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Celebrating Unexpected Research Questions

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Questions are at the heart of research—a concept we spend time teaching students and mentoring scholars about at all levels. People often want to write about topics, and often need help to develop a specific question about a topic they want to try to answer with their research. A host of other skills end up embedded in the seemingly simple task of teaching someone to "develop a research question." One has to determine what kinds of questions can be answered in a particular timeframe—which questions make sense for class project versus a years-long project like a dissertation or a book—what methods will yield the most useful data; what methodologies will allow for the richest, most valuable analysis of that data; and so on. In the editors' introduction to 4.3, Blake, Lisa, and Cathryn examined the role of evidence in the rhetoric of health and medicine (RHM), arguing that "it can help us self-reflectively experiment with and make better decisions about our methodologies, guided by an ethical attunement to the phenomena we engage and what we are noticing and generating from this engagement" (p. 278). This editors' introduction seeks to connect that earlier focus on evidence with the research questions that precede—as well as follow—evidence-gathering, however defined. As with any scholarly endeavor, there is something of a chicken-and-egg or snake-eating-its-own-tail dilemma where one needs to know the question in order to determine other steps,

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but one also needs to have a sense of the data, of the methods, in order to really ask the "right" question for a given project or publication.

The "right" question can be elusive, and very often the question starts out too big, so the work of teaching or mentoring or reviewing is to help the writer narrow it, sometimes focusing on a sliver of the original question for one project and saving the log it began as for another time, another project or more. Sometimes, too, mentors, reviewers, and teachers can be so steeped in the questions that already seem to make sense for their field, so used to helping authors narrow questions down or link them to established frameworks, that they mistakenly shut down an unexpected, but potentially valuable research question, instead of helping someone shape it. Indigenous botanist Robin Kimmerer shared one such story in her much-beloved book, *Braiding Sweetgrass.*

Kimmerer described wanting to begin her academic pursuit of botany with several unexpected questions, including her burning question of "why asters and goldenrod looked so beautiful together" (p. 39). Her adviser declared this question "'Not science,'" and told her science was "not about beauty" (p. 39). Kimmerer was disappointed, but deferred to this response because this scholar was a "learned professor" (p. 39). Her story includes clashing worldviews and her continued pursuit to understand relationships and find connections in a context where detached observation and firm boundaries between subjects were *de rigueur.* Many years later, Kimmerer learned more about how human eyes perceive color, and discovered that from an artistic perspective, purple (the color of asters) and yellow (the color of goldenrod) are opposites on the color wheel, and thus are known as a "reciprocal pair" (p. 45). Beyond that human perception, though, she learned that bees share this visual appreciation for the two colors together—when the two colors appear together in nature, they become "a beacon for bees" (p. 46). That combination results in more bee visits, with attendant increased pollination—which is to say, the beauty of asters and goldenrod together is very much a question relevant to science. Kimmerer's story focused on her own learning, over time, to blend her natural inclinations and Indigenous perspectives with her scholarly, scientific training, but the lessons she drew from these personal stories resonate across contexts: that there is more to learn when different worldviews are embraced together, rather than separated. She noted, "Had my adviser been a better scholar, he would have celebrated my question, not dismissed it" (p. 45).

Kimmerer had not asked the “right” question upon entering her botany program, but the question was not wrong, either—it needed time, training, and experience in order to be shaped to offer valuable personal and scholarly answers. We in RHM must strive to help students and authors develop and shape their questions so we do not inadvertently dismiss valuable epistemologies outside our own worldviews, outside our field(s).

The Call for Papers for the 2023 RHM Symposium underscores one reason for embracing unexpected questions: it aligns with RHM’s commitment to supporting and recognizing work not only within but beyond RHM. As that call states, “We are also called to act on our commitment to diversity, equity, access, and inclusion as we maintain and nourish our dwelling places, recognizing that true sustainability necessitates both affirming a group identity and recognizing who those boundaries can exclude.” Kimmerer’s anecdote is a reminder of the ways scholars in positions of power can explicitly and/or subtly, intentionally and/or unintentionally, deny access to people whose backgrounds, identities, and/or scholarly traditions differ from their own.

