

Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association 2015
TESTING AS WORLD-MAKING

Reviewed By: Society for Cultural Anthropology

Wednesday, November 18, 2015: 12:00 PM-1:45 PM

Mineral Hall E (Hyatt Regency)

Organizers:

Uli Beisel (Bayreuth University) and Sandra Calkins (MPI for Social Anthropology)

Chairs:

Richard W Rottenburg (University of Halle)

Discussants:

Stacey A Langwick (Cornell University)

12:00 PM

Testing Plans: In the Universe of the Unverifiable

Carlo Caduff (King's College London)

12:15 PM

Testing Bodies in Mosquito-Human Encounters

Luísa Reis Castro (Massachusetts Institute of Technology)

12:30 PM

Testing Plants: Micro-Nutrients and Evidence in Uganda

Sandra Calkins (MPI for Social Anthropology)

12:45 PM

Chemical Youth: Testing How Drugs Work in Everyday Life

A.P. Hardon (University of Amsterdam)

1:00 PM

Testing the Trial

Emilia Sanabria (Ecole normale superieure - Lyon)

1:15 PM

Discussant

Stacey A Langwick (Cornell University)

1:30 PM

Discussion

Title: TESTING AS WORLD-MAKING

Keywords: Knowledge, Science and science studies

Type: Oral

Length: 1.75 Hours

Session Abstract: Trials and different forms of testing have become ubiquitous.

Water quality is continually monitored and tested, food is tested for pollutants, toys for chemicals, building materials are tested in mechanical models and computer simulations, and even banks are tested. Tests are designed to sift out the best job candidates, to evaluate students, to measure the IQ, to identify our genetic risk for chronic diseases. Tests in animal models and humans are believed to be necessary to create safe products, such as pharmaceuticals and cosmetics. In the Global South, large-scale randomized controlled trials have become critical sources of medical data. What these forms of testing in different domains share is their analytics: they assume that experimental constructions and simulations of real-life situations allow drawing conclusions about reality out there. We do not principally challenge this analytics, yet approach testing as a form of world-making that relies on and creates specific models, evidences, technologies, and sites. Tests have the power to make the familiar strange, and the strange familiar: they give names to a vague sense of sickness in our body, and can render normal tasting water toxic. We are tempted to suggest that testing has become a new paradigm to produce knowledge about unknowns and risks, at a time when the evidence-base—and less the political imaginary—create the legitimacy of policy. In spite of its societal relevance, anthropological engagement with testing practices and the infrastructures that support them has thus far been scant and dispersed across disciplinary subfields. This panel thus seeks to assemble and compare similarities and differences between various forms of testing. We invite ethnographies of the lab but also in other settings, especially where decisions have to be made based on “best evidence” (i.e., medicine, development cooperation, global health). Exploring testing as an evidentiary practices that is able to disrupt and unsettle established facts, this panel inquiries into how tests also raise new questions about sameness and difference, un/predictability, and the relations between reality, truth and authenticity. Some of the questions for consideration are: - When, where and how is testing done? - How do tests and testing practices in different fields (biology, medicine, physics, etc.) produce, shape and/or challenge evidences? - What are the normativities of testing practices? - What are the stabilities and temporalities of evidences produced by testing? - What types of politics do testing practices enact? What space is there for emancipatory projects? - How might testing relate to sensing? - How does testing disrupt and intervene? How are contradictory testing results negotiated?

Presentation id# 46972

Testing Plans: In the Universe of the Unverifiable

Carlo Caduff (King's College London)

Paper Abstract: In 2004, a private company based in the United States delivered scores of testing samples ostensibly containing a dangerous influenza virus to clinical laboratories all over the world. Not surprisingly, the dissemination of dangerous biological matter caused considerable concern among government officials, especially in the United States. News media considered the global distribution of these hazardous samples to be a serious violation of fundamental principles of biosafety. Though the alarm turned out to be false, government officials argued that the incident was valuable. This paper suggests that such incidents have become important for practitioners of preparedness in the United

States. False alarms can trigger a real response; in so doing, they provide public health professionals with a unique opportunity to test their plans. Yet, strangely enough, this has also meant that pandemics of the present are increasingly perceived as tests for pandemics of the future. What the paper illuminates is how the practice of constant testing compromises the very possibility of an event's actuality.

Presentation id# 49441

Testing Bodies in Mosquito-Human Encounters

Luísa Reis Castro (Massachusetts Institute of Technology)

Paper Abstract: Millions of genetically modified *Aedes aegypti* mosquitoes are currently being released in a state-funded project to tackle dengue fever in the Northeast of Brazil. These mosquitoes are engineered to carry a conditionally lethal gene that is also expressed in their offspring. For this public health initiative to succeed, released lab-reared male mosquitoes have to mate with "wild" *Aedes* females, which are the ones who bite humans and can infect them with dengue. The constant release of GM mosquito should suppress the overall *Aedes aegypti* population. Yet, "wild" *Aedes aegypti* are far from wild and rather live in close proximity to human beings. Hence, the releases in Brazil happen in urban settings, entangling human bodies in this large-scale experiment. To release an insect that is a nuisance and a dengue vector in Brazil demands evidence concerning the safety and efficacy of the intervention. The main justifications concentrate on the non-biting aspect of male mosquitoes. This evidentiary practice produces difference between male/female, lab/"wild", and public health tool/vector mosquitoes. Simultaneously, the GM mosquito project only works if "wild" females recognize the males as suitable partner. I show how scientists in the lab experiment with mosquitoes to produce the "right" kind and size of bodies to attract mating females. In this paper I argue how the constructions of sameness and difference are strategically deployed not only to allow the project's viability, but also how testing bodily encounters establishes a normative governance of the relations among entangled living things.

