

Dr Giulio Ongaro

Assistant Professor of Anthropology

School of Humanities and Social Science
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RESEARCH INTERESTS

Ethnopsychiatry; Medical Anthropology; Shamanism; Ethnography of Laos; Anthropological Theory

Philosophy of Psychiatry; Placebo and Nocebo Effects; Philosophy of Mind

Human History; Philosophy of History; Philosophy of Social Sciences; Marxism; Social Ontology

EDUCATION

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| 2014-2020 | Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)
Social Anthropology, London School of Economics, University of London
Thesis title: <i>The 'placebo effect' in highland Laos: insights from Akha medicine and shamanism into the problem of ritual efficacy</i>
Supervised by Prof. Rita Astuti and Prof. Catherine Allerton
Examined by Prof. Tanya Luhmann and Dr. Joe Calabrese |
| 2013-2014 | Master of Research (MRes)
Social Anthropology, London School of Economics, University of London
<i>Distinction</i> |
| 2012-2013 | Master of Science (MSc)
Philosophy of Mind, Language and Embodied Cognition, University of Edinburgh
<i>Distinction</i> |
| 2009-2012 | Bachelor of Arts (BA)
Social Anthropology, Goldsmiths College, University of London
<i>Distinction</i> |

ACADEMIC APPOINTMENTS

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| 2024 – present | Assistant Professor. Division of Humanities. School of Humanities and Social Sciences. HKUST |
| 2022 – 2024 | Junior Fellow at the Society of Fellows in the Liberal Arts, Southern University of Science and Technology |
| 2021 – 2022 | Wenner-Gren Hunt Postdoctoral Fellow. Department of Anthropology, LSE |

PUBLICATIONS

Peer-Reviewed Journal Articles and Book Chapters

Ongaro, G. (forthcoming, 2027). ‘Whose tribalism?’ in Gutierrez, A. & Musallam, F. (eds.) *New Questions of Anthropology*. London School of Economics. Social Anthropology Monographs. LSE Press.

Ongaro, G. (forthcoming, 2026). Functionalism versus the structuralist tradition. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*.

Ongaro, G. (forthcoming, 2026). ‘David Graeber, the constituent imagination, and historical materialism.’ *Critique of Anthropology*

Ongaro, G. (2025). ‘When new shamans enter the stage: ecstatic healing and the neutralization of messianism among Akha in northwestern Laos’. In Stolz R. & Lutz P. D. (eds.) *Being Present: Emerging Ethnographic Perspectives and the Study of Laos*. NUS Press

Ongaro, G. (2024). Social Psychiatry Inside-OUT. *Philosophy, Psychiatry, & Psychology* 31(3), 341-346

Ongaro, G. (2024). Outline for an Externalist Psychiatry (3): Social Etiology and the Tension Between Constraints and the Possibilities of Construction. *Philosophy, Psychiatry, & Psychology* 31(3), 301-314.

Ongaro, G. (2024). Outline for an Externalist Psychiatry (2): An Anthropological Detour. *Philosophy, Psychiatry, & Psychology* 31(3), 285-300.

Ongaro, G. (2024). Outline for an Externalist Psychiatry (1): Or, How to Fully Realize the Biopsychosocial Model. *Philosophy, Psychiatry, & Psychology*, 31(3), 269-284.

Ongaro, G. (2024). ‘The Cultural Identity of Techniques: rigidity and flexibility among the Akha of highland Laos’. In Charbonneau, M. (ed.) *The Evolution of Techniques: Rigidity and Flexibility in Use, Transmission, and Innovation* (Vienna Series in Theoretical Biology). MIT Press.

Ongaro, G., Hardman, D., & Deschenaux, I. (2024). Why the extended mind is nothing special but is central. *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 23(4), 841-863.

Ongaro, G., Ballou, S., Kube, T., Haas, J. & Kaptchuk, T. (2023). ‘Doctors speak: a qualitative study of physicians’ prescribing of antidepressants for functional bowel disorders’ *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry*.

Ongaro, G. & Kaptchuk, T. (2022). ‘Reply to Arandia and Di Paolo’, *PAIN* 163(4) e605-e606.

Haas, J.*, **Ongaro, G.***, Jacobson, E., Conboy, L., Nee, J., Iturrino, J., Rangan, V., Lembo, A., Kaptchuk T. & Ballou, S. (2022). ‘Patients’ experiences treated with open-label placebo versus double-blind placebo: a mixed methods qualitative study’. *BMC Psychology*, 10(1), 20. *Equal contribution of work

Hardman, D., Hutchinson, P., & **Ongaro, G.** (2021). ‘Questioning the consensus on placebo and nocebo effects’. *Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics*. 1-2.

Hardman, D. & **Ongaro, G.** (2020). ‘Subjunctive medicine: a manifesto.’ *Social Science & Medicine*. 113039.

Ongaro, G. & Kaptchuk, T. (2019). ‘Symptom perception, placebo effects, and the Bayesian brain.’ *PAIN* 160(1), 1-4.

Ongaro, G. and Ward, D. (2017). ‘An enactive account of placebo effects.’ *Biology & Philosophy*. 32(4), 507-533.

