S-114 – Gatekeepers, Informants, and the Undisciplined Labor of Scientific Knowledge Production

Organizers:

1) Rosanna Dent, (University of Pennsylvania, United States), rdent@sas.upenn.edu

2) Jenny Bangham, (Max Planck Institute for the History of Science, Germany), jbangham@mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de

Abstract:

This symposium examines the role of intellectual, social, and affective infrastructures of research in the biological and biomedical sciences. Historians of science have traditionally studied professional networks and collaborations between colleagues to uncover the social nature of scientific work. Recent scholarship has shifted attention to the importance of physical infrastructure in constraining and structuring scientific work. Biological and biomedical knowledge production depend on the spatial distribution and condition of structures and technologies such as hospitals, freezers, roads, and distribution networks for research materials. We build on these approaches to look at the historical importance of intellectual and social infrastructures that extend beyond disciplinary boundaries. Interlocutors from the social sciences, government institutions, and patient and subject populations have influenced which questions are asked and which data are collected in important ways. Focusing on the twentieth and early twenty-first century, these papers inquire into relationships beyond strict professional circles that have been essential to the production of knowledge of human biology.

Even though largely absent from both scientific and historical literature, research subjects, long-term research assistants, social scientists, customs agents, and others have all potentially defined the trajectory of research agendas. This is particularly the case as researchers and research materials travel from country to country, in the process navigating distinct regulatory, ethical, and epistemological regimes. Scientists working beyond their own national boundaries have consistently depended on others with experience specific to foreign field sites. These individuals are needed to collect and interpret local data understood to contribute to global biological and biomedical knowledge. These papers ask: Who are the local gatekeepers beyond the bounds of academic research that determine access to key resources, and how have researchers sought to engage them to further their scientific goals? How have fundamental concepts, institutions, and informants from other epistemological traditions molded biological approaches to human diversity and human health? What labor and care is necessary to secure the material conditions necessary for local research in an internationalized regimen of research and publication, and which social interactions determine the shape of this care? Drawing on case studies from Brazil, Uganda, the United Kingdom, and the United States, these papers examine the social and affective labor involved in biological and biomedical research.

Keywords: Biological and Biomedical Sciences – Invisible Labor – Social and Affective Infrastructures – Networks – 20th century.
Participants:
- Elisabeth Burton
- Eram Alam
- Claudia Fonseca
- Melissa Creary
- Paula Bolzan Jardim
- Rosanna Dent
- Jenny Bangham
- Kirsten Moore-Sheeley