

## 21A.215 MEDICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

### Notes on Issues, Definitions

#### Causes:

Are always plural, at least in medicine. Most often a chain of causes that differ in degree of distance from an individual case. The **proximate** cause may be biological, but a more distant (**distal, final**) cause might not be (example of stress-induced illness). We discussed the example of the Black Plague: causes as varied as a microbe, fleas, rats, poor sanitation, deforestation, etc.

Exercise to try: analyze the current debate about what to do to lessen the number of mass shootings in the USA with respect to how debaters analyze cause.

We developed a scheme distinguishing **disease, illness, sickness**; an arbitrary scheme, but useful for understanding the human side of illness as conceived of in the West

*Disease*—is seen as biological, physical, material. Knowable. Has a beginning and an end. Is ideally knowable through signs, which are objective.

*Disease* is the underlying, core physical condition. The physicians' job is to decode reports of illness and discover disease (this notion from Arthur Kleinman).

Disease contrasts with *illness*, which is subjective, knowable through experience, and hence unknowable to anyone else.

Illness is an experience an individual goes through. Disease is a semantic domain containing various kinds of disorders—nosological categories.

Sickness, in this scheme (Hahn's), is a label for ailments experienced by populations (i.e., refers to epidemiology)

Analytical and clinical problems with the analytic category "disease" as *biomedically constructed*:

1. The crossover with mental illness (note that we don't say "mental disease") is problematic

Mental pathological conditions we call mental illness become more disease-like the more their cause is seen as biological. The case of how schizophrenia has been conceptualized over the last forty years is a good example. (Luhmann)

2. Healing that employs non-physical, non-material means is problematic (e.g., prayer)
3. Chronic illness is problematic because diseases are seen to have a beginning and an end

Discuss:

Diabetes is a disease

Birth defects: are they a disease?

Can one “die of old age”? If so, do you die of disease? Or something else?

Is alcoholism a disease?

Any others???

## Meaning

Proposition: all meanings are culturally derived. Meaning is a part of culture

But biomedicine says meanings are derived from facts “out there,” and are not derived from culture. They are a part of reality, and are *discoverable*. Ex: “The natural course of illness.”

How can we reconcile these two opposed positions?

Note our tendency to dichotomize ourselves: body/self; body/mind; emotion/cognition

Where does “spirit” fit in? Does biomedicine have a place for spirit?

## The meaning of the body

The body is like a machine and is not conscious (despite phrases like “body English” or “the body knows”)

The body belongs to a single individual

The body belongs to the self, the self is responsible for the body

Exceptions you can think of?

Children. Lia Lee. Who is responsible, the parents? What if they take their child to an emergency room? What responsibility does the state have?

Should parents have total control? We say they cannot abuse their children—what constitutes “abuse”?

Cases of Christian Scientists and Jehovah’s Witnesses being arrested following death of their child because adequate care had not been provided—according to the State.

The body is knowable

The body is seen to be very bounded. Skin and orifices. Skin shouldn't be breached (i.e., cut into). Orifices are vulnerable, making the body vulnerable

I can affect another's body only by coming into contact with it, using an object to come into contact with it (I can throw something, put poison in food), or symbolically—examples are glares and speech that produce, for example, blushing or embodied rage. Bodies are hermetically sealed except for orifices, which should be closed or germs will enter.

Exceptions? Food, sexual intercourse. What else?

The body is a source of moral superiority, or inferiority

Examples?

The body is a physical object. Is it anything more?

The notion that body is abode for a spirit, for God (Catholicism, Church of Latter-Day saints [Mormons]; body is a temple of God, is consecrated to God).

The notion that there are people whose bodies can be possessed by supernatural beings

Paul Farmer's book and article—Haitian *voudun*

The very popular spiritualism tradition in this country (a medium is a person who "channels" a spirit, who talks through the person's body, mouth).

