

Who are leeches?

Who are leeches? Exploring malleability in human–leech relations through ethnographies from Dagestan and Turkey

Iwona Kaliszewska and Iwa Kołodziejska



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This paper introduces the concept of "malleability" as a lens for understanding human interactions with writhing animals, using leech–human relations as a case study. Our research is based on ethnographic fieldwork among Dagestani healers in Dagestan and Turkey, 2019–2024. We argue that the malleability of leeches influences leeches' capacity for reversibility and shapes human–leech communication through their physical transformations and social roles. Through their flexible bodies, leeches enable nuanced, multisensory exchanges, influencing how

humans interpret their actions—whether as cooperative, resistant, or purposeful behaviour. Malleability also mediates human sensory and emotional responses, evoking reactions ranging from disgust to admiration. Our findings reveal that leeches occupy a spectrum of roles in human perception and practice, serving as near-companions or ethical subjects, despite the lack of bioethical protections for their use in research, and as commodities or tools in medical contexts. Their physical and semantic malleability enables this fluid reversibility in human perceptions and practices. Methodologically, we advocate for “immersive duo-ethnography”, which incorporates the researchers' bodily experiences as tools for examining non-verbal interactions between writhing animals and humans. This approach reveals significant entanglements at the sensory and cognitive levels, avoiding reliance on oversimplified metaphors about molecular or chemical processes when precise tracking of such mechanisms is unfeasible. By focusing on embodied relationships, our work highlights the complex interplay of physicality and meaning in human–other taxa interactions.

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