Anthropology 740: Biocultural Synthesis

Dr. Tina Moffat  
Term 2, 2018, CNH 307  
Tuesdays, 9:30 am - 12:30 pm (1st class: Tuesday Jan 9th – please come to first class prepared to discuss assigned readings)

Themes and Goals

In 1998, with their book entitled "Building a New Biocultural Synthesis", Alan Goodman and Thomas Leatherman challenged Biological Anthropology to broaden its theoretical scope to include political economy and political ecology – in short to become a more critical sub-discipline within Anthropology – reflexively analyzing the historical and cultural influences on our theory and methodology.

In this seminar, we begin by critically examining the roots of the biocultural approach by exploring various theoretical frameworks from biological and medical anthropology that address the interplay between biology and culture. We will then continue to explore emerging themes and uses of biocultural frameworks in health studies and biological anthropology. We cover a wide variety of the following theoretical approaches and topics including: critical perspectives in medical anthropology, the environment, bodies and embodiment, race and racism, life history and life course theory, and the developmental origins of health and disease.

Class Organization

The course is organized as a seminar. There will be no formal lecture; participants will be expected to have done the appropriate readings, set the agenda and contribute to the discussion. On the final day of class we will hold a mini-research symposium.

Evaluation

Evaluations will be based on four components: 1) class participation (20%); 2) facilitation of one seminar (20%); 3) a class presentation (part of mini-symposium) (20%); 4) a final paper (40%). Although I would like to see these core components as part of the course, I am open to negotiating the weighting and form of the evaluation during the first class.

Participants are to develop a research term paper around one or more of the themes in the course. This can be related to your own research interests and may even take the form of a research proposal if it is useful to you. A paper proposal will be due by February, 27 2018. Although the proposal will not be formally graded, I expect it to be a formal proposal that will give me an opportunity to give you feedback on your proposed paper/research proposal as well as on your writing style.

The final presentation will be based on your research paper. The symposium will be held on the last class. It will be presented in conference style (total length 20 minutes with 15 minutes for
presentation and 5 minutes for questions). The final paper will be due after receiving feedback on the oral presentation. Final papers will be due in April (date TBA).

Readings (Please note that this is a provisional list - some readings and seminar topics may change depending on class interest.)

Articles and book chapters not available online from Mills library will be available as pdfs.
Schedule of Topics and Readings

Jan 9 - What is biocultural anthropology and how does it fit into Anthropology?


Jan 16 – Biology and its intersection with political economy and power


Jan 23 – The body and embodiment


Jan 30 – Sex and gender


Feb 6 – Biocultural approaches to examining human health, diet and identity in the past


Feb 13 – Indigenous Knowledge, health and the environment


Feb 20 – Mid-term Recess – no class!

Feb 27 – Final paper proposals due

Local biologies and life course approaches


Mar 6 – Developmental Origins of Health and Disease and epigentics


Mar 13 – Nutritional Anthropology


Mar 20 – Biocultural Views on Race, racism, and health


Mar 27 – Your topic choice!

Apr 3 – Mini-symposium – paper presentations