

Comparative Healthcare Systems

ANTH 1785-1015 (31952)

Fall 2025

Tuesday & Thursday: 11.00 am-12.15 pm

3301 Wesley W Posvar Hall

Credits: 3 Units

Pre-Requisites: None

Instructor:

Dr. Sanghamitra Das

Email: SAD545@pitt.edu

Office Hours:

Thursday: 1.00-2.00 pm

Or, By Appointment



Photograph Description: A hospital in a tea plantation in North-East India

Course Description:

Healthcare delivery and access to healthcare face a number of competing challenges. Local and global economies of health, diminishing expenditure on public health, pharmaceutical interventions, patient demands, and patient advocacy are forcing us to look more critically at how healthcare is delivered and experienced to devise changes for the future. Simultaneously, these are issues related to the governance of health systems and health markets. Changes made to health systems are often based on economic and political rationale with many countries currently experiencing significant changes to the way in which health care systems have historically been funded and delivered. Students will explore a range of key concepts and themes in comparative healthcare from a multidisciplinary perspective. As such, the course will also serve as an introduction to Medical Anthropology, a sub-field of Sociocultural Anthropology that has established collaborations with Biomedicine, Public Health, and Biological Sciences.

The objective is to understand how the social and the biological are intricately intertwined, both in the therapeutic domains of healthcare providers and the experiential worlds of ordinary people. A central analytic in the course is to examine ways in which healthcare systems are imbricated with identity-based health inequality. Additionally, students will develop critical appraisal skills to assess the quality of evidence used to support developments in healthcare policy and practice. They will also learn to look critically at the role that governmental and non-governmental organizations as well as community perspectives play in shaping healthcare. Direct comparisons will include health experiences in the USA and South Asia to allow students to relate their learning on this course to their own educational and healthcare settings.

The course syllabus is subject to change in the event of unforeseen circumstances or at the instructor's discretion.

The goals of this course are:

- to introduce comparative approaches to understanding healthcare delivery, healthcare systems, and health experiences as complex social systems,
- to utilize case studies to understand how social, cultural, economic and political factors govern the design and implementation of healthcare policies,
- to help students develop critical thinking on issues pertaining to health as well as analytical, reading, writing and communications skills.

By the end of the course, you will be able to:

- identify key themes in interdisciplinary and comparative approaches to health and health systems,
- learn how anthropological methods illuminate nuanced perspectives on healthcare delivery and health experiences,
- learn the significance of interdisciplinary and comparative approaches for analyzing health problems on the ground, across the Global North-South divide.

Land Acknowledgement:

I recognize that the University of Pittsburgh occupies the ancestral land of the Seneca, Adena culture, Hopewell culture, and Monongahela peoples, who were later joined by refugees of other tribes (including the Delaware, Shawnee, Mingo, and Haudenosaunee), who were all forced off their homelands and displaced by European colonists. I honor the original caretakers of this region and uplift their historic, unique, and enduring relationship with this land, which is their ancestral territory. I pay my respects to their Elders and their past, present, and future people, community, and culture. While we cannot change the past, I commit to continued gratitude for the gifts of nature, along with ongoing respect, care, and stewardship of the land, each other, and future generations. I am committed to learning and supporting Indigenous communities in the region today and in the future. This land acknowledgment reminds us of the people who have been harmed and oppressed in the past, and of the harms that continue today. It reminds us that we must attend to the intersectional identities and power systems of race, gender, class, religion, and ability, to build peace, and to build a more just and equitable future.

Course Readings and Attendance:

The aim of this course is to cultivate careful reading of the texts, practice critical thinking to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions about real-world problems, and to foster excellent writing and communication skills. Beyond what is addressed during the class sessions, assistance with developing reading and writing skills can be found at the [University of Pittsburgh Study Lab](#).

This course includes scholarship at the interface of Biomedicine, Technology, and Society. All course readings will either be made available through Canvas or will be accessible online through the University of Pittsburgh Library. It is imperative that you complete the week's

required readings before the weekly class lectures to understand theoretical concepts and empirical case studies. This will provide an opportunity to generate transformative classroom discourses informed by diverse analyses of the literature. To that end, students are required to engage with the course materials actively and seriously.

Regular attendance is essential for your personal success and the collective success of the class. You are allowed to miss three classes without incurring reductions in your class participation grade. Please note, attendance/participation comprises of 15% of your final grade. After three missed classes, each missed class will incur a 0.6% reduction from the total grade.