RHM scholars must remain open to questions from other epistemologies, other traditions, and other minds—always remembering that shaping questions does not mean shutting them down. For any scholarly field to grow, scholars must be asking new questions—not only new questions about new topics as they arise, but new questions about topics with seemingly settled answers as well. Unexpected research questions by their nature surprise us, catch us off guard, and can therefore trigger a too-quick response, as Kimmerer experienced, about what a field is or is not, what it can and cannot explore, the questions it will and will not answer. What Kimmerer’s story reveals for RHM is a critical reminder to remain open to unexpected questions, to new avenues of thought.

RHM scholars do often ask thorny, complicated research questions—highlighted, for example, in a special section of *Rhetoric of Health & Medicine* (*RHM*) 3.4 focused on ethical questions, including pieces that examined the ethics of representation (Carrion 2020) and conflicting ethical obligations in human subjects research (Reed 2020). We editors have each asked various unexpected questions in our research as RHM scholars, some of which have been drawn from personal experience and from ideas we encountered well beyond the field. Kim was once asked by a graduate student how she “felt she had permission” early on to ask research questions about everyday women's childbirth writings. The answer was that she had only ever encountered curiosity, support, and research advice from her mentors when she had brought it up. The notion of permission never entered into the equation, in stark contrast to what Kimmerer experienced with her unexpected question.

We want this journal to continue to foster in RHM a culture of curiosity, support, and advice as a response to unexpected research questions. While not every new idea or unexpected research question ultimately grows into a Kimmerer-style answer that not only teaches the world why asters and goldenrod are beautiful together, but also how that beautiful togetherness is incredibly important to how the world functions, we will all benefit from questions that are shaped and nurtured as they evolve into answers and valuable contributions to our field.

Embracing New Ways of Learning and New Ways of Sharing Knowledge

We want to remind readers of the new multimodal section of the journal called "Physician Stories Archive," which lives on the medicalrhetoric.com website. The first interview is live, and as the introduction explains, provides readers and viewers with access to physicians' clinical experiences, which holds significant potential for asking new, unexpected research questions that may end up affecting how we work in RHM. Please write to the editors at rhm.journal.editors@gmail.com if you are a scholar who would like to interview a physician for this project.

We also want to draw attention to "Graphic RHM," our new digital column of original comics accompanied by artist statements. The first version, column 1, is now live on our website: http://medicalrhetoric.com/graphicRHM/. This episode features an inaugural editors' introduction and the work of Erin Fitzgerald, Kelly Dozier, K.C. Councilor, Maja Milkowska-Shibata, and Erin Kathleen Bahl. The "Graphic RHM" column will continue to publish comics from scholars at any level and stage of comic-making. Comics can address myriad concepts related to RHM, such as offering medical/health testimonials (by patients, caregivers, providers), patient and provider education, research methods, teaching, theoretical concepts, and more. Our "Graphic RHM" co-editors, Catherine Gouge and Blake Scott, are accepting submissions and queries for this new column at GraphicRHM@gmail.com.

In This Issue

This issue offers pieces working to answer a wide variety of unexpected research questions. The research articles in this issue range from exploring how and why wellness celebrities liberally borrow from spiritual and racial beliefs outside their own cultures, to examining how our country's leaders have intertwined securitization with pandemic plans, to wondering how various public depictions of depression can, when analyzed under a Burkean lens, obscure the temporality of depression, making it appear permanent. The dialogue also asks an unexpected question about the effect of the "celebrification" of public health officers on understandings of public health. These original compositions all contribute to this issue and its unplanned but unapologetic celebration of asking unexpected research questions.

Our lead article, by Lisa Keränen, Aishwarya Krishnamoorthy, Branden Ingersoll, and Meghan Cosgrove, "Preparing For Pandemic: Securitizing Rhetoric in U.S. National Influenza Response Plans, 1978-2017," examines how infectious disease has become "increasingly securitized in the post-9/11 environment." The authors analyze a corpus of seven pandemic plans to determine the degree to which each is securitized, finding that despite stylistic and content differences over time, the plans demonstrate a consistent and ever-increasing focus on global and health security. Their analysis demonstrates that a guiding central authority or unified vision for such plans has never been implemented, with predictably uneven results for all. They suggest that those in authority who write such plans in the future 1) work to interrogate the "meanings of security and health; 2) ask who and what are being secured and *how*; and 3) determine whose responsibility is it to secure against pandemic, at whose expense, and with what consequences overall."

