

Health, Disease and Healing in the Larger Social Context II

Read: Farmer, *AIDS and Accusation: Haiti and the Geography of Blame* 1-94

- I. Paul Farmer's critiques of anthropological research are concerned with Third-World health and First-World decision-making about it
 - A. He says that anthropologists run the risk of being part of the problem
 1. If they lose sight of the big picture
 - a. If they focus too much on the local, to the exclusion of the macro
 2. If they search for "thick" local meaning "unhinged from history and political economy" (p. 23 of *Infections and Inequalities*¹)
 - a. If they fail to situate the local world in the larger context, and fail to analyze the articulations
 3. Which can lead them to "miss the revolution"²

1 Paul Farmer, *Infections and Inequalities: The Modern Plagues*. U California Press, 1999.

2 Orin Starn, 1992. "Missing the revolution: Anthropologists and the war in Peru." In George Marcus, ed., *Rereading Cultural Anthropology*. Durham: Duke University Press: 99-112.

- a. A reference to anthropological research in highland Peru
 - b. The article, by Orin Starn, criticizes researchers who failed to analyze the significance of the desperate poverty experienced by highland Peruvian peasants
 - c. In their publications they failed to mention campaigns by *Sendero Luminoso* (“Shining Path”) rebels, and the government’s counter-insurgency efforts, which resulted in over 60,000 deaths
 - d. Farmer complains that ethnographic research on “traditional” topics such as ritual, etc., can result in the investigator ignoring forces that are having enormous effects on the community being studied
 - 1) Sometimes these effects are very visible at the time of fieldwork
4. If they fail to grasp how deeply connected are the local and the translocal
 - a. **DISCUSS:** how might this critique apply to other kinds of researchers in Third World countries?

B. Example of Haiti

1. Haiti has been characterized as the first “developed” country in the New World

a. And now is the poorest—“development” clearly benefited non-Haitian interests

2. *Aids and Accusation* includes a chapter on the history of the country

a. **DISCUSS:** the reasons why the country is in such bad shape at present

C. Another way to make Farmer’s point: don’t pay attention to only proximate causes of disease, ill health

1. **DISCUSS:** review of proximate cause, distal cause, final cause

a. Proximate cause: the immediate cause of an individual case of an infectious disease

1) The pathogen successfully reproducing itself in a host

b. Remember our example of the bubonic plague?

1) Probable contributing causes farther away from specific events of disease?

a) Fleas, rats, sanitation, population movement, deforestation, etc., are more distal causes

c. Farmer complains that local “culture” is often seen to be the cause of a given disease event(s), whereas in fact it is one link in a chain of causes

d. “Both immediate and systemic causes of increased risk need to be elucidated” (p. 78 of *Infections and Inequalities*)

1). He terms the more distal causes “the differential political economy of risk”

2) **DISCUSS:** what does “political economy” mean?

2. Bottom line: researchers shouldn’t focus only on local factors and local actors to the exclusion of broader analyses

a. And shouldn’t conflate structural violence and cultural difference

b. They shouldn’t focus on “culture” so much that certain underlying causes of social interaction are obscured

3. **DISCUSS:** the concept of structural violence
- D. Farmer is not afraid to critique other research: how it's designed, how the findings are interpreted
1. He refers to a "global Tuskegee experiment"
 - a. **DISCUSS:** what might he mean? Examples from other readings—Sunder Rajan or Petryna?
 2. Criticizes a research project looking into Latina women's knowledge about how AIDS is contracted (*Infections and Inequalities*)
 - a. Researchers found that Latina women were in fact quite knowledgeable about AIDS symptomatology, etiology
 - b. They found that interviewees tended to *overestimate* transmissibility, not underestimate it (p. 85)
 - c. Yet researchers concluded that what was needed was "culturally sensitive education programs"
 - d. **DISCUSS:** why might they recommend an intervention not supported by their own research findings?
 3. He finds an exaggeration of personal agency in the literature on epidemiology of HIV infection

a. Rather than inquiring into, for instance, to what degree *can* women insist on condom use?

b. Sees part of the problem to be our society's "obsession with individualism" (p. 86)

c. **DISCUSS**

E. Examples Farmer gives of contributions provided by macro analysis:

1. Understand the role of poverty on incidence of disease

2. Understand the reluctance of researchers, WHO officials, and other policy-makers, to adequately take these structural factors into account

3. In fact, some policy makers argue that exposing poor people to even greater health risks is defensible

4. Famous leaked memo from MIT alumnus Lawrence Summers, then chief economist at the World Bank, later president of Harvard University:

a. Internal memo of Dec. 12, 1988 concerning a "world-welfare enhancing trade" that should be actively encouraged by the World Bank

b. "I think the economic logic behind dumping a load of toxic waste in the lowest-wage country is impeccable and we should face up to that"

c. “Since the measurement of the costs of health-impairing pollution depends on the foregone earnings from increased morbidity and mortality, a given amount of health-impairing pollution should be done in the country with the lowest cost, which will be the country with the lowest wages.”

