

Sickness and healing - an anthropological perspective

[Science](#), [Anthropology](#)



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There is a controversial issue on the statement that some illnesses exist only among members of a certain culture. According to Sangun Suwalnert, this statement is true because he observed a disease called Phii Pob among the Thai people and; therefore, goes ahead to make an assumption that it is only among the people who have culture and beliefs from rural Thai. Robert Hahn is an epidemiologist and anthropologist. He views this statement at an anthropologist point of view, whereby he says culture- bound syndrome is an outdated idea.

These ideas tend to reduce the explanations of the complex conditions of an illness. I tend to agree with Hahn by saying no to the statement. For this reason, Hahn goes ahead to define sickness as " unwanted conditions of self and or substantial threats of conditions of self that are unwanted" (Hahn, 1995)¹. He argues that all sicknesses may be influenced by both biological and cultural factors. He tries to explain how anthropologists have tried to address the cultural context and the way it has contributed to the occurrence of sicknesses, and how human beings have responded to this suffering.

¹Robert, Hahn, Sickness and healing: an anthropological perspective (New Haven: Yale University press, 1995).

Hahn describes three accounts that he believes occur in cultural settings, which include; illness accounts; whereby a person is the one that causes sickness and treatment. Disease accounts; whereby the biomedicine's recognizes the body as the cause and remedy of sickness and lastly, disorder

accounts; whereby the imbalances are the main source of illness and means to cure (Hahn, 1995)².

He refuses the concept of culture-bound syndrome because he believes that it is based on anthropological and psychiatric notions and; therefore, it is culture biased. The cultural difference in health and illness presents and makes people understand the symptoms of the disease (Hahn, 1995). He goes ahead to explain that the individual and social experiences of illness are termed as a complex process, and; hence, the physiological expression of these diseases are becoming a main concern among medical anthropologists and something needs to be done.

Hahn also gives an example of sociocultural influences on low-birth weight between black and white infants. He says anthropology and epidemiology is can make a conclusion on this social medical problem. This evidence can illustrate how the two disciplines can make individuals understand the complexity of a disturbing problem. Therefore, it serves as a powerful means that shows individuals the benefits of looking at sickness, and heals from both sociocultural and biomedical perspectives³.

^{2, 3}Robert, Hahn, Sickness and healing: an anthropological perspective (New Haven: Yale University press, 1995).

There are different ways in which individuals respond to sickness from one society to another. Hahn; therefore, concludes that anthropology is exclusively found on investigations of subjective States and expresses that sociocultural phenomena should be included in the medical epistemology and should be practiced⁴. This way the exclusion of patients' emotional experiences, social circumstances and cultural influence are addressed.

Hahn also uses the culture of contemporary medicine. He tries to see the difference between physicians and their patients by looking at physicians who have written about their own illnesses. Therefore, Hahn concludes by giving ways in which some illness in contemporary western medicine may be treated by exercising anthropological principles and practicing medical training. Finally, Hahn proposes that anthropological perspective should be incorporated into the practice of biomedicine⁵.

4, 5 Robert, Hahn, *Sickness and healing: an anthropological perspective* (New Haven. Yale University press, 1995).

Bibliography

Hahn, Robert. *Sickness and healing: An anthropological perspective*. New Haven: Yale University press, 1995.