
Supervisor's Name	Sandra Widmer
Supervisor Email Address*	swidmer@yorku.ca
Supervisor's Department	Anthropology
Project Title	Quantifying Reproduction: Colonialism, Birth and Women's Health in the South Western Pacific Islands (1906-1980)

Description of Research Project (1500 characters maximum)

"Why would I have more children, if they will only die?" is what women told the European researchers who worried about precipitous demographic decline in the early 20th century New Hebrides (now Vanuatu). It is well known that birth rates were low and that they began to rise by mid 20th century, but little has been written about how this demographic knowledge was implicated in colonial governance of reproduction and family structure. Furthermore, the relations between indigenous and colonial forms of knowledge, medicine and care for birthing women and fertility control have not been adequately studied in this region.

How did Pacific island women care for each other during pregnancy and birth? How did they respond to colonial forms of knowledge and medicine that aimed to improve their health by quantifying many aspects of their lives? How was women's reproductive health connected to broader colonial public health concerns? Professor Widmer examines these questions primarily in the context of the New Hebrides (now Vanuatu) but also in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands. Broadly, the project aims to reveal the circumstances that shaped which bodies, forms of kinship and reproductive practices were marked for improvement in colonial situations.

This research project is currently underway. Professor Widmer has conducted oral histories with women in Vanuatu. She has already conducted archival research in British and French colonial collections as well as private papers of medical doctors and missionaries. The thousands of digitized items are partially organized.

Undergraduate Student Responsibilities (1500 characters maximum)

Organize and catalogue digitized archival documents and images with accuracy.

Update Zotero database and assist with bibliographic formatting in publications.

Assist with conceptualizing and executing project web page.

Conduct secondary literature reviews on kinship, women's health and colonialism.

Develop annotated bibliographies from secondary literature.

Qualifications Required (750 characters maximum)

Curiosity about social, cultural and political dimensions of health.

Must have taken at least one 6 credit 3000 level course in Social Anthropology.

Knowledge of anthropological concepts and theories pertaining to kinship and gender.

Ideally some experience with archival methods and working with digitized archival documents.

Demonstrated attention to detail.

Demonstrated ability to work independently.
