

ANTH42215: Planetary Health in Social Context

2024/2025

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Module summary

Planetary Health in Social Context explores the complex relationships between human health and the planet's well-being. Through a series of intensive workshops, students will present and engage in critical discussions on pressing issues such as climate change, infectious and noncommunicable diseases, pollution, and food and water scarcity. Emphasizing social science perspectives, the module introduces students to anthropological case studies and equips them with the analytical tools needed to critically assess these challenges. By the end of the course, students will develop the skills to evaluate, synthesize, and effectively present complex viewpoints—preparing them for advanced research or applied work in this rapidly evolving field.

Aims

- To provide students with a comprehensive understanding of the origins of Planetary Health as emergent research field;
- To engage students in critical reflections on current debates and issues in Planetary Health (e.g. climate change, emerging infectious diseases, population growth and cities, etc.);
- To encourage students to take an interdisciplinary perspective in approaching problems/questions in Planetary Health, with a solid social sciences foundation.

Learning Outcomes

Subject-specific Knowledge:

- Understanding of the disciplinary and political origins of 'Planetary Health'.
- Understanding of key contemporary issues and debates within Planetary Health.
- Knowledge of key relevant theoretical perspectives.

Subject-specific Skills:

- Ability to critically evaluate and apply a range of theoretical perspectives to contemporary issues in planetary health.
- Ability to synthesise, critically evaluate and present complex material, including data, models and theoretical arguments.

Key Skills:

- Ability to engage critically with a range of literature and secondary data sources.

- Ability to communicate succinctly and clearly in both oral and written format.
- Ability to bring together and contrast different disciplinary perspectives on key contemporary issues.

Modes of Teaching and Learning

This is an intensive workshop-based course. Following an initial introductory lecture, there are weekly 90-minute workshop over the course of one term.

In each workshop session, teaching staff set out the broad contexts and key issues, followed by student-led presentation and discussion.

Assessment

Summative assessment consists of an extended piece of writing (3,000 words).

Please choose to write ONE of these topics:

Essay Option 1: Discuss how perspectives from the social sciences and humanities contribute to our understanding of planetary health. Your essay should be supported by evidence—for example, by focusing on a particular global health problem and its relationship to environmental issues—rather than attempting a sweeping argument about the field as a whole.

Essay Option 2: Critically evaluate the concept of planetary health through a postcolonial lens. How does the framework account for indigenous knowledge systems, historical injustices, and global inequalities? Propose ways to decolonize the new field of planetary health.

Content

Week 1. Introduction

What is planetary health? When and how did this concept come into being? In what way is it different from existing concepts like public health and global health? How do anthropologists in particular engage with this concept? The lecture and seminar will give students an introduction to the origins and recent development of the concept and the field.

Week 2. Environmental change, ‘natural’ disasters, human health

Environmental changes have profound implications for humanity. In this seminar, we will focus specifically on the impact of 'natural' disasters and their impact on human health and wellbeing.

Week 3. Climate change and infectious diseases

Thanks to improved hygiene and effective vaccines, the burden of some infectious diseases has lessen significantly during the 20th and 21st centuries. However, in many parts of the world, infectious diseases continue to post a great threat to human health. Scientists have

warned that as temperatures rise and weather patterns shift, the risk of vector-borne diseases like dengue fever and Zika virus will also increase. In this seminar, we will explore the relationship between infectious diseases, climate change, and planetary health using a few case studies.

Week 4: Climate change and non-communicable diseases

Climate change is also a driving force for noncommunicable diseases like cardiovascular diseases, cancers, and chronic respiratory diseases. In this seminar we'll discuss how environmental issues are influencing the risk of NCDs.

Week 5 & 6. Reading week.

Week 7. Food, Water, and Scarcity

Food and water security are some of the greatest challenges facing humans in the Anthropocene. They also have a direct and profound impact on planetary health. In this seminar, we will examine the social and cultural context contributing to food and water (in)security, drawing on insights from anthropological research.