5. Results of 1990s and continuing “structural adjustment” policies of the World Bank and IMF (International Monetary Fund) in areas of the Third World

a. Results include the prices of essential goods skyrocketing, employment declining, real incomes rapidly shrinking

b. Nonetheless, structural adjustment must occur

c. **DISCUSS:** what’s going on?

II. Farmer belongs to a movement originally called “critical medical anthropology”

A. Insists on the importance of focusing on the bigger picture—the forces in society that critically affect health

1. Farmer’s “political economy”

B. **DISCUSS:** examples in the U.S. of changes in society that benefit one group but harm another

1. Corporations' logic, goals
 - a. Example of documentary film "Who Killed the Electric Car?"
2. Poverty
3. Export of capital—unemployment
4. Unequal distribution of basic resources
5. Racial, gender and sexual orientation discrimination
 - a. The results of implementing our own "structural adjustment" policies include declines in African American life expectancy (Hahn)
 - b. For the first time this century. Not for whites
 - c. Remember Hahn's figures showing that very low birth weights among blacks increased more than 20% from 1960 to 1985, and by 9% from 1985 to 1989 (pp 84-85)
6. Environmental degradation

C. Internationally

1. Inverse correlation between per capita gross national product and national rates of infant mortality³
2. And a direct correlation between per capita gross national product and life expectancy
3. Saying that Third World countries are just “underdeveloped” and will “catch up” ignores the connections between the nations that accumulate profits and the nations whose natural resources are extracted, including cheap labor
4. Capitalist world system: the constant search for profits, often in the face of stiff competition
5. **DISCUSS:** examples of direct damage to health due to the marketing efforts of multinational corporations?
 - a. Baby formula example: Nestlé aggressively marketed its formula ignoring the serious health consequences
 - 1) It took years of international protest and boycotts to have an effect on these practices
 - 2) There are many examples of marketing processed foods that are less nutritional than the traditional diet in the Third World

3 Ray Elling, 1981, “The capitalist world-system and international health.” *International Journal of Health Services* 11: 21-51, as cited in Hahn, p. 73. The following examples are from Elling.

3) But these items may be symbols of “the West” or of “cosmopolitanism” or “modernity” and so are preferred

b. The health of the electronics assembly workers, as in the Ong article

1) Why do multinationals preferentially hire young women?

a) Cheaper (employers pretend that these young women don’t support their families)

b) More docile—less likely to unionize

c) They are young

(1) : high rates of eye infection and serious vision problems result from long hours with microscopes

(2) Women who have worked with the microscopes for 3-4 years all wear glasses, have eye damage

(3) Although in their early 20’s they’re called “grannies”

c. “Sweat shops” producing clothing and footwear for Western countries

d. Marketing drugs that are either banned or whose use is highly restricted in core nations

e. Or marketing dangerous chemicals, DDT being the best example

f. “Dumping”—Summers’ memo—exporting toxic waste or hazardous industry such as production of asbestos products

g. **DISCUSS:** other examples?

III. Examples of non-medical international development projects that have damaged health

A. The Green Revolution

1. “Miracle” grains were developed that were predicted to “end hunger”

2. Corn, rice

3. These “miracle” grains are best described as “high response” hybrids

a. Farmers had to buy insecticide and fertilizers

b. Also, these varieties were much more finicky; the agricultural cycle had to be completely adapted to them

c. So, for example, no more fingerling fish available from rice paddies, a crucial supply of protein

1) The growing cycle was too short

4. Overall result: some farmers did very well, bought out their poorer neighbors and kinsmen, who ended up poorer, many of them migrating to urban areas

a. One of the things developing these high-yield grains was supposed to halt

B. Other cases of agricultural science imported to new environments:

1. New strains of domestic animals turn out to be a disaster

a. Like the Green Revolution story, feed for fancy poultry has to be bought

2. Farmer's example of the fancy pigs brought to Do Kay

a. Outbreak of swine flu, pigs were blamed, had to be killed

b. Cynical villagers had predicted something like this would happen—they'd had previous experiences with “development”

C. Projects that benefit some sectors, but worsen the situation for others

1. The hydroelectric dam benefited urban areas, but greatly impoverished the people of Do Kay

a. Had to move from the valley up to a stony location on the mountain

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