Miscellaneous Writings

Ongaro, G. (2026). ‘Conscious Life and Voodoo Death’. Berggruen Prize Essay Competition shortlisted essay. *Landscape of Consciousness*. <https://loc.closetotruth.com/essay/conscious-life-and-voodoo-death>

Ongaro, G. (2025). ‘The social world is something we collectively create’. Guest blog post on Substack *Psychiatry at the Margins*. <https://www.psychiatrymargins.com/p/the-social-world-is-something-we>

Ongaro, G. (2024). Interview in *Culture, Medicine & Psychiatry* blog. <https://culturemedicinepsychiatry.com/2024/03/08/interview-with-giulio-ongaro/>

Ongaro, G. & Laws, M. (2022). ‘Towards a progressive theory of myth: Turner and Graeber on social creativity’. *Focaal Blog*. <https://www.focaalblog.com/2022/01/24/giulio-ongaro-and-megan-laws-towards-a-progressive-theory-of-myth-turner-and-graeber-on-social-creativity/>

Ongaro, G. (2021). ‘Review of *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity*’ appeared in *Tribune* and *Jacobin*, subsequently translated into Spanish, Italian, German, French, Turkish and Portuguese. <https://jacobin.com/2021/10/david-graeber-the-dawn-of-everything-human-history-anthropology>

Howick, J. & **Ongaro, G.** (2020). ‘Could reading about the pandemic cause harm?’ *The Conversation*. 20 April. <https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-could-reading-about-the-pandemic-cause-harm-135585>

Ongaro, G. (2017). ‘Akha study’. Contribution to ‘Immunisation final report: issues, barriers and facilitators that influence access to immunisation programmes for people living in the Mekong border regions of Lao PDR’. Funded by the World Health Organization.

Ongaro, G. (2016). ‘Wild pigs cannot enter.’ *Mekong Review: Quarterly Literary Journal*. Vol 2(5). https://www.academia.edu/37480523/Wild_Pigs_Cannot_Enter

AWARDS AND PRIZES

2025	Berggruen Prize Essay Competition — Shortlisted
2019	Class teacher award — Highly Commended. LSE
2014	Alfred Gell Prize for Best Research Proposal. LSE
2013	Highly Commended Dissertation Award. University of Edinburgh

FUNDING

2025	Digital Humanities Seed Funding. HKUST
2021 – 2022	Wenner-Gren Hunt Postdoctoral Fellowship
2020 – 2021	ESRC Postdoctoral Research Fellowship
2021	Research Infrastructure and Investment Funding from the LSE Anthropology Department for co-organizing a seminar series ‘The case for comparison’ at LSE, Summer 2021.

- 2018 Research Infrastructure and Investment Funding from the LSE Anthropology Department for organizing ‘The philosophy of placebo workshop’ at Senate House, 27-28 November 2018.
- 2013 – 2018 Economic and Social Research Council 1+3 Scholarship (4 years), ESRC Difficult Language Training grant (1 year).

SELECTED PRESENTATIONS

- May 23, 2026 ‘Human phenotypic plasticity: an ideal-experimental approach’ Shanghai-HKUST Symposium on Philosophy of Science. Fudan University.
- Apr 23, 2026 ‘When new shamans enter the stage: ecstatic healing and the neutralization of messianism among Akha in northwestern Laos’. *Being Present* Book Promo. NUS Press (online).
- Apr 11, 2026 ‘Special Ethnogenic Zones: An ideal framework for an experimental social science’ PKU-HKUST Symposium on Philosophy of Science. Peking University.
- Mar 21, 2026 ‘Akha voices in one script: a project of digitalization and standardization of oral texts’. Junior Fellows Academic Conference. Southern University of Science and Technology, Shenzhen.
- Mar 17, 2026 ‘Akha voices in one script: a project of digitalization and standardization of oral texts.’ Digital Humanities Roadshow. HKUST
- Mar 4, 2026 ‘Spirits as social determinants.’ SOAS Center for Anthropology and Mental Health Research in Action. Brown Bag talk (online).
- Dec 4, 2025 ‘The rationality of indigenous medicine.’ HKU-Pasteur Research Pole. University of Hong Kong
- Nov 23, 2025 ‘Mind in death.’ HKUST-PKU Philosophy of Science Workshop. HKUST
- Oct 26, 2025 ‘Life, consciousness, and voodoo death.’ Shanghai-Hong Kong Philosophy of Science Workshop. HKUST
- Feb 21, 2025 ‘The placebo effect paradox: a conceptual labyrinth and an etiological way out’. Seminar Series in Philosophy of Science. HKUST.
- Dec 5, 2023 ‘Shamanism and the “placebo effect”: a new anthropological approach to the global history of psychiatry’. Division of Humanities. HKUST.
- Dec 1, 2023 ‘Towards a cognitive science of collective intentions’. Institute of Philosophy at the Chinese Academy of Science, Beijing.
- Feb 2, 2023 ‘The Akha medical system: its epistemic and therapeutic value’. Yunnan Minzu University, Kunming.
- Jul 15, 2022 ‘Outline of an externalist psychiatry: anthropological insights into the problem of social causation’. Mind, Value and Mental Health: Philosophy and Psychiatry Summer School. St. Hilda’s College, University of Oxford.

