UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI DI MILANO-BICOCCA

COURSE SYLLABUS

Medical Anthropology - Applied Perspectives

2627-2-F0102R025

Course title

Medical Anthropology - Applied Perspectives

Topics and course structure

In this course, students will develop knowledge and critical understanding of social, cultural, political and economic dimensions concerning health and body issues. In what ways are health and illness matter of interpretation and belief in different societies? How do they involve and shape social interactions and social organization? How do they reflect and influence political and economic relations? To answer such questions, this course focuses on ethnographic approaches on issues regarding body, health, and illness in different contexts worldwide. Particular attention will be dedicated to the anthropological analysis of global inequalities linked to the field of health, in order to better understand some of the most complex contemporary contexts and issues across different ethnographic cases. More in general, this course asks a fundamental question: how are body and health at once biological, social, political, and historical facts?

Objectives

Through the analysis and comparison of ethnographic cases from various settings, students will reach a deeper understanding of medicine and health as systems of thought and practice, as well as exploring the possible ways to study the body as a bio-historical product. Students will learn how to consider health issues as individual forms of embodiment of broader social and historical processes within situated moral worlds.

For students of the Master's Degree in Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences:
Through constant and active attendance of lessons, we intend to promote the following learning outcomes:

• knowledge and understanding of power as a historical process;
• knowledge and understanding of the perspectives developed by political anthropology to critically analyse power.
You will develop the ability to grasp the transversality of the political dimension, and learn to apply your knowledge and skills to problem solving in concrete contexts and unforeseen situations, considering the perspectives of dominant and subordinate groups. This will help students to analyse different professional contexts, identify their needs and develop original projects and reflections.
Students' communication, independent judgement and learning skills will be enhanced through discussions on theoretical and practical issues, which will help them monitor the adequacy of their knowledge and skills, and identify any areas that need further study.
For students of the Master's Degree in in Cultural and Social Anthropology:
Attending classes with perseverance and participation will promote the following learning:
· ACQUIRE solid and systematic knowledge in the field of demo-ethno-anthropological disciplines and, in particular, political anthropology
· IDENTIFY the theoretical and methodological specificities of ethno-anthropological disciplines, political anthropology and interdisciplinary connections
· UNDERSTAND the specificities of political anthropology and its level of integration and interdependence in complex social and cultural realities.
Ability to apply knowledge and understanding
· ARTICULATE the dialogue between scientific literature and research in an innovative way
· EFFECTIVELY APPLY the skills acquired to concrete problems, situations and contexts
· KNOW HOW TO CONVEY the sense of open-mindedness and the capacity for intercultural dialogue that are fundamental to demo-ethno-anthropological disciplines.
• Understanding the complexity of cultural processes and accepting and valuing different points of view, while overcoming stereotypes and prejudices.
Assessing the consequences of one's actions and decisions and adopting a reflective and responsible attitude.
Communication skills:
• Expressing ideas, knowledge and arguments clearly.
• Writing texts and reports using different forms of expression.
• Making informed judgements by integrating information from different reliable sources.
Learning skills:
-Developing and refining one's own learning methods and independently identifying and constructing objects and topics for study.

Methodologies

In the first part of the course, teaching will be based mainly on introductory lectures on Medical anthropology. In the second part, articles and chapters focusing on specific topics of the course will be discussed in form of seminar.

The type of teaching activity planned for the course is exclusively that of lecture.
If international students will be attending, the course will be taught in English.
All in-person meetings will have a dispensing and interactive nature averaging 60 percent and 40 percent of the total hours.
Meetings of an interactive nature include, for example, presentation and discussion of ethnographic cases viewing, analysis and discussion of multimedia and documentary materials; cooperative learning sessions.

Some lessons will be delivered remotely (for a maximum of 15 hours).

Online and offline teaching materials

Attending classes is a dynamic experience. The course develops through collaboration between teacher and students in reading the selected texts and proposing additions.

