments of Anthropology and Social Medicine,
Harvard University

Sunday, September 21, 2008

7:30–9:30 Wine & dessert reception at *Après Diem*

Monday, September 22, 2008

7:00 am Continental breakfast buffet opens (*Hickory
Room foyer*)

8:30 Welcoming remarks (*Hickory Room*)
Don Seeman & Sarah Willen – Conference Organizers

Robert Paul – Dean, Emory College

**8:45-10:45 Session 1: “Depths and Surfaces: Bridg-
ing the Phenomenological and the Psychoanalytic in the
Anthropology of Human Experience” (*Hickory Room*)**

This session begins with the suggestion that phenomenology and psychoanalysis each offer valuable tools for the ethnographic description and analysis of lived experience in social context. Despite their shared aims, these approaches have historically constituted separate, if not openly antagonistic, scholarly conversations. Psychoanalytic writers have tended to be concerned with a “depth” account of human experience that arguably goes beyond what can be observed explicitly in ethnographic settings. Writers in the phenomenological and cultural phenomenological schools have tended to argue for a “thicker” and more context dependent set of descriptions that might arguably be called “surface” descriptions of human experience. Central questions framing this panel include:

- Why has “experience” emerged as so compelling a leitmotif within the ever-evolving anthropological project?
- How have phenomenological and psychoanalytic orientations, broadly construed, sought to make sense of human experience and related notions of memory, unconscious process, subjectivity, intersubjectivity, and temporality?
- Are these two broad traditions of anthropological scholarship necessarily divergent in purpose and scope, are they incommensurable, or are they ripe for more fruitful dialogue and theoretical cross-fertilization?

- Is it possible to imagine a psychodynamic approach to phenomenology or a phenomenological approach to psychoanalysis?

- Where should work in one or both of these fields (or, perhaps, at their intersection) be focused in years to come?

Chair: Sander Gilman (Emory)

Panelists: Byron Good (Harvard)
Robert Paul (Emory)
Jason Throop (UCLA)
Thomas Csordas (UCSD)
Douglas Hollan (UCLA)

10:45-11:00 Coffee break

**11:00-12:45 Session 2: “Round Table on Culture and
Experience: Genealogies and Debates”
(*Hickory Room*)**

At the most recent American Anthropological Association annual meetings in Washington, a fascinating debate emerged over the role of cultural or interpretive anthropology in the development of phenomenological or experience-oriented paradigms of research. In this round-table discussion, we hope to rekindle this exchange in a more free-wheeling style than a standard conference format would typically allow. Central questions include the following:

- Is the anthropology of experience a rebellion against classical Geertzian interpretive anthropology or fundamentally a continuation of it? How ought the answer to this question affect future research agendas in our field?
- What other voices may have been underplayed or neglected in contemporary theorizing of experience/the ethnography of experience? (Possible candidates: Hannah Arendt, David Bidney, Edward Sapir, Alfred Schutz, Baruch Spinoza?)
- What, if any, are the interpretive pitfalls or methodological challenges intrinsic to the “what is at stake” model of anthropological research?
- What are the next steps that the ethnography/anthropology of human experience ought to take?

Chair: Michael Fischer (MIT)

Panelists: Robert Desjarlais (Sarah Lawrence)
Byron Good (Harvard)
Unni Wikan (University of Oslo)
Bradd Shore (Emory)
Ivan Karp (Emory)

12:45-2:00 Lunch (by invitation)

2:00-4:00 Session 3: “Subjectivity and Experience in a Disordered World” (Hickory Room)

Both phenomenological and psychoanalytic ethnographic approaches have been criticized in the past for paying insufficient attention to the impact of power, politics, inequality, conflict, and violence on human experience. Although earlier scholarship may have been vulnerable to such critiques, contemporary work is now keenly attuned – perhaps even over-attuned – to the subjective and experiential implications of these forms of disorder. With these considerations in mind, the present panel asks:

- How should an experience-oriented anthropology confront issues of power and politics, including issues of inequality, marginalization, violence, and suffering? How do phenomenological and psychoanalytic approaches to these issues differ, and how might they be placed in dialogue with one another or with other traditions of critical scholarship?
- What are the benefits and limits to approaching these issues from an experiential perspective? Has anthropology fallen into a trap of overemphasis on extreme or “limit cases” of human experience?
- What are the implications – philosophical, political, representational, etc. – of regarding the ethnography of experience as a kind of moral praxis?
- What have been the successes and/or failings of research on “what is at stake” within “local moral worlds,” and how does this approach compare with others that also claim to foreground issues of moral praxis?