Possession by evil spirits requiring exorcism in Catholicism

### **Problems with our conception of the body?**

Pregnant women—increasingly coming to be seen as two bodies in some respects, in some domains of life (e.g., legal), yet continues to be seen as only one in other respects

A very contested topic currently in the US

Punishing mothers who give birth to babies with fetal alcohol syndrome

And these are two *very different* "bodies"

Raises questions of autonomy and dependency

Pregnancy presents an example of *liminality*—*betwixt and between categories* (discussed several times over the semester)

### **Moral Discourses**

What is the difference between cause, responsibility, and blame for something happening?

Questions about responsibility—for our own health or lack of it, for what our bodies look like, the responsibility we have for other bodies

In general, the degree of responsibility for an ailment decreases the more it's seen as biological. E.g., the medicalization of addictions (seen as in part genetically caused).

We no longer burn witches; the mentally ill are not sinners

Moral issues constantly affect how we evaluate illnesses and ill people.

Moral responsibility with respect to acquiring an ailment:

Immoral smoking produces the very physical lung cancer. Other examples?

The debate about AIDS in the 1980s—how it's acquired

Moral responsibility for getting over an ailment, or managing it optimally

The Fadiman book

Moral responsibility with regard to the underlying reasons why a given individual became ill

Examples?

Note, however, we consider science to be value neutral; also note that the instances when science is applied are most often anything but value neutral

Physicians should heal, regardless of the moral status of the patient. Agreed?

Exceptions? (Giving a liver transplant to an alcoholic—debate about Mickey Mantle, the star baseball player, who received a transplant)

Kidney dialysis: who gets chosen?

“Good” diseases and “bad” diseases? We can construct a scale from “good” to “bad”

From “Good”: E.g., a sports injury like breaking a leg while skiing

all the way to:

“Bad”: E.g., leprosy

Features of “bad” conditions

Disfigurement (as in leprosy)

If it's a condition not well understood (clearly understood conditions are seen as less “bad”)

Degree of impairment

An indefinite or impossible termination of the condition, if an end is very likely achieved, it will be perceived as less “bad”

Contagious

Shameful or immoral circumstances, or behavior that led to contracting the ailment

### **The meaning of health vs. disease**

At times is ambiguous

When does pathology begin?

We spoke of pathology as not entirely agreed-upon. Pathology is a problematic concept

When is the search for thinness an unhealthy endeavor? Who is to blame for cases when it becomes unhealthy?

Notion of **medicalization**: changing meanings of the body, of health

Pregnancy. Are pregnant women sick? Is there such a thing as a healthy pregnant woman?

Of course

But a lot of what a pregnant woman *does* looks like a response to sickness; enters the hospital to deliver, she must be put in a wheelchair.

Borderline cases: menopause, menstruation. Any equivalent examples for men?

When is death not a pathology (big debate currently)?

Another example: PMS, which has had an interesting journey on the road toward medicalization in the last 50 years (didn't really exist prior to the 1960s)

Syndrome

A pathology not well understood (“Gulf War Syndrome”). AIDS is no longer a syndrome, despite the name

AIDS vs. HIV: Having a disease must be a clinical reality

The presence of pathogens in the body does not mean a “diseased” body.

The presence of the TB bacillus does not signal the disease

Anthrax

### **Contextual features of meanings about health and beauty**

Lots of food available in the society vs. no food available will affect notions of beauty, particularly female beauty

The same for covering the body vs. exposing it (going barefoot, etc.): is influenced by social class (e.g., being clothed and shod signaling that one has enough \$\$, versus a total separation between the two)

Holes in one's jeans at the knees are cool only if it is abundantly evident that you could wear new jeans if you chose to

The interesting history of tanning

The notion of the body as badge is illustrated by tanning

The messages about social class and tanning changed over the century

Body builders: Are they signaling Health? Beauty? Pathology? Ugliness?

They don't intend to signal pathology or ugliness, but their bodies can be read as in effect communicating this.