



Encyclopedia of Medical Anthropology: Health and Illness in the World's Cultures Topics - Volume 1; Cultures - Volume 2 (v. 1)

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Medical practitioners and the ordinary citizen are becoming more aware that we need to understand cultural variation in medical belief and practice. The more we know how health and disease are managed in different cultures, the more we can recognize what is "culture bound" in our own medical belief and practice.

The Encyclopedia of Medical Anthropology is unique because it is the first reference work to describe the cultural practices relevant to health in the world's cultures and to provide an overview of important topics in medical anthropology. No other single reference work comes close to matching the depth and breadth of information on the varying cultural background of health and illness around the world. More than 100 experts - anthropologists and other social scientists - have contributed their firsthand experience of medical cultures from around the world.

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Editorial Review

From The New England Journal of Medicine

Medical anthropologists often trace their intellectual origins to the 19th-century work of Rudolf Virchow, the German physician whose interests ranged from cell physiology to the political and cultural contexts of health and disease. However, the discipline began taking professional form only during the 1950s and 1960s, and then largely in the United States, as sponsors of international health programs began to engage social anthropologists to serve as cultural brokers in the management of their various campaigns. Ironically, the professional success these early investigators achieved with their commissioned ethnographies tended to make them intellectually suspect to the more theoretically oriented anthropologists who then controlled the field. During the past two or three decades, however, medical anthropology has gained sufficient theoretical heft to develop a lively intellectual trade with the rest of anthropology, as medical anthropologists have taken up new areas of research. These include biocultural phenomena such as diet, nutrition, health disparities, evolutionary adaptation, sex and reproduction, and epidemiology. These two volumes, by turns a review of and a reflection on medical anthropology from the 1960s onward, provide the most extensive single reference on the field as yet. Having relied on more than 100 contributors, the editors, who are based at the Human Relations Area Files at Yale University, which is a huge repository of cultural ethnographies, present the first volume as a series of 53 articles. These are divided into five topics -- general concepts; medical systems; political, economic, and social issues; sexuality, reproduction, and the life cycle; and health conditions. Even as they have gained solid institutional appointments, many medical anthropologists have remained true to their mid-19th-century German-reformist roots: they continue to emphasize the agency of poverty, disparity between the sexes, and lack of political voice in the generation of disease and suffering, an orientation that comes through clearly in volume 1. The second volume contains 52 cultural ethnographies, which are organized according to a standard format. Each of the entries in both volumes contains references, but the table of contents occurs only in volume 1 and the index only in volume 2, an arrangement that makes reading cumbersome. Although readers who look on these volumes as an encyclopedia will find much of interest, they probably will find that the books come up short in many areas in terms of form and content. The most serious lapses occur in volume 2. The editors do not note what their criteria for inclusion were, and so one finds an entry on the Badaga (a small group of peasant farmers in northwest Tamil Nadu, India) but nothing on Brazil, and an entry on the French, but nothing on the Germans or the Italians. Since the largest groups in China, India, the Americas, Africa, and Europe make no appearance, one is hard put to call this coverage encyclopedic. Moreover, this scattershot assemblage is arranged alphabetically instead of geographically or politically, an editorial choice that makes for a willy-nilly reading experience. Many of the ethnographies themselves seem quaint to the point of insipidity in that they describe colorful folkways or tidbits of social problems without any explication of the political or economic frameworks that shape and reflect them. Volume 1 is much better; nonetheless, at a price of \$475, the set hardly seems worth it. *Robert L. Martensen, M.D., Ph.D.*

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Review

From the reviews:

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