

Culture, cultural categories and human rights

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Introduction The following essay will discuss the culture, cultural processes and human rights in medical anthropology. The medical anthropology studies the relationship between health, illness, social institutions and cultural representation. The approach of medical anthropologists is mainly centered in examining the way in which the relationship between health, culture and economic powers relates medical field with the personal and social problems of an individual (Rubin, 2010). In this case, they are able to examine how the body operates and the reasons behind the operations of the body. For instance, it examines who gets sick and the reasons behind the sickness, who among the sick has access to medical resources in relation to culture and power. Examine the ways in which culture shapes the interaction between healer and patient Culture varies in different ways across different ethnic groups.

It refers to the outstanding behavior and way of living that distinguish one ethnic group from the other. The norms and beliefs that are involved across different ethnic groups usually has got a lot of impact on the way people relates with their medical counterparts in cases of illnesses. Due to generational changes that have occurred with time, culture has also been affected whereby the impact of culture on people today has got less weight compared to the impact during the traditional era. For instance, witch craft was a common method of curing illnesses in the beginning that today as we will see in the essay. In the traditional days, people used to believe in certain things and mostly visited traditional healers in times of sicknesses. They also used herbal medicines in most cases since there were no professional doctors.

Since most herbal medicines were collected in the forests, encountering such animals like snakes, owl, birds, chameleons and such like had different meanings to the sick person (Anon, 2011). There were beliefs like the evil eye, amulets, spell, omens, just a few but to mention that influenced the relationship between the healer and the sick. These beliefs still exist today and some like the evil eye were supported by Saint Thomas though they mostly seem pagan. Culturally, there is a belief and much evidence on the powers of sorcery, witchcraft and traditional healers among others that led to either healing of the sick or to their death. Any person that is an object of sorcery believes that he is doomed and this perception goes along way such that even when he visits a traditional healer, there may be no impact from his medicine (Levi-Strauss, 1963). His family and the community does not wish to be associated with him and their wish from the way they treats this person is that he may die since they view him as a source of danger to them too.

Sacred rights are held to disconnect this person from the family and the community. He is also prohibited from getting involved in any social function whereby the family and the community view this as a taboo and something to be taken with fear. These forces become overwhelming to the subject of sorcery and he may not live for long before joining the world of the dead.

The reason as to why these magic beliefs are so efficient is due to the relationship created between the object and the sorcerer by the three parties: The sorcerer, the object and the community, due to their perception and believe in magic. First, the sorcerer believes that his magic are efficient, then the object believes that the sorcerers magic are powerful and finally the

family and the community's faith and beliefs in the whole thing seals the relationship between the sorcerer and the bewitched making the whole operation a reality. Though the three parties may not be aware, their believes are made real by some biological processes that occur in the body due to fear and terror.

The work of Canon has helped many scholars to understand the relationship between sorcery and the psycho-physiological mechanisms that lead to death from the works of sorcerers and casting of spells. The fear that is associated from the believe in the work of sorcerer has so much effect on the sympathetic nervous system that enables the bewitched person to adapt to the new situation. These extraordinary occurrences from the sorcerer, for instance, when he produces a stone from his mouth which he claims is the cause of some illnesses, disrupts and disorganizes the sympathetic nervous system making the body processes abnormal. Some of the changes that occur in the body include sudden decrease in the blood volume and the blood pressure in the body of the bewitched leading to some permanent damage in the circulatory system, including the capillaries and other blood vessels. These damages are accelerated by dehydration and lack of food which common among the bewitched people since they are outcasts in the society.

Apart from the traditions of witchcraft and sorcery, culture also influences the modern doctor-patient interaction as it has been clearly put across by Cecil, a general practitioner and a research fellow in the University college of London (1984). The evident culture in this scenario is the modern way of doing things whereby the medica practitioners have been trained on colleges <https://assignbuster.com/culture-cultural-categories-and-human-rights/>

on how to have verbal and nonverbal inter-personal communication with the patient (Cecil, 1984). The exchange of information between the patient and the doctor has been made easier by the studies of social anthropological theories that help in the parties to exchange the right context during primary health care. The three major components of doctor- patient interaction in the medical field include communication codes such as spoken word, records and photographs, internal context which include culture beliefs on the illness, doctor's attitude and finally the external context which refers to the setting under which communication takes place. As Cecil puts it, most patients have a cultural attachment between the external and internal context of the medical processes and the effect the whole process may have on their condition.

This is because there is a social anthropological view of the medical consultation as a form of ritual. The patient beliefs on the ability of the doctor to handle his case determine the efficiency of the consultation process (Helman, 1984). It is therefore important that there is mutual understanding between the two parties to ensure that the process is effective. Examples of cultural categories that describe certain objects or substances such as contamination leading to ill health. Different people have different beliefs concerning the reason behind different kinds of illnesses. This is usually influenced by cultural beliefs or some occurrences that took place in the traditions. Culturally, folk illness refers to the ' syndromes from which members of a particular group claim to suffer and for which their culture provides an etiology, a diagnosis, preventive measures, and regimens of healing' (Rubel, O'Neil, and Collado-Ardon, 1991, p1).

Let us look at some of examples that involve such beliefs. Susto is a folk illness with cultural believes in its origin and causes whereby the term itself means freight. A story is given of how a young woman contracted the disease after travelling with her father (Rubel, O’Neill, and Collado-Ardon, 1991, p2). This particular lady was travelling with the father and they came across a river. The father lead the lady in crossing the river as the lady stood on the river bank. In the process, the father was swept by the rapid currents whereby, were it not for some over hanging vines that he swiftly held on, he would have been swept away.

