

Health, Illness, and Healing: An Overview in Medical Anthropology

Priyabrata Mondal* and Abhijit Das

Department of Anthropology, West Bengal State University, Barasat, West Bengal

*Corresponding author: Priyabrata Mondal, Department of Anthropology, West Bengal State University, Barasat, West Bengal, Tel:

00917407664040; E-mail: priyamgob@gmail.com

Received date: April 04, 2022, Manuscript No. IPAJE-22-12569; **Editor assigned date:** April 06, 2022, PreQC No. IPAJE-22-12569 (PQ); **Reviewed date:** April 20, 2022, QC No. IPAJE-22-12569; **Revised date:** June 02, 2022, Manuscript No. IPAJE-22-12569 (R); **Published date:** June 14, 2022, DOI: 10.36648/2348-9502.22.9.001

Citation: Mondal P, Das A (2022) Health, Illness, and Healing: An Overview in Medical Anthropology. Am J Ethnomed Vol:9 No:6

Abstract

It is a mentionable fact that, health, illness and healing are considered as a ubiquitous nexus in the holistic study of health system under the purview of Medical Anthropology. The socio-cultural dimension of health is viewed cross culturally in the study of ethno medicine in the present day. The ethnic communities as the mainstay of the unit of study in medical anthropology have to be observed with special emphasis on the ethno pharmacy along with some of the interdisciplinary domains. The present research article is an overview of the holistic aspects of health system and its different parameters in a nutshell.

Keywords: Medical anthropology; Health; Health system; Ethno medicine; Healing; Globalization

Introduction

Preamble

Health is always considered as one of the major concerns in Anthropology as the discipline studies human being from holistic and integrated perspective. In the present day, the biological and cultural dimensions of health and allied issues are viewed under the purview of Applied Anthropology. Besides, the biological dimension of health and health related issues (Bio-medical Anthropology); Medical Anthropology (Socio-cultural dimension of health and health care system) is one of the most rapidly growing areas as well as Sub-fields in Anthropology. In its very simple sense, medical anthropology studies and interprets how people in different cultures think, conceive and behave regarding health, illness, and healing [1].

Being one of the most relevant and highly developed areas of applied anthropology, it examines the ways in which society and culture are organized around or influenced by issues of health, health care, and related issues. The health related issues under the disciplinary terminology as 'Medical Anthropology' has been used since the early sixties. The anthropologists of the then era labeled it for empirical research and theoretical orientation into the socio-cultural processes and representations of health, illness, and the health care practices associated with these.

Therefore, medical anthropologists examine how the health of individuals, larger social formations, and the environment are affected by interrelationship between human biology and culture; cultural norms, values, social groups and institutions; micro and macro politics; and the forces of globalization as each of these effects on local and regional worlds.

What is Health?

Basically, human health is the biological and mental state of life. According to World Health Organization, health is a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of infirmity. A variety of definitions have been used for different purposes over time. It is a common fact that health can be promoted by encouraging healthful activities, like physical exercise, sound life leading and by avoiding unhealthy activities or situations including excessive stress. Some factors affecting health are due to individual choices, such as whether to engage in a high-risk behaviour, while the society is arranged in a way that makes it easier or harder for people to get necessary healthcare services. Still other factors are beyond both individual and group choices, such as genetic disorders.

Ethnomedicine-The cross-cultural health systems

During the 1960s, when the term 'ethnomedicine' first came into use and referred to only non- Western health systems and was synonymous with the term 'Primitive Medicines'. Since the early days of Anthropology, the concept of Ethnomedicine, or the study of cross-cultural health systems, has been a prime focus of research. The Health Care System or Health System (recently upgraded nomenclature) encompasses the areas like perceptions and classifications of health problems, prevention measures, diagnoses, healing (magico-religious, scientific and healing substances), and healers. Ethnomedicine has expanded its domain such as perceptions of body, culture and disability; change in indigenous or 'traditional' healing systems especially under globalization [2].

It is a mentionable fact that contemporary Western Bio Medicine (WBM), a healing approach based on modern Western medical science emphasizes technology in diagnosing and treating health problems related to the human body. It is an ethnomedical system, too. Medical anthropologists now study WBM as a medico-cultural system intimately bound to Western

values and it's all pervading issues in the local as well as regional contexts of occurrence and the latter is presently termed as 'Pharmaceutical Anthropology' in the advanced Social-Cultural Anthropology. Thus, the current meaning of the term ethno medicine encompasses health systems everywhere.

