

What Is Anthropology

What Is Anthropology?

Slide #1

In a simple term, anthropology is the Study of Humankind

- *anthropology* itself tells the basic story-- from the Greek *anthropos* ("human") and *logia* ("study")--it is the study of humankind, from its beginnings millions of years ago to the present day.

We ask anthropological questions all the time

Slide #2

- ***Do all societies have marriage customs?***
- ***As a species, are human beings innately violent or peaceful?***
- ***Did the earliest humans have light or dark skins?***
- ***When did people first begin speaking a language?***
- ***How related are humans, monkeys and chimpanzees?***
- ***Is Homo Sapiens's brain still evolving?***

We ask anthropological questions all the time

Slide #3

Anthropology seeks to uncover *principles of behavior* that apply to all human communities.

As we all have learned *Behavior* plays major roles in health arena – this is where the public health discipline and the field of anthropology meet!

We ask anthropological questions all the time

Slide #4

- **Anthropology is then** the comparative study of human societies and cultures. It seeks to understand human beings as whole organisms who adapt to their environments through a complex interaction of biology and culture
- The aim is to describe, analyze, and explain the different ways of life, or cultures through which human groups or societies have adapted to their environments

Specialization in anthropology (Continued...)

Slide #5

- **Biological/Physical anthropology** (human biology and its relation to society, culture and history)
- **Linguistic anthropology** (examines various facets of human language and its relationship to social and cultural life)
- **Archeology**
Paleontology – is the study of tracing human evolution in the fossil record (the remains of earliest human forms, as well as non-human forms---where did we come from?)
- **Cultural or Sociocultural Anthropology**

Sub-specialization in anthropology

Slide #5

- **Anthropology of Religion**
- **Linguistic Anthropology**
- **Forensic Anthropology**
- **Applied Anthropology**
- **Urban Anthropology**
- **Legal Anthropology**
- **Applied Anthropology**
- **Feminist Anthropology**
- **Ecological Anthropology**
- **Humanistic Anthropology**
- **Psychological Anthropology**
- **Medical Anthropology**

Cultural Anthropology

Slide #6

Cultural anthropologists study humans through a descriptive lens called the ethnographic method, based on participant observation (face-to-face interviews), normally conducted in the native tongue. Ethnographers compare what they see and hear themselves with the observations and findings of studies conducted in other societies.

Four basic anthropological premises

Slide #7

1) cultural relativity

societies and cultures are best understood as whole systems - those who interact with foreign cultures have a moral obligation to take those cultures seriously, including their social organization and values

2) Theoretical foundation of knowledge and practice – one's beliefs and actions are based on underlying beliefs about how the world works

Four basic anthropological premises (Continue..)

Slide #8

- 3) Research and sociocultural process – that is, research and interaction are sociocultural processes.**
- 4) Human “nature” is also cultural and social.**

What do we mean by anthropological Fieldwork?

Slide #9

Anthropologists use a number of methods to collect data (qualitative data in general)

- participation observation**
- Structured- and unstructured- interviews**
- ethnography (fieldwork write up – an in depth study of people and their cultures)**
- ethnology refers to the comparative statements about cultural and social processes that are based on cross-cultural ethnographic data**

Medical Anthropology

a sub- specialty of Cultural Anthropology

MEDICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

- **Medical anthropology has become a long established specialty within anthropology and is in fact the second largest sub-organization within the American Anthropological Association.**

- **Medical anthropologists are interested in studying patterns of human health, sickness and death by considering both biological and cultural factors, i.e. what can be termed a “biocultural synthesis”. For example, high rates of infant death caused by diarrhea.**

- **In particular medical anthropologists are interesting in studying and seeking ways to deal with the following issues:**

- **why some human groups are more affected than others by certain illnesses**
- **why the effectiveness of treatment varies from group to group**

- **cultural variation in conceptions of health and illness**
- **cultural universals in health and illness**
- **political and social forces that affect illness and health**

