Applied Medical Anthropology
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What is medical anthropology?
Medical anthropology is the application of anthropological theories and methods to questions of health, illness, medicine and healing. Topics studied by medical anthropologists include:

- local interpretations of bodily processes
- cultural understandings of health and health care
- health ramifications of ecological adaptations or maladaptations
- perceptions of risk, vulnerability, and responsibility for health and healthcare
- practical ways in which specific health issues can be addressed

As medical anthropologists we consider topics holistically. This involves understanding not only the issue itself, whether that is childhood vaccination or perceptions of body fat, but also how the topic is situated in peoples’ life histories, cultural settings, and structural positions. While some disciplines like public health seek for straightforward answers to health problems, medical anthropology is interested in the messy reality of the health topics and how people negotiate these issues in their everyday lives. Consequently, the insights provided by medical anthropology are often different than those contributed by other disciplines.

Methodologically this holistic view of health is obtained through the use of qualitative methods (interviews, focus groups, direct observations, etc.) and ethnography (a qualitative method that relies primarily on participant observation). Quantitative methods, such as surveys and social network analysis, are also used but often only in association with more traditional anthropological methods.

Investigators
Emily K. Brunson
Dr. Brunson holds an MPH and PhD from the University of Washington. She is currently an Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Texas State University.

Nicole L. Taylor
Dr. Taylor holds a PhD from the University of Arizona. She is currently an Associate Professor of Anthropology at Texas State University.

Research Interests and Projects
As scholars we are interested in conducting health-related research that has a practical application. Our research interests include:

Childhood Vaccination
Dr. Brunson studied childhood vaccination in the US as part of her dissertation research. She is currently writing a grant to study how first-time parents’ vaccination decisions are formed. The research will involve interviewing and surveying (using ego-centric network analysis methods) first-time parents from the second trimester of their pregnancies through the first year of their children’s lives. The research will have important implications for vaccination interventions and policies.

Youth Body Image and Obesity in the US
Dr. Taylor studied how youth navigate body image concerns within a dominant culture that reinforces widespread beliefs about body size as a matter of personal responsibility while offering limited opportunity to exercise, along with an abundance of junk foods. Drawing on daily participant observation, interviews, and focus groups over the course of a school year, Taylor explored how youth negotiate body image norms, food consumption, and exercise practices. Taylor also traces policy efforts and offers practical strategies for promoting teen wellness.

Healthcare Access in the US
Dr. Brunson is currently writing the results of a study examining healthcare access in Hays County, TX. The project involved interviewing uninsured persons and following their experiences longitudinally from 2013 through 2015 (over the time period when the Affordable Care Act went into effect). In addition assessments of county resources were conducted as well as a survey of Hays County residents’ opinions of healthcare reform. The research provides critical insights into an issue that currently affects millions of Texans.

Community and School Behavioral Health
Dr. Taylor worked as part of interdisciplinary project teams to conduct research in the areas of substance abuse, education and poverty, childhood obesity, and school climate. These projects drew on mixed-methods approaches that included surveys, interviews, focus groups, and observations. Dr. Taylor conducted site visits in communities and schools across the country to gather data, and she worked with program staff to improve services provided to children and communities.

Community Engagement
To train graduate and undergraduate students in applied medical anthropology we provide opportunities for students to be engaged in community research.

ANTH 3336/5336 (Community Research Project)
This class provides students with a field-school opportunity during the course of a normal semester.

In 2016 the class conducted an assessment of food insecurity and perceptions of food aid for the Hays County Food Bank (HCFB). Based on the findings of the research, the class was able to provide recommendations to help the HCFB address current challenges in providing food aid and increase donations from the broader county community.

Future projects of the class may include:
- assessments of disability access around local communities
- evaluations of community health initiatives
- additional research on food insecurity in Hays County

Internships
We also actively seek internship opportunities for our students with local organizations including the Texas Department of State Health Services and the Women’s, Infants and Children (WIC) Program.

Funding Agencies

- National Institutes of Health (NIH)
- National Science Foundation (NSF)
- Food and Drug Administration (FDA)
- AAUW (American Association of University Women)
- Women’s, Infants and Children (WIC) Program