

ICS SEMINAR SERIES 2024

It takes a more-than-human village: Parenting as microbial management

15 August 2024 | 11:30am - 1:00pm

Room: EA.2.13 Parramatta South Campus

Abstract

Parental responsibilities have involved some form of management and awareness of the impact of microorganisms on human health for some time. In the mid-1800s, the advent of germ theory specifically tasked parents with indiscriminately avoiding and killing germs through antimicrobial practices and hygienic vigilance. More recent microbiological studies introduced the idea that the trillions of microorganisms found on and within our bodies are fundamentally constitutive of and a vital contribution for our health. Among this microbiological literature, great emphasis is put in the microbial relations between mother and child from pregnancy to the first years of life, where the current and future health of the baby is positioned as subject to maternal influence through 'lifestyle' decisions mediated by the gut microbiome. While this new post-Pasteurian turn seems to offer a path for rethinking parenthood as a more-than-human and distributed practice, it also frames the maternal microbiome as a new site of scrutiny that disproportionately responsabilises and burdens mothers. In this seminar, I'll share some of the initial insights emerging from our interviews with parents of young children in NSW, looking at how parents deal with these new microbial concerns. I will consider how the biological and political are all entangled in these practices of parental care for and with the microbes.

Biography

Roberta Pala is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the Sydney Centre for Healthy Societies at The University of Sydney. Her research draws on Science and Technology Studies (STS), Feminist STS, social theory, biopolitics and sociology of health. Her work looks at the entangled nature of social and scientific events and considers biological interventions and technological artefacts as material sites of political investigation. She gained her PhD in Science and Technology Studies from the University of New South Wales, Sydney, with a thesis on the political dimensions of the biological workings of vaccines. Her current work investigates human-microbial relations in the context of maternal bodies and the role of the microbiome in family practices of care.

Presenter: Roberta Pala
Discussant: Annie Sandrussi
Chair: Nicole Campbell

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