- **Of special interest to medical anthropologist is the study of entnomedicine, the investigation of health-related beliefs, knowledge, and practices of cultural groups.**

- **Some cultural beliefs about health and illness are widespread.**

- **Among them are concepts of balance or equilibrium, meaning that imbalance brings illness and the restoration of balance brings health. Examples, hot and cold, yang and yin. Tai chi as a preventative measure.**

- **Another common belief is the idea that supernatural forces cause illness and must be appeased to restore health. Examples, loss of one's soul, ill fate, retribution for violation of a taboo or bad conduct, contact with a polluting or tabooed substance or object, sorcery.**

- **In these cases diagnosis is especially important in searching an appropriate cure.**

- **In trying to establish applied health programs medical anthropologists must first work with the cultural consensus of the social group, i.e. what do the majority of people believe as the cause and likely cure of illness and what are their basic health beliefs.**

- **In medical anthropological studies of shamans it has been found that many shamans' cures are much like those of psychotherapists in the following ways:**

- **They name the illness and thus so labeled it becomes more likely to be cured.**

- **Shamans who are warm, empathetic, non-threatening and appear to be sincerely concerned for their patients get better results.**

- **Elaborate curing bits and pieces, impressive settings, time and resources spent to receive a cure all seem to affect better results.**

- **Some ethnocures have biological properties that empirically work. Many cultures have a sophisticated knowledge of the human anatomy. Examples, bone setting, fetus tuning, medical plants.**

- **The mind-body connection should always be considered. While we are only beginning to understand the linkage of body, mind and emotion, we know it is important. Example, the placebo effect.**

- **Nowadays the knowledge exchange between Western medicine and the ethnomedicine of other cultures is more complete and two-way. Examples, acupuncture, herbal cures.**

- **The increase in human migration around the world has helped spread illnesses to all parts of the globe.**

- **Medical anthropologists are concerned with how the inequities of wealth and power affect illness and health. Example, cash crops replacing subsistence agriculture.**

- **Migration and wealth and power in inequalities have brought about some particular health concerns.**

- **Example, the epidemic of AIDS. Sexual practice, poverty, the pharmacy business, cultural beliefs regarding sex, relative gender position.**