The e-learning platform is the main point of reference for both attending and non-attending students.

The teacher will provide materials to support non-traditional students in their studies and exam preparation.

Programme and references

The course bibliography includes a book and a series of twenty-two scholarly articles and chapters distributed by the teacher during the course.

Book:
Byron J. Good, “Medicine, Rationality and Experience: An Anthropological Perspective”, Cambridge University Press, 1993.
(Italian edition: “Narrare la malattia. Lo sguardo antropologico sul rapporto medico-paziente”, Einaudi, 2006).

The course materials will include the following articles and book chapters (list subject to change – please contact the teacher):

1. Byron J. Good, “The Heart of What's the Matter: The Semantics of Illness in Iran” (Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry, n. 1, 1977).
2. Arthur Kleinman, “Concepts and Model for Comparison of Medical Systems” (Social Science and Medicine, vol. 12, 1978).
3. Allan Young, “The Anthropology of Health and Sickness” (Annual Review of Anthropology, n. 11, 1982).
4. Thomas J. Csordas, “Embodiment as a Paradigm for Anthropology” (Ethos, vol. 18, n. 1, 1990).
5. Peter Conrad, “Medicalization and Social Control” (Annual Review of Sociology, vol. 18, 1992).
6. Margaret Lock, “Cultivating the body: Anthropology and Epistemologies of Bodily Practice and Knowledge” (in Annual Review of Anthropology, vol. 22, 1993).
7. Paul Farmer, “On Suffering and Structural Violence: A View from Below (Dedalus, vol. 125, n. 1, 1996).
8. Margaret Lock and Nancy Scheper-Hughes, “A Critical-Interpretive Approach in Medical Anthropology - Rituals and Routines of Discipline and Dissent” (book chapter, from “Medical Anthropology: Contemporary Theory and Method”, edited by Johnson, T. & C.F. Sargent, Praeger, 1996).
9. Philippe Bourgois - “The Moral Economies of Homeless Heroin Addicts: Confronting Ethnography, HIV Risk, and Everyday Violence in San Francisco Shooting Encampments” (Substance Use & Misuse, vol. 33, n. 11, 1998).
10. Margaret Lock, “The Tempering of Medical Anthropology: Troubling Natural Categories” (Medical Anthropology Quarterly, vol. 15, n. 4, 2001).
11. Joao Biehl , “Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment”, Social Text, vol. 19, n. 3, 2001)
12. Susan Reynolds Whyte, Sjaak van der Geest, Anita Hardon, “The Social Lives of Medicines: An anthropology of materia medica” (book chapter, from “Social Lives of Medicine”, Cambridge University Press, 2002).
13. Adriana Petryna, Biological Citizenship: The Science and Politics of Chernobyl-Exposed Populations (Osiris, vol. 19, 2004).
14. Mariella Pandolfi and Gilles Bibeau, “Suffering, Politics, Nation: A Cartography of Italian Medical Anthropology” (book chapter, from “Medical Anthropology: Regional Perspectives and Shared Concerns”, edited by Francine Saillant and Serge Genest, Blackwell, 2006).
15. Didier Fassin, Frédéric Le Marcis, Todd Lethata, “Life & times of Magda A: Telling a Story of Violence in South Africa” (Current Anthropology, vol. 49, n. 2, 2008).
16. Charlotte Ikels, “The Anthropology of Organ Transplantation” (Annual Review of Anthropology, 42, 2013).
17. Lorenzo Alunni, "Obituaries Without Biographies: Death and Health Care in Roma Camps in Rome" (AQ - Anthropological Quarterly, vol. 90 n. 3, 2017)

18. Banu Bargu, “The Silent Exception: Hunger Striking and Lip-Sewing (Law, Culture and the Humanities, vol. 18, n. 2, 2017).
19. Lorenzo Alunni, “Pathogenic Camps, Therapeutic City?” (Social Science & Medicine, n. 289, 2021).
20. Lorenzo Alunni, “The Threshold and the Line: Bodies, Migration, and a Pier in Lampedusa” (Law, Culture and the Humanities, 2025).
21. Lalaie Ameeriar, “Breathing through the rage: Maternal refusal as ethnographic method” (Medical Anthropology Quarterly, 2025).
22. Lorenzo Alunni, “The Radars and the Lighthouse: Ill Bodies in Lampedusa” (Current Anthropology, in press, 2027).