Nov 26, 2021	‘Towards a progressive theory of myth: Terence Turner and David Graeber on dynamic structuralism’. Department of Anthropology, LSE. (with Dr. Megan Laws).
Jul 2, 2019	‘Ritual efficacy in an externalizing medical system.’ Anthropology Department, University of Heidelberg.
Nov 27, 2018	‘Placebos and the limits of medicine: from the modern clinic to shamanic healing’. Philosophy of Placebo Workshop. Senate House, London.
Mar 16, 2018	‘The effectiveness of symbols revisited: insights from Akha indigenous medicine and placebo science.’ Department of Anthropology, LSE.
Aug 17, 2017	‘Efficacy of spiritual and non-spiritual therapies among the Akha of northern Laos’. EUROSEAS Conference, University of Oxford.
May 27, 2017	‘Akha medicinal plants: knowledge and effectiveness’. Plant Worlds: A Cross-Disciplinary Forum on Human-Plant Relationships. University of Kent.
Apr 3, 2017	‘Diagnosis as treatment: anthropological insights from Akha indigenous medicine.’ First official Society of Interdisciplinary Placebo Studies conference. Leiden.
May 13, 2016	‘Akha identity in Laos’. LSE Southeast Asia Forum ‘Inclusion and exclusion in Southeast Asia’. The Lincoln Centre, London.

COURSES TAUGHT

Graduate

A New History of Humanity
 Culture, Psychiatry, and Mental Illness
 Fundamentals of Chinese Culture—Anthropology Module

Undergraduate

Medical Anthropology
 Global History: New Anthropological Perspectives
 Introduction to Social Anthropology

Guest Lecturer

Placebo: What, Why, and How (postgraduate, University of Oxford)

Teaching Assistant

The Anthropology of Kinship, Sex, and Gender (undergraduate, LSE)
 Religion in Different Social and Geopolitical Contexts (undergraduate, King’s College)

EVENTS ORGANIZATION

1 Nov 2025	‘Across borders and realms: new visions of mobility and spiritual connections in China’. Panel organized for the East Asian Anthropological Association (EAAA) conference, Zhejiang University
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12 Mar 2025	IAS Distinguished Lecture by Prof. Marcia Inhorn (Yale) ‘Motherhood on Ice’. HKUST, Institute For Advanced Study
02 Nov 2023	4on4 Salon seminar on ‘The early Neolithic city of Taosi’ by Prof. He Nu. School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Southern University of Science and Technology.
27 Apr 2023	4on4 Salon seminar on ‘Akha twinship and caring practices’ by Prof. Wang Ruijing. School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Southern University of Science and Technology.
Sep – Dec 2021	Research seminar series on the anthropology of David Graeber. LSE. Co-organised with Prof. Alpa Shah and Dr. Megan Laws.
27-28 Nov 2018	‘The philosophy of placebo workshop’. Senate House, London. Main organiser.
16-18 Aug, 2017	‘The creation of efficacy in Southeast Asian healing practices’. Panel co-convened (with Elizabeth Elliot, UCL) for the European Association for Southeast Asia Studies (EUROSEAS) conference at the University of Oxford.

ACADEMIC SERVICE

Professional Service

Scientific Committee Member, *Placebo, Hypnosis, and Functional Disorders: Bridging Basic Research and Clinical Innovation* (International conference), Nancy, France, 14–16 Oct 2026.

Departmental Service

Curriculum Committee (2025–present)

Peer-reviewed journals

The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute, *Synthese* (4x), *Philosophical Psychology*, *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, *Clinical Social Work Journal*, *Philosophies*, *Religions*, *BMC Medical Education*, *Journal of Medical Ethics*, *Philosophical Quarterly*, *Asian Medicine*, *Inquiry*, *Communications Medicine*, Cambridge University Press.

PhD theses external examiner

University of Warwick (2025)

MPhil/PhD supervision

Qin Kunyu | Spirit mediumship, Dongbei

Wei Zhifei | Cross-border dynamics, Yunnan/Myanmar

Bao Xiaomeng | Mongolian traditional medicine, Inner Mongolia

Yuan Mingze (Heidelberg University, co-supervised) | Akha concepts of fate and luck, Yunnan

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS

2025 – 2027	Assistant Director. South China Research Center, HKUST
2025 – present	Officer. The Asian Philosophy of Science Association (APSA).
2025 – present	Team Member. Center for Philosophy of Science, HKUST

2024 – present	Team Member. Situated Cognition Research Group. Bournemouth University
2022 – 2025	Visiting Fellow at the Department of Anthropology, London School of Economics
2021 – present	Team Member. Program of Placebo Studies & the Therapeutic Encounter. Harvard Medical School
2018 – present	Member. Society for Interdisciplinary Placebo Studies (SIPS)

LANGUAGES

Italian	Native speaker
English	Full proficiency
Akha	Advanced
Mandarin Chinese	Intermediate (HSK 4)
Lao	Elementary