

# 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?

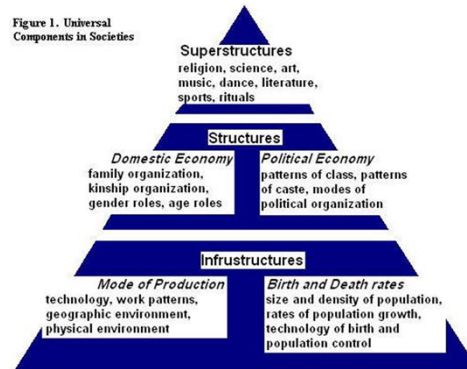
In spite of breadth there are factors that unite anthropologists from all 4 subfields:

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.

Figure 1. Universal Components in Societies



# 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.
- Study of human health and disease, health care systems, and biocultural adaptation (Ann McElroy).
- 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

Forms of Cultural and Biological Adaptation (to High Altitude)

Form of Adaptation	Type of Adaptation	Example
Technology	Cultural	Pressurized airplane cabin with oxygen masks
Genetic adaptation (occurs over generations)	Biological	Larger "barrel chests" of native highlanders
Long-term physiological adaptation (occurs during growth and development of the individual organism)	Biological	More efficient respiratory system, to extract oxygen from "thin air"
Short-term physiological adaptation (occurs spontaneously when the individual organism enters a new environment)	Biological	Increased heart rate, hyperventilation

## 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:
  - [Kolokotronis 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](#)