The course reading list will be in English, but in exceptional cases students may contact the teacher to discuss the possibility of using an Italian-language reading list, if necessary.

Assessment methods

Choosing an oral interview as the examination method is consistent with the course's objectives, as it enables interaction with students to assess their critical understanding of course topics and ability to connect theory and practice through a communicative dialogue situation. There will be no partial exams during the course.

The assessment will be based on the Dublin Descriptors. The level bands are as follows:

1. High Level (25-30/30): Distinguished - Excellent
   Knowledge and Understanding: The student demonstrates in-depth and solid knowledge of the texts and topics covered; understands and analyses the texts presented without hesitation.

Ability to apply knowledge: is able to identify general considerations on the authors/topics examined in the texts with confidence and effective personal observations; with adequate argumentative skills, is able to analyse, summarise, interpret, contextualise and compare the texts presented, also making use of interdisciplinary links.

Autonomy of Judgement: demonstrates excellent critical skills, autonomy of judgement and originality in the analysis and interpretation of texts.

Communication Skills: expresses themselves clearly, rigorously, fluently and appropriately. Is fully aware of the need to use different linguistic registers depending on the communicative situation.

Learning skills: demonstrates excellent/very good independent learning skills, is able to effectively rework knowledge and link it to their own experience; is fully aware of the usefulness of the discipline.

2. Average level (18-24/30): Sufficient - Good
   Knowledge and understanding: The student demonstrates a general understanding of the texts and topics covered. Although there are some minor inaccuracies or a few uncertainties regarding specific, non-essential details, overall the student shows sufficient comprehension and a reasonable ability to analyse the texts.

Ability to apply knowledge: The student has some difficulty connecting general points to the examples provided in the texts. The summary of the content is sometimes not very effective, and the contextualization and comparison of authors and themes could be further developed.

Autonomy of judgement: The student demonstrates a fair degree of independence in forming critical assessments, although he or she sometimes tends to rely on the opinions of others.

Communication skills: expresses themselves clearly and with sufficient precision, with a reasonable command of

the specific language of the discipline. Is aware of the need to use different linguistic registers depending on the communicative situation.

Learning skills: The student demonstrates a reasonable ability to apply knowledge and relate it to personal experience. An awareness of the subject's practical value is present, though it is still developing.

3. Basic Level (0–17/30): Still consolidating
   Knowledge and understanding: The student demonstrates only a partial understanding of the texts and topics covered. Their grasp of the content is sometimes uncertain and requires further exploration and greater precision in interpretation.

Ability to apply knowledge: The student finds it difficult to link general considerations to the examples in the texts and to summarise the content effectively. Contextualisation and comparison between authors and themes still need to be developed.

Autonomy of judgement: Critical thinking and independent evaluation need to be guided through more personal reflection and reworking.

Communication skills: Oral presentation is at times somewhat halting; it would be advisable to strengthen the use of subject-specific vocabulary and improve precision of expression.

Learning skills: The student still shows difficulty in personally reworking knowledge and linking it to broader experiences and themes. Greater awareness of the educational value of the subject is desirable.

NB: Students with PUOI (special educational needs) must email the document before the exam.

Office hours

Please contact the teacher: lorenzo.alunni@unimib.it

Programme validity

Syllabus validity: Two academic years.

Course tutors and assistants

Sustainable Development Goals

QUALITY EDUCATION