

Moral laboratories

Family peril and the struggle for a good life

Reviewed by Katharine Dow

Cheryl Mattingly, *Moral Laboratories: Family Peril and the Struggle for a Good Life*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2014. Paperback, 280 pp., \$32.95. ISBN: 9780520281202.

Cheryl Mattingly's latest book comes out of a long-term collaborative research project on African American families in Los Angeles who are caring for children with chronic illnesses. This project has already generated a number of publications, including her previous monograph, *The Paradox of Hope* (2010). *Moral Laboratories* returns to many of the characters and scenes that populate the earlier book, a movement that mirrors her approach to ethnographic description within the text. Mattingly takes the reader back and forth, in and out of particular scenarios, gradually and deftly assembling a rich and complex picture of what everyday life is like for the individuals and families she is describing.

Moral Laboratories centres around the struggle for a good life informed by an ethic of care. Tacking between theoretical arguments and ethnographic examples, Mattingly develops an important and convincing argument about the value of a first-person 'virtue ethics' approach to anthropological subjects. Virtue ethics, which originates with Plato and Aristotle, attempts to understand how people cultivate ethical dispositions and come to act as moral beings as part of the pursuit of a good life. Virtue ethics focuses on being, that is, on the continuous cultivation of moral character, rather than on doing specific actions. First-person virtue ethics, she writes, 'takes our human singularity and the dialogical nature of our intersubjective life as primary' (p. 206). But this is a singular human, one who lives in a

world that, whilst infused with economic inequality, racism, and other structural constraints, remains unfinished and full of possibilities both tragic and hopeful. This is one of the meanings of her phrase ‘moral laboratories’, which is not so much a reference to contemporary biomedicine – much as that is an important background to her story – but to the fundamentally experimental nature of the struggle for a good life. The question of how to capture and account for the deliberative, experimental, and effortful nature of ethics, whilst not losing sight of the structural constraints in which these judgments and actions are enacted, is one of the most fruitful contributions of the recent blossoming of literature on ethics and morality within anthropology (see, for example, Laidlaw 2013; Faubion 2011; Lambek 2010; see also Paxson 2004). Mattingly’s answer, encapsulated in her concept of moral laboratories, demonstrates very well just what anthropology, and particularly ethnography, can bring to morality and ethics.

In addressing this problem of how to faithfully communicate the complexities of everyday ethics, Mattingly’s approach is to present ‘events’ in her research participants’ lives. These scenes, often tragic and always dramatic, seem to fit well with both Mattingly’s interest in virtue ethics and the realities of her participants’ lives. She tells many of her stories gradually, building up layers and revealing outcomes over the course of the book. She strives to valorise the ordinary, as illustrated by her account of how Willy’s family responded to his severe burns, caused by a household accident. While Willy’s mother and other members of the family talked about Willy’s ‘specialness’ in the aftermath of his accident, for example remarking on his intelligence to draw attention away from his facial scars, his grandmother Delores, the moral compass of the family (and perhaps the whole book), steered the family towards recognising and valuing Willy as neither victim nor hero, but just another, equal member of the family.

I am not sure that I have cried as much reading any ethnography as I did while reading *Moral Laboratories*, yet Mattingly takes great pains to avoid cheap pathos. Although this is an ethnography of the drama of the mundane, it is never melodramatic. For example, while introducing a chronological account of Andrena’s struggle with her four-year-old daughter Belinda’s cancer, she lets the reader know at the outset that Andrena has died in between this story and its telling. I could not help but think that this was a way of protecting the reader from the shock of finding out later, once she has invested in Andrena’s story – as Mattingly did. While Mattingly is not explicit about the role of emotions in ethics, it is unavoidable in the accounts she gives, and this is one part of the story that might have benefited from further theoretical reflection.

Mattingly is generous in the space she gives to her interlocutors' narrative accounts and she is clear about the power of personal testimony for them. Making accounts of others and ourselves is an ethical process, which she takes seriously. While she directly relates each of her ethnographic accounts to her theoretical points, she does not tie up all the loose ends, showing rather than telling the reader how caring for a very sick child can be a moral experiment and how ethics is not about answers, but about questions, possibilities, and struggles.

In the prologue, Mattingly portrays her approach as contentious and adversarial. I am glad that this threat of a fight was not entirely fulfilled. Certainly, she makes a strong case for her theoretical approach and is unflinching in considering the counterarguments to it, but ultimately this book is a lesson in balanced, respectful, and scholarly theory that is ethnographically informed theory and that leads by example rather than getting bogged down in epistemological turf wars. In the prologue, she depicts herself as focusing more on how particular people 'creatively and stoically respond to unjust or otherwise miserable social forces than to their underlying causes' (p. xvii). But I am not sure whether it is possible, or preferable, to separate out these 'unjust or miserable social forces' and people's responses to them. One mother in the book, who has become as expert in her daughter's sickle cell anaemia as her doctors, and who argues with them about whether to allow her daughter to undergo a highly experimental bone marrow transplant, reflects on the probability that better treatments for the condition have not been developed because a 'Black disease' does not attract funding. Racism and poverty exist in their actions and effects and *Moral Laboratories* shows this in heartbreaking detail.

About the author

Katharine Dow is a postdoctoral research associate in the Reproductive Sociology Research Group (ReproSoc) at the University of Cambridge. Her main research interests are the ethical questions provoked by reproduction and assisted reproductive technologies and relationships between reproduction and the environment. She is currently completing a book in which she traces the connections between how people think about the ethics of reproduction and ethics in their everyday lives called *Making a Good Life*, which is under contract with Princeton University Press. She recently co-edited a special issue on nature and ethics in *Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology*.

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