

[Published in *Current Anthropology* 48 (4): 492 (2007)].

Comment on “A generic solution? Pharmaceuticals and the politics of the similar in Mexico” (by Cori Hayden)

Cori Hayden makes an ingenious, but sometimes hard to follow argument about generic pharmaceuticals, politics and the public/private domain in Mexico. It seems to me that her emphasis on the subtle variations in branded and generic pharmaceuticals that are presented to the consumer as similar, or even identical, implies that the far less subtle differences between patients/consumers of drugs are of little or no relevance. Yet the individuality of patients is important, and ‘pharmaceutical anthropologists’ have pointed out intriguing local concepts that capture ideas about pharmaceuticals working differently for different people. These ideas are also now being studied now in pharmokinetic research. One example is the concept of compatibility: a medicine that works for one person may be useless for another. In the Philippines people call this *hiyang* (Hardon 1992). The idea of (in)compatibility also applies to other phenomena such as food, work, marriage partner, cigarettes, colors, and music. Similar observations about human beings’ differential reactions to medicines (and other things) have been reported from Malaysia and Indonesia. In Indonesian Bahasa the term is *cocock* or *jodoh*. Hull (1998) applies the concept of *cocock* to the use of contraceptive implants; Nichter (2006) to cigarette smoking. Obviously, other variations in consumer identity and behavior and subsequent pharmaceutical efficacy could be considered as well.

By focusing on the elasticity of pharmaceuticals and pharmaceutical business and not regarding the ‘elasticity’ among consumers of medicines, Hayden suggests a rather one-dimensional consumer versus a multifaceted world of drug production and marketing. I welcome her focus on processes that up to now have been largely unnoticed in the anthropology of pharmaceuticals, but I regret the disappearance of the larger context of consumers without whom the entire enterprise would be senseless.

Reference

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