

On Anthropology and Bioethics

The medical world is chock full of decisions. The world is chock full of decisions. How we make those decisions is up to debate. Is there a universal idea of what is right and what is wrong? Or is it okay for one group of people to declare it right to do one thing, and that be wrong for another group of people, and we all can be happy that way? It looks to be that the world should be governed in a way that includes both. Both of what exactly? As is described by Arthur Kleinman, when I say “both”, I am differentiating between morals and ethics. Morals, he describes as, “What really matters to people locally in the social processes themselves”, while ethics he describes as “The articulation of the value-based issues in a self-aware language” (pp. 79). This differentiation is explored in this week’s readings, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of ethnography. The readings discussed are pages 66-97 from *Moral Experience and Ethical Reflection: Can Ethnography reconcile them? A quandary for the new Bioethics*, by Arthur Kleinman, and pages 29-54 of *Blessing Unintended Pregnancy. Religion and Discourse of Women’s Agency in Public Health*. The former examines how ethnography navigates between universal ethics and local moral worlds, while the latter is in itself an ethnography looking at African American women at a Naomi’s House homeless shelter, and how they view their pregnancies, how they conceptualize blessings, and how they differentiate religion and spirituality. These two readings complement each other to highlight the diversity of people’s existences but also the similarity of them too.

*Moral Experience and Ethical Reflection: Can Ethnography reconcile them? A quandary for the new Bioethics* by Arthur Kleinman’s main message is that there is a great difference

between making decisions based on local morals and ethics. There are things that are okay in one place and not so much elsewhere. But we are also all human, as Kleinman says, “By naturalizing human experience, ethics can be objectively human” (pp. 73). But, he quickly retorts to this, saying that there is no agreement on what is human nature. We have seen this already in this class. We have looked at debates from a Muslim point of view, a Catholic lens, a Hindu lens, a Buddhist lens, a secular feminist lens, and many others. Within these lenses, there are many more interpretations. Kleinman postulates that ethnography be the bridge between ethics and local moral worlds that really help highlight a human experience. He explains that ethnography does not look to justify but to explain (pp. 79). This can be positive or negative. Paul Farmer for instance brought change to Haiti and Peru with his ethnographies there (pp. 82). Meanwhile, Sheri Weiser’s ethnographic work on AIDS fell short of making good change, as outsider’s perspectives did not allow for change to be made (pp. 83). And this is where ethnography falls short, as explained by Kleinman and by Dr. Seeman. There is no way to break someone’s subjectivity. But Kleinman would argue that it is still the best work there is for building common understanding. Ethnography is inefficient, but valuable for wide-thinking. It can be dangerous, but it is valuable, and Kleinman’s hope is that “the ethnographic approach be developed more generally as a means of teaching about moral processes and examining their practical implications” (pp. 90). This I believe everyone hopes can be done. It does not have to be through ethnography. But if ethnography is needed to help bring change, to reduce judgment, to build friendships and alliances, I am all for it.

*Blessing Unintended Pregnancy. Religion and Discourse of Women’s Agency in Public Health* by Don Seeman, Iman Roushdy-Hammady, and Annie Hardison-Moody specifically

observes women living at Naomi's House, a homeless shelter specifically for women, many of which coming from domestic abuse. The location of the shelter where this ethnography takes place is not disclosed however. In this reading, the women continue to call their pregnancies a blessing, even when it was a big factor in their current bad circumstances (pp. 30). Seeman et. al describe how these women have a commitment to "make a way out of no way", which is something central to the lives of African American women (pp. 33). Many of the women interviewed base their decision-making off of the bible, backing their disapproval of abortion with the idea of pregnancy being a "divine initiative of life" (pp. 35). But a large motivation for these women in their positivity towards their pregnancy is that they emphasize how the pregnancy has helped them start over in their lives. They highlight how having someone that depends on you forces you to grow up. This is where we get to the idea of a blessing. The reading defines a blessing as an "unplanned gift that changed things for better" (for these women) (pp. 38). These women in the reading may be dealing with circumstances that many people would view negatively. But subjectivity again plays a major role here. It is difficult to say what is good for someone when one has not been in those circumstances themselves. That is the power of this ethnography: to help us "understand what a good outcome looks like to women struggling under circumstances" (pp. 43.). This is similar to *Made in India*, which tried to help show the viewer what a good outcome was for Aasia. The reading also highlighted how many of these women said that they were spiritual but not religious. Then, when they described their spiritual practice, it sounded just like religion. But to them, it is different. This is where ethnography comes in again as it can help capture what these women mean with their distinction.

The two readings complement each other because they highlight the diversity of rational decision-making, and how there are morals and ethics. Kleinman highlights how there is a great distinction, but both are important. Seeman et al. then show a more clear case of how this difference functions, and also, they write an ethnography to achieve Kleinman's proposed purpose of ethnography: "to teach about moral processes and examining their practical implications". The women studied at Naomi's House live in different moral worlds than the average Emory student. They chose not to terminate their pregnancies based on an idea of it being a blessing. Even if I view it to have complicated their lives, they do not, or not to the extent that I do, and the ethnographer shows this. And so, we can think a little bit more when we judge how people make decisions. But there are widespread ethics too, which are also observable from this ethnographic account. At least I saw that myself in that I could easily agree with one account from a woman who stated she was uncomfortable going to the hospital because of her treatment from doctors. Most people would view blatant negative treatment as a reason to avoid something. But, then again, what constitutes the perception as negative can fluctuate.

I myself have never formally identified with any religion. I would call myself agnostic, but I do not know (you get it?). But I grew up going to church in Texas for holidays with my family as wanted by my devout Methodist grandpa. As he has continuously spoken of the gospel to me, sometimes I get to thinking about it hard. Growing up in the south, especially in Texas, religious ideas of morals are all around you, and that was the case for me. When that is the case, it is hard not to absorb it. A few years ago, my mom told me that when I was nine, they believed that I had had a tumor in my brain. I only knew that I was having headaches, and needed to get surgeries a lot, and my parents were being extra nice to me. But at the last minute, the doctor

learned that it was just a huge thing of mucus. When I learned this news however, I viewed my not having the tumor as some sort of blessing, and continue to do so now. How I conceptualize a blessing may be very different from how most people do, but I viewed it as a gift, and something that guides my actions in life. I do not believe that this makes much sense to a lot of people. But those who have had similar things happen in their lives can often relate. And so this talk of blessings and how these women view their circumstances, and how local moral worlds need to be accounted for resonates with me. My circumstances were rather bizarre. But my interpretation of them is hard to understand unless someone has been in similar circumstances, or they were with me in the hospital all that time. Ethnography is that person in the hospital just observing.

## Works Cited

- Kleinman, Arthur. 1999. "Moral Experience and Ethical Reflection: Can Ethnography Reconcile Them? A Quandary for "The New Bioethics." *Daedalus*, Vol. 128, No. 4, 69-97. JSTOR.
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