Offering up a very different focus on guiding authorities in their article, "'Let's Get a Little Bit Aboriginal, Shall We?': Transforming Cultural Appropriation into Spiritual Wellness via the Neohealthism of KINRGY," Stacey Overholt and Amanda Friz explore "celebrity-driven wellness ventures," which they explain are common and typically led by "white women, resulting in white-centric health guidance." With a focus specifically on KINRGY, begun by Julianne Hough, the article offers a critical rhetorical analysis of KINRGY's various media outputs. Crucially, the authors identify how the "workout and lifestyle method" capitalizes on cultural appropriation and exploitation. Through a careful reckoning and with cogent, coy headings such as “The Unbearable Whiteness of Wellness,” the authors productively (re)theorize neohealthism as a “distinct shift from medicalization and healthism,” one “marked by a turn toward spirituality as a guiding authority” and with a tremendous focus on the personal rather than the societal.

Next up is “Constructing Chronicity and Clouding Kairos: The Fragmentation of Temporal Dialectics in Descriptions of Chronic Depression,” by Ellen Defossez. Defossez returns journal readers’ attention to chronicity, the subject of a recent *RHM* special issue, by “extending Singer and Jack’s (2020) definition of illness chronicity as a complex rhetorical process of identification” to include new “temporal vocabularies (ways of defining and describing time)” that come before and enhance that identification process. With a focus on chronic depression, Defossez relies on Kenneth Burke’s temporal themes to analyze various public descriptions of chronic depression. The analysis illustrates how such descriptions make depression appear permanent, thus “obscuring recognition of change.”

Colleen Derkatch, Kristin Kondrlik, Hua Wang, and Beck Wise assert that RHM scholars should be interested in what happens when public health figures are treated as celebrities in their dialogue, “A Dialogue on Public Health Celebrities during COVID-19.” The transnational dialogue draws on and contributes to scholarship on public health rhetoric. The speakers explore the “celebrification” of public health officers across various local contexts, suggesting that this evolution in their role requires public health officers to balance ethical obligations with public expectations. The authors suggest that celebrification reshapes the role of the public health officer and also affects public understanding of health.

We are also pleased to include two book reviews in the online portion of this issue. The first is S. Scott Graham’s incisive review of Jennifer S. Blumenthal-Barby’s *Good Ethics and Bad Choices: The Relevance of Behavior Economics for Medical Ethics*—a text that, while it may elicit discomfort, could also allow for productive conversations in rhetoric on the fraught and complex dynamics of paternalism and clinical persuasion. In the second, Brittany Smart offers a review of Colleen Derkatch’s book, *Why Wellness Sells: Natural Health in a Pharmaceutical Culture* (2022). Smart notes Derkatch’s framing of wellness as a “never-ending feedback loop” that can be forever chased but never be fully achieved. Derkatch applies the concept of autopoiesis to examine various vectors of wellness in each chapter, noting that self-surveillance, tracking, and self-hacking become *de rigueur*. In this framework, everyone is on the verge of becoming ill. A memorable takeaway from the review is "that in its turn inward, in its performativity, wellness culture inhibits the true 'self-transformation' that it seeks."

Just as perception was at the heart of both Kimmerer's question (her perception) and its ultimate answer (bees' perception), perception matters across each of these pieces in significant ways—the celebrification of wellness matters differently if one perceives white women appropriating indigenous practices for profit appealing, appalling, or somewhere in between; pandemic protection in some form benefits everyone, but securitization challenges associated with pandemic preparation are perceived dramatically differently depending on one's political perspective, and so on with experiences and beliefs about depression, public health, and celebrities. Where perception matters most, though, is in the belief that even an unexpected or "wrong" question might become significant, and therefore the, or a, "right" question for the *kairotic* moment.

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