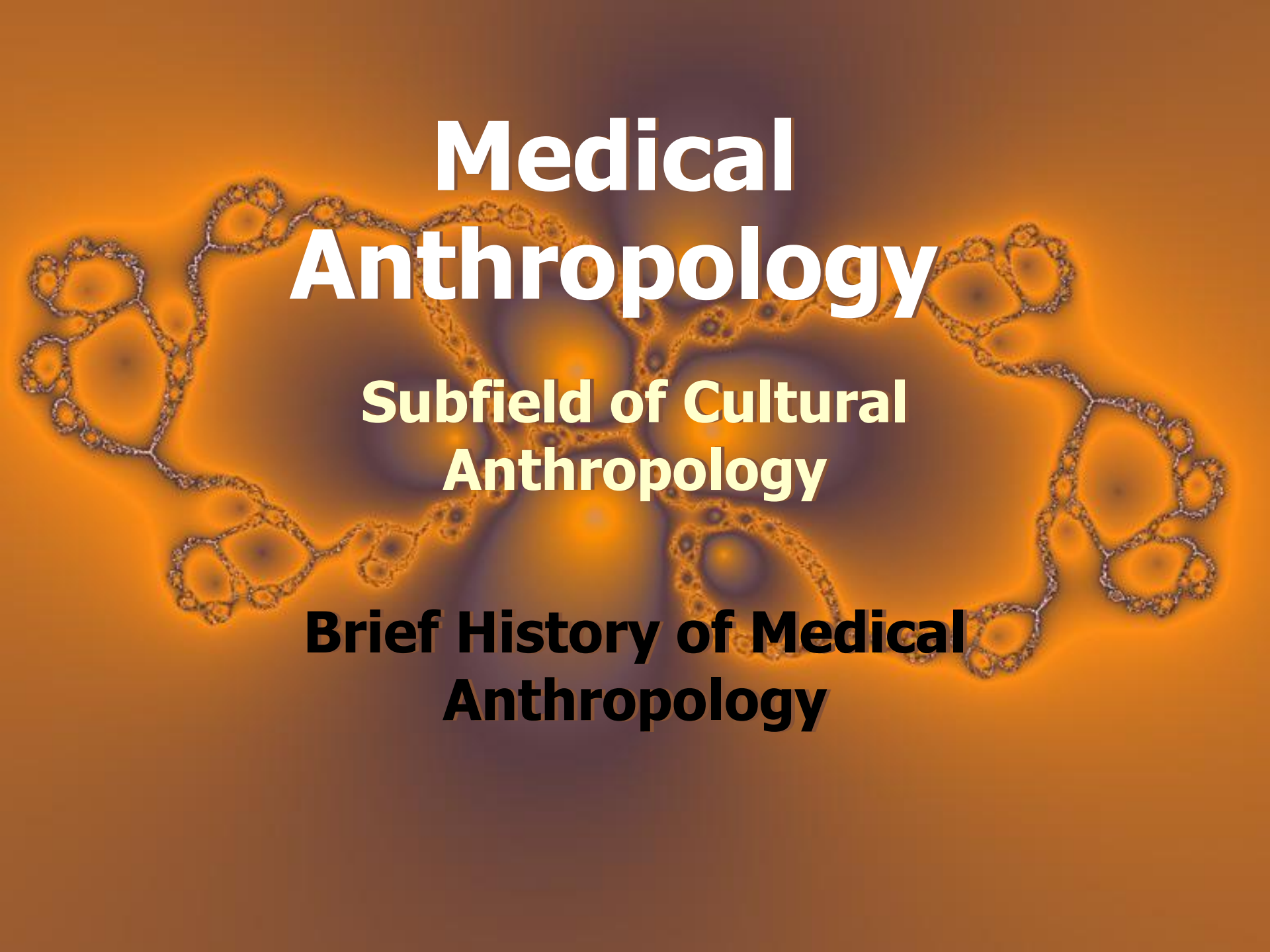
- **Medical anthropologists also investigate whether there are culturally bound illnesses or not.**

- **Example, is *pibloktoq* an illness occurring among some adult Inuit in Greenland (symptoms, disorientation, agitation, followed by exhaustion and withdrawal) really unique or caused by a dietary deficiency?**

- ***Susto* may be a culturally bound way to understand generalized ill health and/or psychological distress.**

- **Yet medical anthropological studies indicate depression and schizophrenia are so widespread that they are thought to be universal.**

- **In sum medical anthropologists consider human health and illness from the holistic perspective of a biocultural synthesis.**



Medical Anthropology

**Subfield of Cultural
Anthropology**

**Brief History of Medical
Anthropology**

Brief History of Medical Anthropology

- 1. 1940's = Ethnobotany:** documenting indigenous people's medical beliefs
Ex. Native Brazilians knowledge of Amazonian plant and bark properties
- 2. 1950's = International Health relationships & western biomedicine & development**
Ex. Western medicine and antibiotics will help developing nations (i.e. tb cure in 1952)
- 3. 1960's = Ethnomedicine:** different cultures practice different kinds of medicine
Ex. Non-western medicines & practices are worth understanding

History of Medical Anthropology (cont.)

4. 1970's = Psychological anthropology: what does illness mean to individuals?

Political economy: who gets ill and why?

5. 1980's = Body Politics: what is the relationship between national politics & the body? (Frankfurt school)

Ex. During WWII, the physically fit & able body was the nationally appropriate body (Eugenics & Nazism)

History of Medical Anthropology (cont.)

6. 1990's = Critically **"applied"** medical anthropology

Ex. Farmer's work as an MD & anthropologist

"illness narratives" = your story, your words, your experience with illness (v. "patient histories" which protect the hospital)

7. 2000 = Using anthropological lens as a tool to examine medical situations as they intersect issues of **social justice** (organ transplants, pharmaceutical industry, health in prisons, etc.)



