



Medical Anthropology

Medical anthropology is an important sub-field within anthropology. Medical anthropology includes global health, medical systems, cross-cultural issue, as well as ideas, in health and wellness.

Health systems

Medical anthropologists often research different health systems around the world, offering a comparative outlook. A health system is the course of treatment given to an individual. This involves how an illness is experienced and perceived by an individual, what an individual does about their illness, how the illness is diagnosed, how the illness is treated, who is affected by the illness, and many more ideas. Clearly, medical anthropologists research a wide variety of different variables.

Cross-cultural variants

For many medical anthropologists, it's important to study, recognize, and respect the cross-cultural variants in health, medicine, and wellness. For example, cultures may vary in terms of who is responsible for caring for an ill patient, why a certain physical symptom occurs, who they go to for treatment, and many other topics.

Biomedicine versus biopsychosocial model

Medical anthropologists often recognize and discuss the difference between two different models of health—the biomedical model and the biopsychosocial model.

In much of the world—particularly North America and Europe—the biomedical model is used. In this model, a patient experiences physical symptoms, which leads to treatment of the symptoms and/or the cause of the symptoms. This model is centered around the idea that illness and disease have virtually exclusively physiological causes. A good example of this model would be having a headache, and treating it with a painkiller pill.

While this is the traditionally predominant way of viewing illness in much of North America and Western Europe, in recent decades the biopsychosocial model of health is prevailing instead. The biopsychosocial model acknowledges more than just an individual's physical symptoms, and also looks at the psychological and social context behind the symptoms. This model is important, since it takes into account the relationship between stress and illness. Additionally, more preference is given to this model today because it attempts to focus on the cause of the illness, rather than just the symptoms.

Global health

Besides looking at culturally variable ideas about health and wellness, medical

anthropologists also often look at issues of global health. These can include infectious diseases, HIV/AIDS, epidemics, and other issues. Since cultures and individuals have different ideas about health and how to treat illnesses, understanding the cultural context is key in understanding how to treat patients.

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