The father reports that the daughter, for the next fifteen days was seriously ill with susto but himself was fine without any infection. The above occurrence of the young lady infection with Susto was compared to the reasoning given by a different informant. In his efforts to explain the cause of Susto he says that ‘ the water contains a being which is its virtual, its force or strength, the same as the earth, the wood, the high mountains and everything’. This force retrieves the strength of an individual leaving her weak. Culturally, this informant explains that the only way to prevent the spirit of an individual from remaining on the earth or in the water as in the case of the father and the daughter discussed above is the speak to it.

The cross cultural study of this illness shows that is not bound to the culture that it occurs since patients suffering from the illness display the same kind of signs. Some of these signs include ‘ restlessness during sleep, listless, debilitated, depressed, and indifferent to food, dress and personal hygiene’. Since the disease affects people across cultures and each culture may have their belief on the cause, it may not be easy to confirm which belief is true

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whereby medical research may have a medical reason for this illness.

However, the common believe is that persons suffering from Susto have an immaterial substance in their body that may at times separate from the body and start loitering freely whereby in this process it may become a captive of some supernatural powers on the earth or in the waters. This may be the reason behind the young lady contracting the illness when the father almost drowned meaning that her substance may have been involved in this scandal Another example of a folk illness is the fear of contamination of anorexia as a result of Miasmatic calories and saturated fats.

It is an eating disorder than is very common among teenage girl. It is associated with an obsession that it would be difficult for these girls to have a healthy social life if they are fat. Even when they are underweight and skinny, they feel that they are overweight and combine several things in order to lose weight (Fink, 2000, pg 7. Halse, Honey & Boughtwood, 2008, pg 19) The most common habits of Anorexia patients is refusal to eat, intake of laxatives and excessive exercise to burn any fats that may be accumulating tin the body and to have the little food they take in to use. Another story is given of a certain woman who was suffering from this illness that their counterparts believed was a result of abuse of some food aspects, her body and relationships (Warin, 2009). This particular woman was supposed to join some young women in Vancouver and stay with them for brief period.

Those who were expecting her described her as an underweight woman where by their major concern that created a lot of anxiety in them was the emaciated state of this woman. All the women involved in this programme had gained weight through a recovery program whereby the state of this <https://assignbuster.com/culture-cultural-categories-and-human-rights/>

underweight woman caught the attention of some nurses who were spotted complaining that her presence was likely to sabotage all their hard work. On the very day that Jose “ the underweight woman” was to arrive held these women with nervousness and anxiety of how the whole stay with them would turn out to be. This anxiety was times folded by her delay in the hospital which made them think that she could be really sick. Finally, Jose arrived when everyone was seated in the lounge and her condition made her attract so much attention from these women. She had a large water bottle between her knees, very significant veins on her hands and legs, waxy skin and some protruding cheekbones as it is evident from the people suffering from anorexia(Watson, 2007, pg 7).

. Regardless of her weak stats and the stares from people, Jose sat confidently and spoke at ease while everyone else kept quiet. Farmer’s call for a new definition of human rights Human rights refer to the rights and freedom individuals are entitled to which no person has legal rights to violate. There are those rights that a person enjoys just by the virtue of living and then there are those that depend vary from country to country depending on the prevailing constitution. Farmer new description of human rights involves a situation where human being lives a non-restricted life without deprivation as is evident in most poor as well as rich countries. He suggests a situation where the ruling bodies can put more effort to cure curable diseases, to prevent those are preventable, to control those that are controllable, to feed its nation and shelter them well, just to mention but a few, because these things are possible.

Farmer suggests that the nation has to look for solutions to social phenomena leading to horror and means to tolerate societal abomination rather than complaining due to the adversity of nature. However, it has proved overpowering to many scholars to pose the question in their full generality despite the diversified study on the subjecting. What is evident among most of them is taking time to study the subject of the matter and then shying away from the reality and the core importance of going through the studies (Farmer, 2005). Farmer however is different from many scholars and he has been putting a lot of effort to give human rights a new definition in terms of health and war on poverty. This may be due to his great knowledge in the medical field whereby he has come across very serious diseases as well as quite adverse circumstances in his field. Some of the encounters would include the many times he had been handling patients with serious diseases such as AIDS and Tuberculosis as well as cultural and societal expertise which he has acquired during the many times he has worked in diversified communities. As public health interventionist, Farmer's goal is to the war most institutions have been handling the issue of human rights and their mismatched arrangements. In his efforts to change the old fashioned view on health, human rights and the fight against poverty, Farmer comes up with the idea of structural violence, which would enable him to determine the nature and the distribution of extreme suffering across the human race.

This would also help him determine and come up with a solution of a situation where the most basic right to survive is messed up with in this era of great affluence. The right to survive is determined by the kind of shelter

the individual has, the way his health is taken care of and the general freedom on enjoying his human rights. On the issue of structural violence, Farmer explains that human rights violations are not accidents as the perception that has been created in our mind and their distribution and effects are neither random (Farmer, 2005). They are basically results of deeper pathologies of power that determine those who are affected by violation and those who are not. Structural violation is mostly inclined towards the discriminatory nature of social life that has divided the society into social classes whereby the less fortunate are subjects to suffering but the fortunate are spared from harm. This is basically what is entailed in the Farmer's new definition on human rights a situation which will allow people across the social classes to enjoy their human rights.

Conclusion The three subjects discussed above are very significant in the society we are living in. The case of cultural influence on the interaction between the patient and the healer has been identified across the world since every community has its cultures and believes. Secondly, the case of fear of contamination in Anorexia is very common among young women who faced the problem in their efforts to maintain a shapely body. We have finally discussed the Farmer's case on his new definition on human rights which gives us light on the setting of the society we are living in today.