Class Assignments:

Fostering fruitful classroom discussions also gains from the practice of writing. For this purpose, everyone will be required to make twelve Canvas postings over the course of the semester. All posts are due by 5 pm on Wednesday, before the second lecture of the week on Thursday. This is to provide ample time for you to read your peers' discussion posts. During class discussions, please respond to at least one of your peers' posts for active participation.

Each of these discussion posts should be between 150-200 words. Please ensure that the posts are careful and deliberate analyses of the week's theme, arrived at through a critical engagement with the readings. Identify two-three key arguments across the readings and provide your own understandings, and critiques (if any). As a result of this exercise, you will develop your own questions about the lecture's theme. Please include at least one or two such questions in your posts for broader class discussions. Since we have fourteen weeks of two class sessions, you can select any two weeks in which you will not be required to submit a post. Focus only on reading the course materials and your peers' discussion posts for class during these two weeks.

The first session of Week One is meant for introductory remarks and discussing the syllabus. Please go through the syllabus for the first session of Week One. You may also ask any questions you may have regarding the readings and the assignments during this first session.

In addition to the twelve weekly posts on Canvas, each student will be required to select one day to lead discussions at the beginning of class. This will be an opportunity to practice your presentation skills. Please come to your selected session prepared to make a brief presentation (no more than 5-7 minutes) on your reflections on the session's readings. Be sure to describe how you arrived at your own questions, opening them up for general discussion. You can make the presentation in any format that you like. The conventional formats are PowerPoint presentations and conference-paper style write-ups.

Finally, you will be required to submit a final essay at the end of the semester. This will be due on December 10. This final paper can be on any comparative health-related topic. In the paper, address three questions: 1) What social dimensions does a comparative perspective reveal about the health problem?; 2) How have existing health policies addressed this problem in each geographical site?; and, 3) What policy recommendations emerge from your comparative study? The final essay should be between 2000-3000 words, double spaced and must include appropriate citations. It should also utilize the readings in the course to analyze the data. An abstract proposal for this paper should be submitted by the end of Week 7 on October 10; the abstract should be between 250-300 words. The abstract will be graded and based on this you will receive feedback on writing the final essay. Should it prove more useful to you, you may choose to provide alternative writing assignments. For example, policy briefs, public-facing media articles, grant application drafts, or a conference paper. In the case of alternative writing submissions, you will need advanced approval.

Grading parameters:

Canvas posts: 30% (2.5% each)
 Discussion Lead: 20%
 Final Essay Abstract: 5%
 Final essay: 30%
 Attendance/Participation: 15% (0.6% for each session out of 25)

Letter grade equivalency:

100-98: A+	89-87: B+	79-77: C+	69-67: D+	59-0: F
97-94: A	86-84: B	76-74: C	66-64: D	
93-90: A-	83-80: B-	73-70: C-	63-60: D	

Academic Integrity:

Students in this course will be expected to comply with the [University of Pittsburgh's Policy on Academic Integrity](#). Any student suspected of violating this obligation for any reason during the semester will be required to participate in the procedural process, initiated at the instructor level, as outlined in the University Guidelines on Academic Integrity. This may include, but is not limited to, the confiscation of the examination of any individual suspected of violating University Policy. Furthermore, no student may bring any unauthorized materials to an exam, including dictionaries and programmable calculators.

To learn more about Academic Integrity, visit the [Academic Integrity Guide](#) for an overview of the topic. For hands-on practice, complete the [Academic Integrity Modules](#).

Artificial Intelligence:

What is Artificial Intelligence (AI)? It is intelligence external to human intelligence, created by algorithms meant to utilize and process large databases and giant data systems to accomplish a given task. However, AI is just that, artificial; a system created by another human or a collection of humans that is now shaping how you read, write and even think!

In this class, you will learn to analyze complex systems (like healthcare systems and AI) as dynamic institutions intertwined with the social, political, cultural as well as the economic. In view of this critical dimension, **the use of AI in writing class assignments is strictly prohibited**. You may utilize AI to assist you in gaining a preliminary understanding of new concepts (remember, class lectures and discussions are first and foremost meant to teach new concepts) and for copy editing. But this class requires you to think about real-world problems using your own intellectual capabilities, so that you can utilize, hone and sharpen them. Moreover, there is now increasing evidence that use of AI in classrooms leads to a [loss of critical thinking](#). To ascertain that you learn effective reading, thinking and writing skills, you are required to commit to completing class assignments using your own capacities, consciously and with integrity.

