What is medical anthropology?

ANTH 306/Medical Anthropology

Readings

- McElroy + Townsend Pp.34-80.
- McElroy: *Medical Anthropology*
- *Medical Anthropology: The Search for Knowledge.*
What is anthropology?

- Holistic & comparative study of humanity.
- North American anthropology divided into 4 sub-fields:
  - Physical/biological
  - Cultural
  - Archaeology
  - Linguistics.

What unites anthropology?

In spite of breadth there are factors that unite anthropologists from all 4 subfields:

1. All of its approaches are comparative.
2. All subfields emphasize importance of concept of culture.
3. All subfields interested in understanding humans in broadest possible context – holistically.
Domains of Culture

1. **Infrastructure:** material & economic aspects of culture.
2. **Structure:** social organization, power, interpersonal relations.
3. **Superstructure:** belief system, symbols, cognitive models, ideology.

Research in anthropology

Anthropological projects usually start with:

1. A **problem** or question.
2. An **ethnographic site** or a particular **historical period** that will provide information and context for answering the question. Field research – study of humans in their natural settings.
3. A **theoretical approach** to determine what questions to ask and what research methods to use.
What is Medical Anthropology?

- Area of anthropology that seeks to understand *causes of health & illness* in human societies.
- Application of anthropological theories & methods to questions of health, illness, medicine, & healing.
- [Mark Nichter Pathways to Health](#)

## Major orientations

1. **Medical ecology**
   - Uses ecological perspective to understand disease patterns.
   - Biomedical disease categories seen as universal.
   - Views humans as biological & cultural beings.
   - *Adaptation* is key concept.
     - Genetic
     - Physiological
     - Cultural
     - Individual

### Table 1.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Forms of Cultural and Biological Adaptation (to High Altitude)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type of Adaptation</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genetic adaptation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Biomedical adaptation</td>
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</table>
Major orientations

2. Ethnomedicine.
   - Focus on health beliefs & practices, cultural values, social roles.
   - Health maintenance system of a society.
   - Beliefs, knowledge, & values of specialists & lay people.
   - Roles of healers, patients, clients, family members.
   - Implements, techniques, pharmacopeias of specialists.
   - *Explanatory model* – notions about causes of illness, diagnostic criteria, & treatment options.
   - Distinction between disease & illness important.
   - Ethnographic methods are key.

Major orientations

3. Applied medical anthropology
   - Often serves populations at margins of mainstream society: refugees, rural communities, elderly, drug addicts, disabled, ethnic minorities.
   - *Political economy of health/critical medical anthropology* examines differentials in power and how they affect health and illness.
   - *Eclectic methodology* – from highly qualitative to highly quantitative.
Video illustrations

• Dr. Mark Nichter
  - Regents' Professor and Professor of Anthropology, Public Health, Family Medicine, University of Arizona. (his website)
  - Pathways to Health. (short video)

• Dr. Paul Farmer:
  - Kolokotrones University Professor of Global Health and Social Medicine, Harvard University
  - 10 Questions for Paul Farmer
  - Partners in Health.
  - I Believe in Healthcare as a Human Right