

Book review of Ferrero, Laura, Vargas, Ana Cristina and Guagliariello, Chiara (eds.) 2021. *Embodying Borders. A Migrant's Right to Health, Universal Rights and Local Policies*. New York: Berghahn Books. 255 pp



BOOK REVIEW

MERVI LEPPÄKORPI 

Embodying Borders. A Migrant's Right to Health, Universal Rights and Local Policies is an edited volume, which brings together embodied experiences of different borders and extended border practices. The editors have a common affiliation at the Fundamental Rights Laboratory in Turin, Italy, and the right to health as fundamental right is consequently in focus of this volume. The book consists of two main parts, both comprising four chapters. The first part focuses on borders and inequality, the latter on the shift from individual to collective identity.

The volume presents a variety of case studies that reveal long-term research processes. The varieties of expertise from human rights to medical professionalism offer a sound analysis of systemic violence. Through eight empirical case studies from three continents, the authors focus on local practices around migrant health – and how these practices affect well-being. The cases reach from Sao Paulo, Buenos Aires and Lebanon to Italy and the United States. Authors understand ‘migrants’ as the socially disadvantaged individuals, often asylum seekers, refugees or people living in irregularity. The focus of the book is on local policies, while universalistic approaches and human rights, specifically the right to health, are viewed as a goal to be reached.

The authors have somewhat different fields of expertise, which supplement each other's topics and contributions. This enriching multidisciplinary take is particularly outstanding in Chapter 3 by Alejandro Goldberg, Cássio Silveira, Tatiane Barbosa and Denise Martin, and in Chapter 6 by Hala Kerbage and Filippo Marranconi, where the authors' disciplines combine the medical and the anthropological perspectives.

Following the disciplinary tradition of medical anthropology, the authors focus on the effects of power and social inequality on people's health, rather than to study the body as detached from the social and political environments that it inhabits. They analyse structural conditions, which cause sickness, suffering and ill health in certain populations, instead of focusing on ‘cultural’ issues and pathologies. Pietro Cingolani (Chapter 5), for instance, emphasises that the high numbers of health issues among the Roma should not be merely understood as ‘cultural differences’ between the patient and health-care professionals, but a consequence of long-term social exclusion.

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KEYWORDS:

Migration; Health care;
Human Rights; Borders;
Structural violence

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Leppäkorpi, M. 2022.
Book review of Ferrero,
Laura, Vargas, Ana Cristina
and Guagliariello, Chiara
(eds.) 2021. *Embodying
Borders. A Migrant's Right
to Health, Universal Rights
and Local Policies*. New
York: Berghahn Books.
255 pp. *Nordic Journal of
Migration Research*, 12(4),
pp. 493–495. DOI:[https://doi.
org/10.33134/njmr.540](https://doi.org/10.33134/njmr.540)

The embodied consequences of different forms of structural violence towards migrant populations form the core of the volume. The main contributions relate to the analysis of structural violence and the role of the state in (re)producing inequalities while controversially being also the institution that should or could challenge the structures. Health and well-being, particularly of migrants in positions of social disadvantage, are largely dependent on the action or inaction of states, and therefore this relationship between state action, access to human rights and a person's health and well-being is at the heart of the book. Indeed, the structural violence is at the centre of the volume even to the extent that it could have deserved a mention in the book title.

In the first two chapters, Anahí Viladrich (Chapter 1) and Nolan Kline (Chapter 2) analyse the characteristics of a 'deserving/undeserving' migrant in the United States. While Viladrich writes that the deserving migrant in the medias corresponds to an ideal neoliberal citizen, according to Kline, undeservingness results from policies, which cause individuals to feel they have no right to access health services even if they, in fact, are entitled to treatment. In the following two chapters, the authors discuss the structural violence in concrete cases of migrants' access to health care and demonstrate how the travel and living conditions resulting from irregularising practices dispose migrants to ill health.

In the second part, the authors focus on collective health practices. The case study on mental health care of Syrians in Lebanon by Kerbage and Marranconi (Chapter 6) is an important contribution to the ongoing discussion on pathologising suffering and consequently shifting focus on individual, medical solutions instead of resolving underlying structural conditions, which cause suffering. The article successfully discusses the controversies of expectations that surviving requires and that the humanitarian regime expects from refugees, as well as how individuals navigate between the different regimes under which they live.

Three further chapters in the second part of the book focus on different community approaches in Italy (Cingolani, Chapter 5; Ana Cristina Vargas, Chapter 7; and Laura Ferrero, Chapter 8). Considering the ample focus on Europe and the United States, the strong geographic focus on one country might have deserved further elaboration to clarify its significance for the reader. In their articles, Vargas and Ferrero introduce different approaches of intermediation between migrant patients and health-care providers. Considering that the empirical examples raise questions about ethical aspects of these practices, it could have served a reader without earlier knowledge about these practices to discuss further with the critical contributions that are referred to.

The chapters offer ethnographic, analytical fragments and evidence of structural conditions, which affect the health, as well as local practices, which support in overcoming local, bureaucratic borders between the migrant and health care. The contributions evidence the structural violence in a variety of contexts. Occasionally, the empirical data seem rather as a collection of examples instead of results of sound methodological analysis. The results hence seem wide reached, which in the complete picture do not affect the evidence the cases offer to support the overall image of structural violence.

Controversially, regarding the name of the book, the concept of border remains vague. Although the empirical examples would have offered a possibility to contribute to different theoretical and practical discourses about the borders and bordering, the borders and their effects remain undertheorised throughout the volume. The

discussion on terminology and the empirical evidence could have benefitted from further developing the concept of borders or bordering. The relation to borders could have been stronger through references to recent contributions to border mechanisms, such as ‘everyday bordering’ (Yuval-Davis, Wemyss & Cassidy 2018). Daniela DeBono’s Afterword, which discusses borders, would have offered a base for analysing borders and bordering in the empirical chapters to justify the book title. As it is, the Afterword is well written, but it remains unconnected from the chapters.

The scholarly apparatus is solid throughout the volume. However, at times, the chosen theoretical framework or terminology could have been further elaborated. For instance, when Cingolani (Chapter 5) refers to a person who has cut all his ties to Romania as a form of transnationalism, the approach, which emphasises the importance of belonging to different geographic locations, seems to lose its meaning.

Beyond the contribution to medical anthropology, this book could offer perspectives for health practitioners with an interest in developing more inclusive health-care practices. The civil society actors in the field of health might benefit from the critical contributions to the humanitarian practices.


FUNDING INFORMATION

Mobile Futures research project is funded by the Strategic Research Council (SRC) established within the Academy of Finland. PI Decision number: 345154, WP2 Decision number: 345405.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038517702599>

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Leppäkorpi, M. 2022.
 Book review of Ferrero, Laura, Vargas, Ana Cristina and Guagliariello, Chiara (eds.) 2021. *Embodying Borders. A Migrant’s Right to Health, Universal Rights and Local Policies*. New York: Berghahn Books. 255 pp. *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, 12(4), pp. 493–495. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33134/njmr.540>

Submitted: 13 December 2021

Accepted: 14 December 2021

Published: 07 December 2022

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