Disability Services:

If you have a disability for which you are or may be requesting an accommodation, you are encouraged to contact both your instructor and [Disability Resources and Services \(DRS\)](#), 140 William Pitt Union, (412) 648-7890, drsrecep@pitt.edu, (412) 228-5347 for P3 ASL users, as early as possible in the term. DRS will verify your disability and determine reasonable accommodations for this course.

Accessibility:

The Canvas LMS platform was built using the most modern HTML and CSS technologies, and is committed to W3C's Web Accessibility Initiative and [Section 508](#) guidelines. Specific details regarding individual [feature compliance](#) are documented and updated regularly.

Statement on Classroom Recording:

To ensure the free and open discussion of ideas, students may not record classroom lectures, discussion and/or activities without the advance written permission of the instructor, and any such recording properly approved in advance can be used solely for the student's own private use.

Required Books:

- Khiara Bridges. *Reproducing race: An ethnography of pregnancy as a site of racialization*. Univ of California Press, 2011. (Available on Canvas)
- Andrew McDowell. "Breathless: Tuberculosis, Inequality, and Care in Rural India." In *Breathless*. Stanford University Press, 2024. (Available through Pitt Library)

Class Schedule:

PART I: MEDICINE & SOCIETY

Week 1: Narratives in Medicine

Tuesday, 25 August:

Introduction & Syllabus

Thursday, 27 August:

Arthur Kleinman. Chapter 1: "The Meaning of Symptoms and Disorders" in *The Illness Narratives*. Basic Books, 2020.

Paul Farmer, Bruce Nizeye, Sara Stulac, and Salmaan Keshavjee. "Structural violence and clinical medicine." *Understanding and applying medical anthropology* (2016): 336-343.

Week 2: Anthropology of Health

Tuesday, 2 September:

Lock, Margaret. "Cultivating the body: Anthropology and epistemologies of bodily practice and knowledge." *Annual review of anthropology* (1993): 133-155.

Emily Yates-Doerr. "Reworking the social determinants of health: Responding to material-semiotic indeterminacy in public health interventions." *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (2020): 378-397.

Thursday, 4 September:

Emily Mendenhall. Introduction. *Syndemic Suffering: Social Distress, Depression, and Diabetes among Mexican Immigrant Women*. Routledge, 2016.

Week 3: Race & Biomedicine I

Tuesday, 9 September:

Carrie D. Wolinetz and Francis S. Collins. "Recognition of Research Participants' Need for Autonomy: Remembering the Legacy of Henrietta Lacks." *Jama* 324, no. 11 (2020): 1027-1028.

Khiara Bridges. "Reproducing Race." Introduction.

Thursday, 11 September:

Khiara Bridges. "Reproducing Race." Chapters 1 & 2.

Week 4: Race & Biomedicine II

Tuesday, 16 September:

Khiara Bridges. "Reproducing Race." Chapter 3.

Thursday, 18 September:

Khiara Bridges. "Reproducing Race." Chapter 4.

Week 5: Race & Biomedicine III

Tuesday, 23 September:

Khiara Bridges. "Reproducing Race." Chapter 5.

Thursday, 25 September:

Khiara Bridges. "Reproducing Race." Chapter 6 & Epilogue

Week 6: Economies of Health

Tuesday, 30 September:

Jenny Reardon (2019), *The Postgenomic Condition: Ethics, Justice, and Knowledge After the Genome*. University of Chicago Press, 2019. [Pages: 1-24;25-45]

Thursday, 2 October:

Melinda Cooper and Catherine Waldby (2014), "Part III" & "The American Experiment: From Prison-Academic-Industrial Complex to the Outsourced Clinic." In *Clinical labor: Tissue Donors and Research Subjects in the Global Bioeconomy*, Duke University Press.

PART II. NARRATIVES OF HEALTH

Week 7: Locating Biologies

Tuesday, 7 October:

Jörg Niewöhner and Margaret Lock. "Situating local biologies: Anthropological perspectives on environment/human entanglements." *BioSocieties* 13, no. 4 (2018): 681-697.

Sienna R. Craig, and Barbara Gerke. "Naming and forgetting: Sowa Rigpa and the territory of Asian medical systems." *Medicine Anthropology Theory* 3, no. 2 (2016).

Thursday, 9 October:

Yulia Egorova. "Castes of genes? Representing human genetic diversity in India." *Genomics, society and policy* 6, no. 3 (2010): 32.

Sobin George. "Reconciliations of caste and medical power in rural public health services." *Economic and Political Weekly* 54, no. 40 (2019): 43-50.

