Introducing medical anthropology
Program for this lecture

• What is anthropology?
  – Key concepts in anthropology

• What is medical anthropology?
  – Key concepts in medical anthropology

• Challenges in medical anthropology
Defining anthropology

• ’Social anthropology is a social science studying how people live together and how they experience their world’ (Mogensen et al. 2002: 42)

• ’Anthropology studies how social and cultural life varies across the world’ (Mogensen et al. 2002: 43)

• ‘Anthropology aims at uncovering the cultural meanings human beings attach to their social worlds – meanings that are often implicit’ (Course description)
Defining anthropology

• Anthropology – analysis and theory
• Ethnography – the making of data/empiri
The historical roots of anthropology

• Colonialism
• Evolution – mono-directional development
• Documenting cultures (and languages) before they disappeared
• The same way as biologists would document fx different type of butterflies

• But not any longer…. 
Key concepts
Key concepts

- Culture
- Meaning and experience
- Relativism
- Social relations (society)
- Context, structure and interconnections
- Qualitative, open, interpretive
- The insiders perspective – the double gaze, emic-etic
- ’Walking along’, ‘the study of common sense’
- Comparison (with other empirical fields and other concepts)
- Knowledge and practice
An attempt to define culture

• Culture is the norms, values and assumptions that a social group of people share and create together, and the practices that are created based on these norms, values and assumptions (with reference to Geertz 1973, Ortner 1984, 1999, Hardon et al. 2001)
Key concepts

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Is anthropology scientific?

- Yes – but in a different way than the natural sciences and medicine
  - The researcher (or scientist) as participant in the social field that is being researched
  - From an explicit position and an explicit point of departure
  - Where reflexivity and transparency are key concepts when we talk about validity
What is medical anthropology?

• Anthropology within the field of medicine, health, disorders, treatment, healing……

• The above concepts as equally relevant within medical anthropology

• Plus a range of concepts of specific relevance to the medical field

• The study of medical phenomena as culture (Hardon et al. 2001: 6)
Why medical anthropology?

• ’There is more to health and disease than physical and biological processes’ (Pool & Geissler 2005: 6)

• ’We study how [the] disease is part of the life of a person and how this person is part of a society where many things are at stake’ (Mogensen et al. 2002: 45)

• Because living and working conditions and lifestyles have major importance for health (Hardon et al. 2001: 11)
Key concepts in medical anthropology I

• Disease and illness – Curing and healing
  – Physical malfunctioning vs. Cultural informed experiences

• Idioms of distress

• Explanatory models
  – Cause
  – When and how symptoms first appear
  – The nature of the symptoms
  – The cause of the sickness
  – Treatment

• Body imagies, the human body as an individual, social and political phenomenon
Key concepts in medical anthropology II

• Medical system/health care system
  – The professional sector
  – The folk or traditional sector
  – The popular sector

• The social life of medicine

• Medicalization

• Anthropology in medicine, Anthropology of medicine
Challenges in medical anthropology

• (Radical) different approach than medicine
• Hierarchical relationship between medicine and anthropology
• That themes and topics that for the anthropologist are marks of good science (fx a focus on context) by medicine is often seen as irrelevant, noise, disturbing the picture…
• The anthropologist is often required to stick to the cultural aspects/the illness side