

1 Introduction: Anthropological perspectives on Medicine and Health

Summary of the Lecture

Today's issue: Introduction to the development of social anthropology and the role of medical anthropology. What do we mean by 'culture'? What are the methods used by Medical Anthropologists?

What is anthropology?

- The study of human beings. A cross-cultural and comparative study of human society.
- Anthropology is a representational process, engaged in an activity of cultural translation and interpretation.
- By aiming to translate the cultural environment of human societies, anthropology hopes to remove western [ethnocentric] ways of seeing other cultures. This translation, in essence, is a political exercise.
- Anthropologists aim to engage with people's lives while keeping a sense of critical representation of society and culture.

What is Medical Anthropology?

- The study of human experiences of health, disease and healing.
- Is about how people in different cultures explain the causes of ill-health, the types of treatment they believe in, and to whom they turn if they do get ill
- It is the study of how beliefs about health, body, illness and its practices relate to biological, psychological and social changes
- It draws connections across disciplines and integrates a variety of perspectives on human health
 - It questions: what is a cultural system of healing?
 - It addresses: Western biomedical approaches to understanding health and well-being
 - It challenges: the dichotomy and opposition between biomedical and traditional healing systems.
 - It provides a critical approach (it helps us make questions) about the relation between the many different cultural approaches to healing and health.

Approaches to Medical Anthropology

- The Ethnomedical approach - the importance of understanding an '*emic*' (insider's view) responses to health and disease
- Evolutionary approach - framework for understanding environmental conditions (*not used in this course*)
- Ecological approach - focuses on adaptation to environments (social, ecological, political) and their impact on health.
- Critical approach - analysis of social inequalities and challenges that perpetuate health deprivation among the underprivileged
- Applied medical anthropology - challenges health care

Methods in Applied Anthropology:

- Key Informants
- Participant Observation
- Critical perspective/Awareness of bias

Today's quotations:

"Anthropologists demonstrate a particular capability in helping to solve human problems through building partnerships in research and problem solving; acknowledging the perspectives of all people involved; focusing on challenges and opportunities presented by biological variability, cultural diversity, ethnicity, gender, poverty and class; and addressing imbalances in resources, rights, and power. Such contributions are most effective in interdisciplinary settings where active and committed social scientists work in partnership with active and committed representatives of community, national, and international constituencies"

-Society for Applied Anthropology, *Strategic Values and Directions*

"Western biomedicine and medical anthropology are intimately connected. Many medical anthropologists work in biomedical settings or study problems that have been defined in biomedical terms" (Rhodes, p165, in Sargent 1996)

"Therapy, treatment and healing are terms that define the domain of active response to illness, disease, pain, suffering and distress. At the broadest, they are a response to general conditions of life (...) at the narrowest; they are applications of a specific remedy to a specific and limited problem" (Csordas, T and Kleinman, A p.3 in Sargent 1996)

References and Suggested Readings

- Glick, L.B (1997) Medicine as an Ethnographic Category: The Gimi of the New Guinea Highlands. In *Culture, Disease and Healing: Studies in Medical Anthropology* (Ed, Landy, D.) Macmillan Publishing Vo., Inc., New York, pp.58-70
- Helpman C.G (2000) *Culture, Health and Illness*. Ch. 1. Arnold. Hodder-Headman Group.
- Lewis |G (1993)
- Lambert, H (2006) "Ethnocentrism: Reflections on Medical Anthropology". *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, Vol.12, pp.23
- Sargent, C, Thomas M, J. (1996) *Medical Anthropology: Contemporary Theory and Method*. Praeger Publishers.

Thinking Questions:

- 1- Think for a moment how you would define 'health'
- 2- Does health include only physical qualities, or are there other aspects as well?
- 3- Outline any issues when trying to understand 'health' from an 'outsider's' (*etic*) point of view?