[Friday, 10 October, 11.59 PM: ABSTRACTS FOR FINAL ESSAY DUE]

Week 8: Identity & Health I

Tuesday, 14 October:

Andrew McDowell. *Breathless*. Chapter 1.

John T. Doyle, Margaret Hiza Redsteer, and Margaret J. Eggers. "Exploring Effects of Climate Change on Northern Plains American Indian Health." In *Climate Change and Indigenous Peoples in the United States: Impacts, Experiences and Actions*, pp. 135-147. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2013.

Thursday, 16 October:

Andrew McDowell. *Breathless*. Chapters 2 & 3.

Week 9: Identity & Health II

Tuesday, 21 October:

Andrew McDowell. *Breathless*. Chapters 4 & 5.

Thursday, 23 October:

Andrew McDowell. *Breathless*. Chapters 6 & 7.

Week 10: Identity & Health III

Tuesday, 28 October:

Andrew McDowell. *Breathless*. Chapters 8 & 9.

Thursday, 30 October:

Bengt G. Karlsson. "Nuclear Lives: Uranium Mining, Indigenous Peoples, and Development in India." *Economic and Political Weekly* (2009): 43-49.

Chundankuzhiyil Ulahannan Thresia, Prashanth Nuggehalli Srinivas, Katia Sarla Mohindra, and Chettiparambil Kumaran Jagadeesan. "The health of Indigenous populations in South Asia: a critical review in a critical time." *International Journal of Health Services* 52, no. 1 (2022): 61-72.

PART III. HEALTHCARE SYSTEMS THROUGH CASE STUDIES

Week 11: Healthcare Systems

Tuesday, 4 November: [Election Day] [NO CLASS]

Thursday, 6 November:

Janzen, John M. "The comparative study of medical systems as changing social systems." *Social Science & Medicine. Part B: Medical Anthropology* 12 (1978): 121-129.

Saiba Varma, Kalindi Vora, Keolu Fox, Suze Berkhout, and Tarik Benmarhnia. "Why calls to diversify trial populations fall short." *Med* 2, no. 1 (2021): 25-28.

Sarojini Nadimpally, and Keertana K. Tella. "Recalibrating Health Governance, Equity, and Reproductive Rights in India: A Case Study from the Global South." *The CRISPR Journal* (2025).

Week 12: Population Control

Tuesday, 11 November:

Murphy, Michelle. Introduction & Select Chapter. *The economization of life*. Duke University Press, 2017.

Thursday, 13 November:

Lecture & Discussion on Sterilization Policies in the US and India. [Read materials available through links and policy documents uploaded to Canvas.]

Links for US Sterilization Policy:

<<https://register.dls.virginia.gov/details.aspx?id=6270>>

<<https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/eugenic-sterilization-in-virginia/>>

Population Control Draft Bill, 2019 India – PDF in Canvas

Week 13: Advocacy

Tuesday, 18 November:

Steven Epstein. "The construction of lay expertise: AIDS activism and the forging of credibility in the reform of clinical trials." *Science, technology, & human values* 20, no. 4 (1995): 408-437.

Kim Fortun. "The Bhopal disaster: Advocacy and expertise." *Science as Culture* 7, no. 2 (1998): 193-216.

Thursday, 20 November:

Lecture & Discussion on Activism and Advocacy for Healthcare.

[Read Policy Documents on AIDS control (selected sections) in the US and Bhopal Gas Tragedy in India available in Canvas.]

Week 14 [No Class- Thanksgiving Recess]

Week 15: Regulating Emerging Bioeconomies

Tuesday, 2 December:

Arsenii Alenichev, and Vinh-Kim Nguyen. "Precarity, clinical labour and graduation from Ebola clinical research in West Africa." *Global Bioethics* 30, no. 1 (2019): 1-18.

Sanghamitra Das. "Indentured clinical labor? An indigenist standpoint view of 'forced surrogacy' and reproductive governance in India." *BioSocieties* 18, no. 3 (2023): 586-613.

Thursday, 4 December: Last Day of Class

Lecture & Discussion on Clinical Trial and Surrogacy policies in the US and India. [Read materials available through links and policy documents uploaded to Canvas.]

US FDA Regulations on Clinical Trials:

<<https://www.fda.gov/science-research/clinical-trials-and-human-subject-protection/regulations-good-clinical-practice-and-clinical-trials>>

Surrogacy Regulation Bill, 2019, India – PDF in Canvas

[Wednesday, 10 December, 11:59 PM: FINAL ESSAY DUE.]