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Rethinking Mental Health

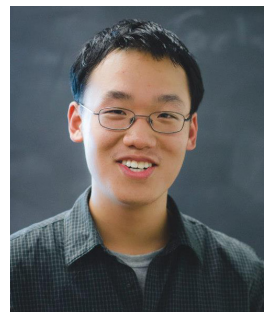
“The origin of every science we find in two different desires of the human mind—to arrange systematically the phenomena seen by the observer...[and] the personal feeling of man towards the world...”

—Franz Boas, “The Study of Geography,” *Science*, 1887

It is not uncommon for a new field of study like global health to find itself caught between two distinct habits of mind that shape the development of disciplines. As noted by geophysicist-turned-ethnographer Franz Boas, one is the tendency of the human mind to “put confused impressions into order” and to rationalize perceptual experience with explanatory principles. The other habit is a sentient one, one less interested in reducing nature to the abstractions of the intellect and more interested in finding beauty, wonder and emotional satisfaction in the nuances of perceptual experience.

Boas writes “The Study of Geography” to address the challenge of integrating, in a single scientific discipline, the human mind’s rational capacity with its sensitive, visceral and wonder-seeking tendencies. Consider the case of anthropology, a cross-curricular discipline pioneered by Boas that, like many social sciences, has struggled mightily to find a balance between humanism and the rationalist tendencies of the natural sciences. A century after Boas’ article, the challenge of striking such a balance remains relevant to burgeoning, interdisciplinary fields like global health. Caught between the phenomenological and the rational tendencies of the human mind, where does the equilibrium currently lie for global health?

This issue of the Journal spotlights the challenges facing contemporary mental health care and how global health’s multifarious nature can empower us to better understand and address mental health issues. How do we translate the abstractions of brain science into psychiatric care, especially where diverse sociocultural institutions and customs often complicate the recognition of mental health conditions? Why is it that, despite enormous recent progress in neurobiology research, the treatment of mental illness remains such a stigmatized and under-prioritized facet of clinical medicine globally? We ask you to consider how global health’s interdisciplinary nature—straddling the divide between the natural sciences and the humanities—can be utilized to translate contemporary advances in cognitive science into a more effective and informed approach to mental health issues worldwide.



Napier Lopez

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