

Medical Anthropology and the Decolonization of Global Health Programs

Darcy Scholz*

Department of Anthropology, Australian National University, Canberra, Australia

DESCRIPTION

Medical anthropology, a dynamic subfield within anthropology, offers an indispensable lens through which we can explore the intricate relationships between culture, health, illness, and healing. In a world increasingly shaped by globalization, technological advancement, and shifting sociopolitical structures, medical anthropology remains uniquely positioned to bridge the gap between biological and cultural understandings of health. Its critical insights challenge conventional biomedical models by advocating for a more holistic and inclusive approach to human health that integrates social, cultural, economic, and political dimensions.

The COVID-19 pandemic, perhaps more than any recent event, has illustrated the critical importance of medical anthropology. Cultural beliefs, misinformation, mistrust in health authorities, and unequal access to care all influenced the effectiveness of public health measures. In this context, medical anthropologists played a vital role in helping public health institutions understand vaccine hesitancy, resistance to mask mandates, and disparities in morbidity and mortality.

In addition to its contributions during crises, medical anthropology is also instrumental in improving routine health care practices. Hospitals and clinics, though grounded in evidence-based medicine, are also cultural institutions where power dynamics, communication patterns, and implicit biases shape the patient experience. Medical anthropologists working in clinical settings often uncover mismatches between healthcare providers and patients differences in language, expectations, and perceptions of care that can lead to misdiagnosis, non-compliance, or patient dissatisfaction. By promoting cultural competency and advocating for more patient-centered care, medical anthropologists help make healthcare institutions more responsive and humane. Their insights also inform the design of health education campaigns, ensuring that messages resonate

with diverse audiences rather than relying on one-size-fits-all approaches. Moreover, medical anthropology contributes to global health by challenging ethnocentric assumptions embedded in international health initiatives. Too often, health programs designed in high-income countries are exported to lower-income regions without sufficient consideration of local customs, beliefs, and resources. Such interventions may fail not because they are ineffective per se, but because they are culturally incongruent or politically insensitive. Medical anthropologists, through their fieldwork and advocacy, help design programs that are contextually grounded and respectful of indigenous knowledge systems.

Another significant area of contribution is in understanding medical pluralism the coexistence of multiple healing systems within the same society. From traditional healers in Africa and Ayurvedic practitioners in India to herbalists in Latin America, medical anthropology respects and investigates the diverse ways in which people seek healing. It does not dismiss non-biomedical practices as superstition or quackery, but instead seeks to understand their logic, efficacy, and social significance. In many cases, traditional and biomedical systems operate in tandem, with patients navigating both in pursuit of better health. Recognizing this pluralism is crucial for creating inclusive health systems that honor patient autonomy and cultural diversity.

Medical anthropology also interrogates the politics of pharmaceuticals and medical technologies. It explores how drugs are developed, marketed, and distributed and how their use is shaped by more than just medical necessity. For instance, the rise of antidepressant use in Western societies cannot be understood without considering cultural narratives about happiness, productivity, and mental illness. Similarly, access to life-saving medications in low-income countries often hinges on political will, patent laws, and global economic structures. Medical anthropologists expose these dynamics and advocate for more just and transparent systems.

Correspondence to: Darcy Scholz, Department of Anthropology, Australian National University, Canberra, Australia, E-mail: schold@gmail.com

Received: 03-Mar-2025, Manuscript No. ANTP-25-38250; **Editor assigned:** 05-Mar-2025, PreQC No. ANTP-25-38250 (PQ); **Reviewed:** 18-Mar-2025, QC No. ANTP-25-38250; **Revised:** 25-Mar-2025, Manuscript No. ANTP-25-38250 (R); **Published:** 01-Apr-2025, DOI: 10.35248/2332-0915-25.13.262

Citation: Scholz D (2025). Medical Anthropology and the Decolonization of Global Health Programs. *Anthropology*. 13:262.

Copyright: © 2025 Scholz D. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.