

Workshop Report: Vaccination between Individual Autonomy and Social Responsibility

On December 9th, 2022, the Innovative Training Workshop (ITN) “Knowing Vaccines” held its second workshop, organised by us, the five PhD students and the postdoc researcher of the ITN. We invited medical anthropologist Dr Sung Joon Park as a guest to discuss current developments and paths in social research on epidemics and vaccination. Park leads the working group on medical anthropology at the Bernhard Nocht Institute for Tropical Medicine (BNITM) in Hamburg. He has done extensive ethnographic field research on social regimes of public health in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Uganda, with a special interest in Ebola epidemics.

Park opened the first part of the workshop with a talk in which he provided insights into current research projects of his working group at the BNITM. He reflected on current topics and perspectives of medical anthropology and addressed the question of how and for whom anthropologists write up the findings of their research. Furthermore, Park reflected on how to conceptualise modes of interdisciplinary collaboration by raising the idea of crystallization as a mode of integrating different analytical angles and insights, similar to a kaleidoscope.

In preparation for the second part of the workshop, we engaged with different articles by Park, connecting them to our own respective research fields to formulate comments and questions to the author. These reflections addressed, among others, mechanisms of trust and distrust, the impact of ideological frameworks and political regimes, the status of state actors as well as the role of anthropologists in their field.

In the afternoon, the third part of the workshop focussed on the relations between conceptualizations of the liberal and autonomous individual on the one hand and the aim of protecting society as a whole on the other: In what ways do these relations between individual choice-making and social responsibility create tensions or alignments? How were they used in different threads of argumentation throughout the Covid pandemic? And to what extent did that influence vaccination practices? Divided into three small groups, we discussed how these questions were dealt with by different stakeholders, namely lay people, governments and biomedical experts.

In the group presentations and the concluding discussion, it became clear how conceptions of the individual and society are historically situated and socio-culturally embedded. By referring to examples from Germany, the UK and Russia, we also pointed out the importance of political frameworks, the influence of media coverage and the role of practices of compliance. All in all, the workshop made evident how different dimensions of culture and society are complexly interwoven into sometimes very pressing ethical negotiations during epidemics. Thus, gaining a deeper and nuanced understanding of historical as well as contemporary regimes of vaccination requires context-sensitive inquiries and close empirical investigations on the ground.

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