Chair: Edward Queen (Emory)
Panelists: Sarah Willen (Harvard)
Sarah Pinto (Tufts)
Unni Wikan (University of Oslo)
Ghassan Hage (University of Melbourne)
João Biehl (Princeton)

4:15 – 5:45 Film screening (Salon II)
“Forty Years of Silence” – Robert Lemelson (UCLA)

6:30 Dinner (by invitation)

7:30 Keynote Address (Hickory Room)
“Existential Anthropology: An Itinerary of a Thought”
Michael Jackson, Distinguished Professor in World Religions, Harvard Divinity School

Tuesday, September 23

7:00 am Continental breakfast buffet opens
(Hickory Room foyer)

8:30-10:30 Session 4: “Religious Experience: A Special Case?” (Hickory Room)

It is impossible to discuss the study of lived experience and the ethnography of experience without noting the special place that religious studies have played in the analysis of experience, from William James’ *Varieties of Religious Experience*, to Godfrey Lienhardt’s *Divinity and Experience*, to Rudolf Otto’s phenomenology of *The Holy*. Yet religion specialists and anthropologists have sometimes spoken past one another because of either an anthropological tendency to reduce religion to a broad understanding of “culture” or a tendency among religion scholars to posit a unique, if hard to define, religious essence. Does the ethnography of religious experience show a way out of this conundrum? Central questions include the following:

- Is religious experience a special case in the study of lived experience more broadly?
- What are the points of contact or divergence among ethnographic, textual, and theological approaches to the study of religion, and how do these contact points help guide us toward future research agendas?
- What are the special methodological or theoretical dilemmas facing researchers of religious experience?
- Is experience an adequate category to move the study of religion forward?

Chair: Dianne Stewart (Emory)
Panelists: Don Seeman (Emory)
Laurie Patton (Emory)
Katherine Ewing (Duke)
Chikako Ozawa-de Silva (Emory)

10:30-11:00 Coffee break

11:00-1:00 Session 5: “Suffering, Healing, and Therapeutic Dynamics” (Hickory Room)

Despite significant differences, psychoanalytic and phenomenological approaches in anthropology share a number of core interests including (1) attention to therapeutic encounters across medical systems; (2) deep reservations about the reductionist tendencies within much of contemporary biomedicine; and (3) an interest in generating clinically relevant insights, perspectives, and paradigms. Experience-oriented anthropologists have engaged with clinical/therapeutic work in multiple ways: as ethnographers of clinical interactions, as ethnographers of “medical culture,” and as clinicians themselves. Central questions to be engaged include the following:

- What analytic motives animate these approaches to human experiences of suffering and distress, help-seeking and diagnosis, and healing/therapeutic process? What theoretical insights do they generate? What are the clinical implications or effects of these different ways of construing and studying these forms of human experience?

- Can we document ways in which experience-oriented approaches have generated new pragmatic avenues in healing? Are the truth claims made by theoretically and clinically focused studies of experience actually incommensurate in some fundamental sense, or do they complement one another?

- How might renewed thinking about the bridge between phenomenological and psychoanalytic approaches create a richer, more satisfying account of human experience? How might such new approaches contribute meaningfully to therapeutic work in clinical settings?

