



**WHAT IS MEDICAL  
ANTHROPOLOGY?**

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STUDY GUIDE FOR EPISODE 1  
"The Medical Anthropology Approach"

**SONG**

"Talk about a Revolution" by Tracy Chapman

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xv8FBjo1Y8I)

[v=Xv8FBjo1Y8I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xv8FBjo1Y8I)



# MEDICAL ANTHROPOLOGY BASICS

## **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.

Application of anthropological theories & methods to questions of health, illness, medicine, & healing.

## **DOMAINS OF CULTURE**

### **Infrastructure**

material & economic, aspects of culture.

### **Structure**

social, organization, power, interpersonal, relations.

### **Superstructure**

belief system, symbols, cognitive models, ideology.

## **MAJOR ORIENTATIONS**

### **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



# MEDICAL ANTHROPOLOGY BASICS

Medical Anthropology is the study of health and healing from an anthropological perspective. Academic research in medical anthropology draws on different theoretical approaches, with a shared emphasis on increasing our understanding of the diverse ways in which cultural, social, and biological factors influence human experiences of pain, illness, suffering and healing in different settings. In addition, medical anthropology investigates the social, political, and economic contexts in which health behavior and health systems are shaped.

Issues studied by medical anthropologists include, but are not limited to:

cultural understandings of bodies and bodily processes;

- risk and protective dimensions of cultural norms and behaviors;
- illness experience and social meanings of disease;
- health effects of human ecologies and adaptive processes;
- and biosocial factors related to disease distribution and health disparities.

Medical Anthropology also includes applied research geared toward solving specific problems related to the delivery of health care, including improving health care policies and systems, enriching approaches to clinical care, and contributing to the design of culturally valid public health programs in community settings around the world.

## MAJOR ORIENTATIONS

### **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

### **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.



# MEDICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

# KEY TERMS

## •**Medicalization**

when conditions become categorized

**Somaticization** = body expressing itself, how the body experiences itself

**Illness** = Anthropologists investigate the cultural experience of the “sick role.” Ex. “I have” HIV v. “I am” an AIDS patient

**Disease** = Biomedical or scientific construction of “x condition”

**Wellness**= Some cultures focus on health instead of wellness....

Ex. Could it be beneficial to powerful institutions to keep the sick sick and the poor sick?

## **HEALTH**

Health is not just the outcome of genetic or biological processes but is also influenced by the social and economic conditions in which we live.

These influences have become known as the ‘social determinants of health’.

Inequalities in social conditions give rise to unequal and unjust health outcomes for different social groups.

**Social determinants of health** These refer to the social, economic, and political situations that affect the health of individuals, communities, and populations.

**Absolute and relative inequalities** in health Inequality in health is an empirical notion and refers to differences in health status between different groups. It is a multidimensional concept, consisting of technical and normative judgments in the choice of appropriate metrics. We have presented absolute and relative inequalities.

**Inequity in health and health care Inequity** in health is a normative concept and refers to those inequalities that are judged to be unjust or unfair because they result from socially derived processes.

Equity in health care requires active engagement in planning, implementation, and regulation of health systems to make unbiased and accountable arrangements that address the needs of all members of society.

**Health system and health-systems performance** The health system as defined by WHO describes “all the activities whose primary purpose is to promote, restore, or maintain health.

## Determinants of health outcomes