Health problems-disease-illness dichotomy

It is worth mentioning that emic (insiders' viewpoint) diversity in labeling health problems presents a challenge for medical anthropologists and health-care specialists. The most important set of concepts that medical anthropologists use to sort out the many cross-cultural labels and perceptions is the disease-illness dichotomy. The model depicts that disease refers to a biological health problem that is objective and universal, such as a bacterial or viral infection or a broken leg/arm. On the other hand illness refers to culturally specific perceptions and experiences of a health problem. Medical anthropologists consider and study both disease and illness, and they try to show both must be understood within their cultural contexts.

Description

Ethno-Etiologies-The causal explanation for health

Ethno-etiology is the culturally specific causal explanation for health problems and sufferings. People in all cultures, everywhere, attempt to make sense of health problems and try to understand their cause (etiology). The concept refers to a cross culturally specific causal explanation for health problems and sufferings.

Healing ways and healers

Medical anthropologists consider healing ways, healers and healing substances as three key points under this domain. The private healing addresses bodily ailments in social isolation, whereas the community healing encompasses the social context as crucial to healing. Compared with Western biomedicine, many non-Western systems use community healing. People's solidarity and group sessions may support mental and physical health, acting as health protection system. On the other hand, humoral healing has been practiced for thousands of years in the Middle East, the Mediterranean, and much of Asia. It is the healing that emphasizes balance among natural elements within the body.

It is a common fact that, everyone is a 'healer' because self-diagnosis and self-medication as well as treatment are likely the first steps while feeling ill in day to day life. Although the cross-cultural evidences indicate certain common criteria of healers like, selection proper framing, certification, professional image, and expectation of payment.

Regarding healing substances thousands of different natural and manufactured substances are used around the world as medicines for preventing or curing health problems. Anthropologists used to spend more time studying the same in non-Western pre-industrial cultures that in the Western, although a more fully cross-cultural approach is emerging that

also examines the use and meaning of Western pharmaceuticals under the preview of Anthropology of pharmaceuticals.

Phytotherapy

It is healing through the use of plants. Cross-culturally, people know and conceive about and use multi-variegated plants for a wide range of health problems. Similarly, increasing awareness of the range of potentially useful plants worldwide provides a strong incentive for protecting the world's cultural diversity, because it is indigenous people, who know about botanical resources and cognitive skills [3-4].

Moreover, pharmaceutical medicines are rapidly becoming increasingly popular worldwide. Although these medicines have many benefits, some bad side effects include frequent self-medication without prescription and over-prescription [5].

Theoretical approaches

Medical Anthropologists depends three distinctive theoretical approaches. The ecological/epidemiological approach considers how aspects of the natural and social environment interact to cause illness. Interpretivist approach examines health systems as systems of meaning *i.e.* to study how people in different cultures label, describe, and experience illness and how healing systems offer meaningful responses. On the other hand, critical medical anthropology involves the analysis of how economic and political structures shape people's health states, their access to health care, and the prevailing medical systems that exist in relation to them.

Health

Globalization and change: With the 21st century globalization, health problems move around the world into remote areas and cultures more rapidly than ever before. The HIV/AIDS epidemic and COVID-19 and newly allied pandemics are the tragic examples of the day. These episodes of diseases and health system are part and health systems are part and parcel of the decade may lead to a situation in which aspects of both cultures coexist to form a situation of medical pluralism. It refers to the presence of multiple health systems (indigenous/traditional, western biomedical and mixed) within the society. The concept of disease of development, *i.e.* health problem caused or increased by economic development, effects on the environment and people's relationship with it (e.g. COVID-19 of the timeline).

Therefore, the applications of anthropological knowledge with these regards (*i.e.* Applied Medical Anthropology) to furthering the goals of health-care providers are urgently needed.

Conclusion

It is the application of anthropological knowledge/study to further the goals of health-care providers which may involve improving doctor-patient communication in multicultural settings, making recommendations about culturally appropriate health intervention programmes, or providing insights about factors related to disease that medical practitioners do not

usually take into account. Within this sphere anthropologists draw on ethno-medical knowledge and on any of the three theoretical approaches as mentioned or a combination of them. All of which brought anthropological knowledge to the solution of public health problems both through the public health communication and working together by WBM and non-WBM systems.

References

1. Haviland WA, Prins HEL, Walrath D, McBride B (2008) Cultural Anthropology. 13th edition. New Delhi, Cengage Learning, India.
2. Kottak, Philip Conrad (2000) Cultural Anthropology. 8th edition. New York: McGraw Hill, India.
3. Miller, Barbara (2011) Cultural Anthropology. 8th edition. New Delhi, PHI Learning Pvt. Ltd, India.
4. Petryna, Adriana, Andrew Lakoff, Arthur Kleinman, eds (2007) Global Pharmaceuticals: Ethics, Markets, Practices. NC: Duke University Press, Durham, London. Glob Public Health 2: 418-420.
5. Strang, Veronica (2021) What Anthropologists Do. 2nd edition, New York: Berg, India.