Chair: Peter Brown (Emory)
 Panelists: Tsipy Ivry (Haifa University)
 Linda Garro (UCLA)
 Cheryl Mattingly (USC)
 Yehuda Goodman (Hebrew University of Jerusalem)

1:00-2:00 *Lunch (by invitation)*

2:00-4:00 **Session 6: “Round Table Discussion:
 Summing Up and Moving Forward”** (*Hickory Room*)

In this final session, we will revisit the original aims of the conference, which was designed to assemble an array of leading scholars to critically engage contemporary scholarship at the intersection of culture and lived experience. Experience-oriented scholarship has forced the reevaluation of “culture,” turned a spotlight on the formation of subjectivity in its social and political contexts, and raised important ethical questions about the representation of other people’s lives. Not only have such studies broadened and deepened anthropological understanding of suffering, healing, embodiment and lived experience, but they have also opened up new lines of inquiry in a range of anthropological subfields including the anthropology of religion, medical and psychological anthropology, and anthropological studies of institutional and state power, political disenfranchisement, and social exclusion. Central questions include the following:

- What are the most useful approaches to have emerged within the anthropology of experience, and which approaches have proven more limited?
- What ethical and/or epistemological quandaries have emerged for experience-oriented researchers, and how might these challenges be addressed?
- What, if any, areas of consensus seem to have been reached in our field, and what are the most important areas of contention that remain?

- What is the future of this analytic field, and how can we do a better job of representing human experience and subjectivity in more valid and non-reductive ways without sacrificing the rigor of anthropological and ethnographic research?

Chair: Don Seeman (Emory)
 Panelists: Iman Roushdy Hammady (Emory), Conference Ethnographer
 Alasdair Donald (Harvard)
 Mary-Jo DelVecchio Good (Harvard)

Presentation Titles

Biehl, João and Peter Locke (Princeton): “Deleuze and the Anthropology of Becoming”

Csordas, Thomas (UCSD): “Phenomenology and Psychoanalysis”

Ewing, Katherine (Duke): “Religion and Experience: Diverging Analytics in the Study of Islam”

Garro, Linda C. & Kristin E. Yarris (UCLA): “‘A Massive Long Way’: Interconnecting Histories, a ‘Special’ Child, and Everyday Family Life”

Good, Byron (Harvard): “Phenomenology, Psychoanalysis, and Postcolonial Subjectivities in Indonesia”

Goodman, Yehuda (Hebrew University of Jerusalem): “‘A Devil-Woman Says I’m Married to Her’: Politics of Truth and Human Experience in a Mental Health Clinic in Israel”

Hage, Ghassan (University of Melbourne): “Living Outside the Law in Beirut”

Hollan, Douglas (UCLA): “On the Varieties and Particularities of Cultural Experience”

Ivry, Tsipy (Haifa University): “Is gestation to pregnancy as disease is to illness?”

Jackson, Michael (Harvard): Keynote Address: “Existential Anthropology: An Itinerary of a Thought”

Mattingly, Cheryl (University of Southern California): “Narrative Phenomenology and the Practice of Hope”

Ozawa-de Silva, Chikako (Emory): “Is there such a thing as ‘pre-religious experience’? The case of Naikan, a secularized Japanese therapy”

Patton, Laurie (Emory): “Sanskrit and the Religious Experience of Women: Reflections After Ethnographic Writing”

Pinto, Sarah (Tufts): “The Limits of Diagnosis: Sex and Law in Indian Psychiatry”

Paul, Robert (Emory): “The Conscious, the Mental, and the Social: A Psychoanalytic Perspective”

Seeman, Don (Emory): “Religious Experience, Coffee and the Ethnographic Opaque”

Shore, Bradd (Emory): “Anthropological Holism and the Study of Human Experience”

Throop, C. Jason (UCLA): “On Inaccessibility and Vulnerability: Horizons of Compatibility between Phenomenological and Psychodynamic Accounts of Lived Experience”

Wikan, Unni (University of Oslo): “WHAT’S AT STAKE IN HONOR KILLINGS? Explanation, understanding, experience: Anthropology at the extreme”

Willen, Sarah (Harvard): “Migrant ‘Illegality’ and the Struggle for Being”