Paul Farmer's Perspective is Shaping a New Anthropology

**“In a very real way, inequality itself
constitutes our modern plague”
(Farmer 1999:15)**

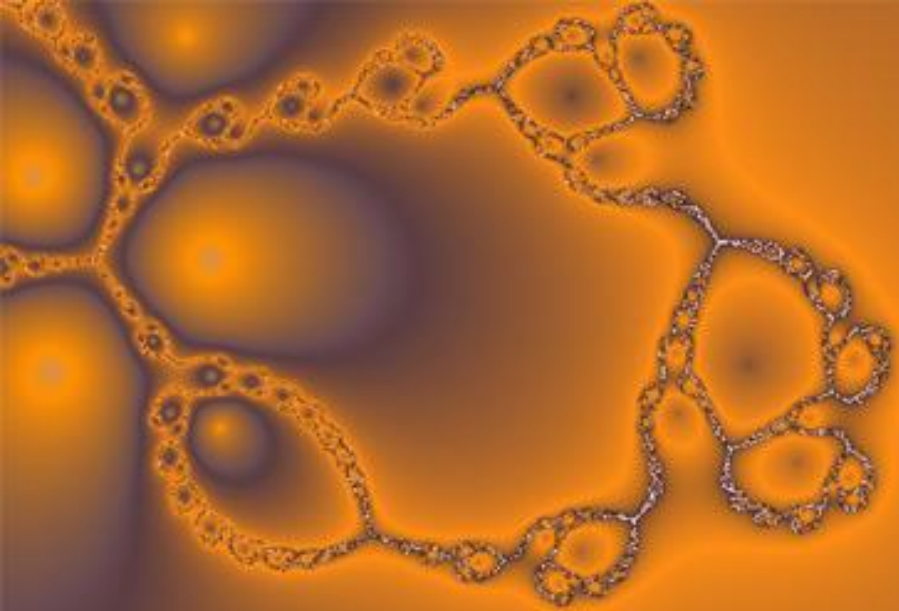
**Our focus should be on stopping the
spread of **MDR-TB, HIV/AIDS** &
poverty!
(not on the anti-aging industry!)**

Medical Anthropology Ethnographies

- 1994. Emily Martin. *Flexible Bodies: Tracking Immunity in American Culture From the Days of Polio to the Age of AIDS.*
- 1987. Aihwa Ong. *Spirits of Resistance and Capitalist Discipline: Factory Women in Malaysia.*
- 1995. Aihwa Ong and Michael Perez (eds.). *Bewitching Women, Pious Men: Gender And Body Politics in Southeast Asia.*
- 1993. Nancy Scheper-Hughes. *Death Without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil.*

Medical Anthropology Ethnographies

- 1979. Nancy Scheper-Hughes. *Saints, Scholars, and Schizophrenics : Mental Illness in Rural Ireland.*
- 1993. Barbara Duden. *Disembodying Women: Perspectives on Pregnancy and the Unborn.*
- 2003. Nancy Chen. *Breathing spaces : Qigong, Psychiatry, and Healing in China.*
- 1992. Paul Farmer. *AIDS and Accusation: Haiti and the Geography of Blame.*
- 2003. *Pathologies of Power : Health, Human Rights, and the New War on the Poor.*





Medical Anthropological Approach

1. How can we understand the intersection between **medicine** and **culture**?
2. What are the relationships among “disease,” “illness,” and “wellness”?
3. What is the relationship between “medicalization” v. “somaticization”?



1.

**Intersection between medicine
and culture is always
historically, politically, and
economically constructed.**

**Ex. Not every Haitian gets
treatment for HIV virus**

2.

- **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 “illth”

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

3.

- **Medicalization** = when conditions become categorized
- **Somaticization** = body expressing itself, how the body experiences itself

Ex. Today, we tend to medicalize our somatic experiences because of an unequal health care system: if your situation does not fit into a medical category, how will you get treatment?