Presentation id# 46970

Testing Plants: Micro-Nutrients and Evidence

Sandra Calkins (MPI for Social Anthropology)

Paper Abstract: An alliance of donors, governmental agencies, researchers and businesses recently promoted biofortification of crops as effective tool against micro-nutrient deficiencies. Biofortification, enriching crops with vitamin A, iron, or other micro-nutrients, is done through conventional plant breeding or genetic modification. These hybrids between pharmaceuticals and foods emerged in an interdisciplinary field of sciences, involving diverse theories concerning what a well-nourished body and what an adequate nutritional status is. A range of tests is deployed during crop development to identify a gene for biofortification, to test the success of gene transfer, to measure nutrient contents in transgenic plant lines, to test the bioavailability of nutrients in human cells, feeding trials in animals and humans, etc. I examine testing practices in Ugandan laboratories and trial farms, which are nested into global infrastructures through which scientific evidence is

made. I explore how scientists experiment with and care for biofortified plant matter, adapting it to Ugandan environmental conditions. These practices of crop domestication acknowledge the specificity of plants and reckon with difficulties in moving them to other places. Simultaneously, Ugandan scientists measure the efficacy of biofortification initiatives in randomized controlled trials, which assume that bodies eating the plants and absorbing nutrients are commensurable across space and time. Yet, things like the iron statuses of well-studied South Asian women do not smoothly map onto Ugandan realities, rather I show how testing plants in Uganda interferes with what counts as “best evidence” elsewhere.

Presentation id# 46975

Chemical Youth: Testing How Drugs Work in Everyday Life

A.P. Hardon (University of Amsterdam)

Paper Abstract: This paper describes how young people in Amsterdam incorporate biological understandings of chemicals, including MDMA, Ritalin and new designer drugs, into their collaborative efforts to generate pleasurable effects. The paper examines the use of drugs – not only illicit narcotics but a wider range of chemical and pharmaceutical substances – from the perspectives of youths themselves. It outlines the kinds of beneficial effects, including empathy and euphoria, which youths seek to generate, and how these are understood. It further describes the kinds of il/licit chemicals that they use to generate these desirable outcomes. Taking illicit chemicals and new designer drugs involves risks related to their uncertain quality and content. More specifically, the paper shows how at festivals, parties, and in homes people manage these risks by monitoring the diversity of effects of drugs on each other’s bodies, and how they manipulate and mix chemicals to modulate the effects. It shows how through collective ‘testing’, young people generate knowledge of lived effects of specific chemical practices, which circulates through youth networks and on the internet. While policy makers tend to be concerned about the risks of these drugs, young people adhere to codes of conduct (know your supplier; drinking a lot of water, gradually increase the dose, test new drugs carefully) to avoid harm. The Amsterdam municipality subsidizes sites where party pills can be tested, which are pragmatically used. Amsterdam youths and the municipal health services are concerned about drug use in tourists, who do not know how to avoid harm.

Presentation id# 46974

Testing the Trial

Emilia Sanabria (Ecole normale superieure - Lyon)

Paper Abstract: Randomized-controlled trials have become the gold standard of evidence-making in biomedical research. But what do they test? How are their results made applicable beyond the test situation? These questions are tricky when the goal is to establish the efficacy of pharmaceutical interventions, but they become almost intractable when the objective is testing the effectiveness of complex interventions whose causal principles are multiply determined and highly local. This paper explores how the logic of the trial itself is tested by the recent renaissance of clinical trials to test the therapeutic potential of psychedelic substances, for anxiety, PTSD or addiction treatment. It examines the circuits

through which the effects of the traditional Amazonian herbal brew ayahuasca are translated to fit the categories of biomedicine, and its specific understandings of healing. What is lost and what is gained (and for whom) through the incorporation of ayahuasca into the trial logic? Entheogenic substances have notoriously unpredictable effects. The ritual setting in which these substances are used are basic to their effects, and shaped by what many refer to as "set" (subjective expectations of users) and "setting" (social and physical environment) of the drug experience. Many practitioners explain that ayahuasca does not treat symptoms but heals their causes. It strikes at the existential origins of suffering and dis-ease. This deeply challenges the routine practices of biomedical research which strive to demonstrate causal and generalizable links between an intervention and an outcome at the population level. What, then, can be tested of the ayahuasca experience?