

The Partnership of Public Health and Anthropology

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ABSTRACT

Public health focuses on health of the population and it is concerned with threats to health based on population health analysis. Anthropology covers most aspects that concern human beings. Both sciences converge on community and this fact represents a foundation for the partnership between public health and anthropology. Biological/medical anthropology is one of the highly developed fields of anthropology and the most important for public health.

Key words: anthropology, public health, biological medical anthropology, population

Introduction

Public health and biological/medical anthropology from their own perspectives provide holistic understanding of health and illnesses in the population. This paper reviews the main characteristics of public health and biological/medical anthropology and highlights the bridges between them.

Public health

There have been many definitions and explanations of public health published in the scientific literature over the years, however, the definition offered by the Acheson report has been widely accepted. In the mentioned report public health is defined as the science and art of preventing disease, prolonging life and promoting health through organised efforts of society¹. In 2003, Roger Detels defined the goal of public health as well, which is the biologic, physical, and mental well-being of all members of society regardless of gender, wealth, ethnicity, sexual orientation, country, or political views. Public health focuses on the health of the population and it is concerned with threats to health based on population health analysis. Its primary concern is the improvement of health and quality of life of population. On contrary, clinical medicine focuses on individual level, on the patient and its disease².

Public health is focused on population. Important subfields and public health related fields include environmental health and food security, occupational health and safety, health economics and community health. Public health incorporates the interdisciplinary approaches of epidemiology, biostatistics and health services³.

Biomedical model and biopsychosocial model are two main models of health used in public health. In biomedical model illness is the focus of observation. Risk factors such as factors of natural environment, factors of social environment, factors of internal environment of each individual, etc. are taken into account when talking about health in biomedical model. In biopsychosocial model, health is the focus of observation and determinants of health are used to describe the threats to health such as determinants of natural environment, social environment, determinants of internal environment of each individual, etc. Public health links both described models of health. Furthermore, biopsychosocial model is a conceptual model that assumes that psychological and social factors must also be included along with the biologic ones in understanding a person's medical illness or disorder. Besides its use in public health biopsychosocial model is used in anthropology, psychology and sociology. Epidemiological research has shown with increasing clarity that patterns of disease within populations are socially produced. Over recent years, various theoretical models have emerged to explain the processes through which social conditions and people's experience of life in society translate into differential health outcomes^{4,5}.

Public health has many different functions as to prevent disease and injuries, promote healthy lifestyles and good health habits, identify, measure, monitor and anticipate community health needs, formulate, promote, and enforce essential health policies, organise and ensure high-quality, cost-effective public health and health-care services, reduce health disparities and ensure access to

health for all, promote and protect a healthy environment. Furthermore, public health aims to disseminate health information and mobilize communities to take appropriate action, plan and prepare for natural and man-made disasters, reduce interpersonal violence and aggressive war, conduct research and evaluate health-promoting/disease preventing strategies, develop new methodologies for research and innovation and ensure competent public health workforce².

Biological/Medical Anthropology

Anthropology mostly focuses on the research of groups of people, especially in local communities. Its focus on community/population represents a strong foundation for the link between anthropology and public health⁶. Anthropology is divided in many different subfields. Biological/medical anthropology is one of the highly developed fields of anthropology and the most important for public health. The term biological/medical anthropology has been in use since 1953. It is attributed to William Caudill, who first mentioned it in his paper entitled »Applied Anthropology in Medicine«, which was published in 1953. The first of the subfields of medical anthropology was ethnomedicine. The term »Critical medical anthropology« was introduced by Bear in 1983. Critical medical anthropology is a theoretical approach within medical anthropology that uses a critical theoretical framework and focuses on the political economy of health and health care. It brings medical anthropology closer to perspectives of public health⁷.

Biological/medical anthropology is implicated the studies of human health and disease, health care systems as well as biocultural adaptation. It deals with important issues as perceptions of risk, vulnerability and responsibility for illness and health care, experience of illness and the social relations of sickness, social organization of clinical interactions, cultural and historical conditions shaping medical practices and policies, use and interpretation of pharmaceuticals and forms of biotechnology, harm reduction practices, disease distribution and health disparity as well as the political ecology of infectious and vector borne diseases, chronic diseases and states of malnutrition (<http://www.medanthro.net/>). Medical anthropology does not study the relationship of individual person to disease but studies the relationship between the biological and cultural characteristics of a group (ethnic or racial) and

its resistance to susceptibility to various diseases in view of different genetic constitution⁸.

Contribution of anthropology to the field of public health

Main methodological contributions of anthropology to the field of public health are the integration of quantitative with qualitative procedures, utilisation of ethnography for the collection of data and the use of qualitative methods for collection/analysis of formative, descriptive and interpretative data. Anthropology contributes to most community/population studies in public health, including studies in isolated populations^{9,10}. Regarding public health policy development anthropology contributes to it with integrated perspective of culture, holism, critical perspective and qualitative analysis¹¹. Anthropological approach has much to offer as a basis for sound interventions for understanding human behaviour. Interventions-not aim at informing individuals, but improving cultures (understanding gender roles) and this is a way of health promotion¹². In fact, health promotion is one of the pillars of public health and goes far beyond educating individuals about potentially harmful consequences of risky behaviours. Instead, it embraces many of the principles of modern public health, including a wider understanding of the determinants of health and new approaches to solving public health problems, such as through intersectoral action, healthy public policies, and health in all policies³.

Conclusion

Public health has population as its focus and this focus on population represents a strong foundation for the link between anthropology and public health. In fact, anthropology covers everything that concerns human beings. The most important for public health is biological/medical anthropology, one of the highly developed fields of anthropology. Biopsychosocial model which is used in public health and anthropology links both sciences, as well. Furthermore, an important contribution to public health represent both, the capacity of anthropology to translate scientific knowledge into practice at the population level and many different methodological approaches.

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PARTNERSTVO JAVNOG ZDRAVSTVA I ANTROPOLOGIJE

SAŽETAK

Javno zdravstvo se fokusira na zdravlje stanovništva i bavi se prijetnjama zdravlju na temelju zdravstvenog stanovništva analize. Antropologija pokriva većinu aspekata koji se tiču ljudskih bića. Obje znanosti konvergiraju na zajednicu i ta činjenica predstavlja temelj za partnerstvo između javnog zdravstva i antropologije. Biološko-medicinska antropologija je jedna od visoko razvijenih grana antropologije i najvažnija za javno zdravstvo.