

Ecks, Stefan. 2022. *Living worth. Value and values in global pharmaceutical markets*. Durham, London: Duke University Press. 288 pp. Pb.: \$26.95. ISBN: 9781478017677.

Book review by

Cohwen Mills

West Chester University (USA)

Amidst what many consider an increasingly severe global mental health crisis, the prevalence and rate of psychotropic drug usage is on the rise. In *Living Worth*, anthropologist Stefan Ecks reflects on sociomedical ethnographic work done in Kolkata and abroad to demonstrate perceived and embodied values within the global pharmaceutical markets that actively facilitate these trends.

Existing theories of value, including the Marxist labor theory of value (LTV), as well as the widely used economic subjective theory of value (STV), cannot substantially explain the cultural or psychological worth of pharmaceutical anodynes, Ecks explains. Hence, he proposes a new perspective, a practice he refers to as biocommensuration. Ecks describes biocommensuration as “the practice of valuing,” and that “living means valuing.” (p. 28) Therefore, true value is often ascribed to what makes, or appears to make, life better. This idea—that what we purchase, consume, or surround ourselves with in an effort to improve our lives is inherently valuable—is the driving force of Ecks’ argument regarding the globalized, cross-cultural value of mental health-related pharmaceuticals.

Living Worth also explores the implications and effects that sociocultural environments have on habitual behaviour. Building off Mauss’ *habitus*, Ecks vividly demonstrates the reluctance of Indian society to admit that poor mental health is rising through case studies and conversations with those consuming, as well as those prescribing, these drugs. His research reflects systematic flaws within the pharmaceutical markets of India and demonstrates the habitual actions that have been taken to escalate the situation to the point at which we see it now.

Furthermore, Ecks draws on over two decades of experience within the field of sociomedical anthropology to highlight the limitations of current approaches to embodiment and perception of value. One of Ecks' major criticisms here is the lack of guidance and information regarding etiology. Within the *DSM-5*—the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (now the *DSM-5-TR*)—little to no information is given regarding root causes of human behavior, even those that have the capability to lead to the development and perpetuation of mental disorders. Ecks dedicates the 8th chapter of *Living Worth* to this discussion, outlining how psychiatrists have both failed and succeeded in improving their practices via identifying the ways in which substance consumption, mental disorders, and culture intertwine.

Ecks builds off this discussion to address the global implications of the structure of existing psychiatric treatment, putting particular emphasis on the fact that whilst pharmaceutical corporations continue to profit massively, those struggling with disorders like depression are not receiving the treatment they need. He describes the current situation within Big Pharma, particularly in American and Western European corporations, where psychopharmaceuticals addressing depression are no longer a research and development priority due to their difficulty or inability to turn a profit. Meanwhile, outdated drugs are being sold “generically,” that is, not name-brand, in nations like India for pennies on the dollar. Neoliberalism, as well as capitalist interest, are at the very core of this issue, as Ecks describes it. With the bottom line being profit for these corporations, very little attention is paid to the use and misuse of the products that are being distributed and consumed globally.

Living Worth stands as an incredibly powerful commentary on the state of global pharmaceutical markets and how, through the value systems of consumers and distributors, they are impacting societies and communities worldwide. Using his past ethnographic experience as a sort of microcosm, Ecks' cynicism toward these conglomerates is backed by thorough research into the increasingly isolated world of psychiatry and psychopharmaceutical research. Clearly something must be done to address the enormous increase in rates of depression and mental disorders plaguing modern populations. This book effectively communicates the issues at hand and proposes new, interdisciplinary approaches to solve them.