

ANTH 3052: An Anthropological Approach to Bioethics

Course prospectus

W 3:30-6:30pm

TBD

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Meetings by appointment

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Course description:

Bioethics and anthropology have a complicated relationship. Though the two disciplines have long studied overlapping topics, the contribution of anthropological work to bioethical discussions and associated health policy interventions has been limited. This course will investigate whether and how anthropology can contribute to ethics and characterize the unique perspective that the discipline adds to bioethics topics.

We will begin by carrying out an anthropology of bioethics, exploring how bioethics developed as a field with a specific philosophical and political orientation and a particular conception of which issues in health, illness, and medicine are worthy of attention as ethical problems. Next, we will clarify how anthropology can contribute to bioethical theory by considering decades-old, ongoing debates about the relevance of (descriptive) social scientific findings to the development of (prescriptive) bioethics frameworks. Finally, we will apply an anthropological lens to bioethical problems. We will use anthropology's global, ethnographic orientation to explore a series of classic bioethics topics, examining how anthropologists' conclusions about these topics might differ from bioethicists', why, and with what ramifications.

Format:

As a seminar, this course will focus on discussion of weekly readings in large- and small-group formats. There will be occasional lectures. We will also regularly watch relevant media to examine how they frame contemporary bioethical issues and/or to provide supplementary context to the week's readings.

Learning objectives:

By the end of the class, students should be able to:

- (1) Understand the cultural, philosophical, and political foundations of Western bioethics and how they have contributed to a focus on particular problems in health and medicine.*
- (2) Reflect on the role of anthropology and adjacent social sciences in contributing to discussion and debate about bioethics (and ethics more generally).*

(3) Form positions on ethical problems in health and medicine using a global perspective informed by ethnographic data and anthropological theorizing.

Assignments & assessment:

Participation [15%]

Consistent attendance, preparation, and participation are important components of enrollment in this seminar course. If you must miss a class session, you will be expected to catch up on the material discussed by completing the readings as usual and by asking a classmate for notes.

Journal club [20%]

Each week, 1-2 students will present a supplementary article to their peers during class that complicates and expands upon the week's theme. The presentation will be used to facilitate group discussion.

Mid-term exam [20%]

A take-home, essay-based mid-term will be administered roughly halfway through the semester to assess your understanding of the ideas discussed in assigned readings and your ability to connect these ideas.

Essay [25%]

Students will write a 3000-word essay about a book-length ethnography about an issue in medicine/health/illness. The essay will examine the moral reasoning and the prescriptive implications of this ethnographic work.

Final exam [20%]

A timed, essay-based final exam will be administered at the end of the semester. The exam will be broadly synthetic—not based on memorization of details. It will be open book (assigned readings and class notes only).

Schedule of topics

UNIT I: ANTHROPOLOGY OF BIOETHICS ... ANTHROPOLOGY *IN* BIOETHICS?

Week 1. Bioethics: foundational concepts

Week 2. Social science of bioethics I: the contested history & institutionalization of American bioethics

Week 3. Social science of bioethics II: examinations of contemporary bioethics in practice

Week 4. Social science in bioethics I: 'is' vs. 'ought', fact vs. value, & the role of empirical research in developing ethical theory

Week 5. Social science in bioethics II: anthropology & the specter of relativism

Week 6. Social science in bioethics III: moral anthropology & ordinary ethics

UNIT II: ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON BIOETHICAL ISSUES

Week 7. Living donor organ transplantation, autonomy, coercion, & the gift

Week 8. Justice, inequity, & global health

Week 9. Clinical trials, scientific validity, & exploitation of research subjects

Week 10. Bioenhancement, values, & value

Week 11. Non-human animal experimentation, moral status, & interspecies relations

Week 12. Life-sustaining care, futility, & the definition of death

Week 13. Mental illness, capacity, commitment, & the morality of physician-assisted death