Week 8. Pollution and toxic exposure

The health ramifications of environmental pollution is clear, yet in reality it is very difficult to prove that a health condition, be it cancer or multiple chemical sensitivity, is a direct result of pollution or toxic exposure. This seminar focuses on the politics and slow violence of pollution, and the promise and limitation of environmental justice.

Reading list

See attached reading list.

Planetary health in social context (Academic year 2024-25)

[View Online](#)

57 items

Key texts and resources on anthropology, climate change, and health (4 items)

All students should familiarise themselves with the following texts and resources. These are key background readings and will help you perform well in your summative assessment.

Wellcome Trust: Climate and Health

[Website](#) | Essential

WHO. 2021. Climate change and health

[Website](#) | Essential

Climate Change and Health - in A Companion to Medical Anthropology, by Merrill Singer; Eleanor Shoreman-ouimet; Ashley L. Graham, edited by Merrill Singer; Pamela I. Erickson; César E. Abadía-Barrero, 2022-03-08

[Chapter](#) | Essential

Time for a Focus on Climate Change and Health - in Medical Anthropology, by Rebecca Marsland; James Staples, 2024-01-02

[Article](#) | Essential

Week 1: Introduction (6 items)

What is planetary health? When and how did this concept come into being? In what way is it different from existing concepts like public health and global health? How do anthropologists in particular engage with this concept? The lecture and seminar will give students an introduction to the origins and recent development of the concept and the field.

From public to planetary health: a manifesto - in The Lancet, by Richard Horton; Robert Beaglehole; Ruth Bonita; John Raeburn; Martin McKee; Stig Wall, 2014-03

[Article](#) | Essential

Correspondence to A manifesto for planetary health - in The Lancet, by Frederick M Burkle, 2014-04

[Article](#) | Essential

Safeguarding human health in the Anthropocene epoch: report of The Rockefeller Foundation-Lancet Commission on planetary health - in The Lancet, by Sarah Whitmee; Andy Haines; Chris Beyrer; Frederick Boltz; Anthony G Capon; Braulio Ferreira de Souza Dias; Alex Ezeh; Howard Frumkin; Peng Gong; Peter Head; Richard Horton; Georgina M Mace; Robert Marten; Samuel S Myers; Sania Nishtar; Steven A Osofsky; Subhrendu K

Pattanayak; Montira J Pongsiri; Cristina Romanelli; Agnes Soucat; Jeanette Vega; Derek Yach, 2015-11

Article

Measures of future health, from the nonhuman to the planetary - in *Medicine Anthropology Theory*, by Richard Rottenburg; Abou Farman, 2019-10-24

Article

The Medical Anthropology of Climate Change: Eco-Risks and the Body Environmental - in *Medical Anthropology*, by Elizabeth Cartwright, 2019-07-04

Article

Planetary health: safeguarding human health and the environment in the Anthropocene, by Andy Haines; Howard Frumkin, 2021

Book

Week 2: Environmental change, 'natural' disasters, and human health (6 items)

Environmental changes have profound implications for humanity. In this seminar, we will focus specifically on the impact of 'natural' disasters and their impact on human health and wellbeing.

The Nature of Disaster in China, by Chris Courtney, 2018-02-15

Book | Essential | Please read the Introduction chapters.

Applied Anthropology of Risk, Hazards, and Disasters

Journal | Essential

What is a Disaster? | Global Governance Institute - UCL - University College London

Webpage

Climate Podcast: How should we tackle climate disasters? | Climate Change - UCL - University College London

Webpage

Natural Disasters: Coping with the Health Impact

Document

Pollution, Land Use, Biodiversity, and Health - in *Planetary Health*, 2021-07-22

Chapter | Read Chapter 3, but please start from the section titled "Land Use Change, Biodiversity Loss, and Disease Risk" (p.97) rather than the section on "pollution" at the start. We will read the earlier sections on pollution later in this class.

Week 3: Planetary health and infectious diseases (10 items)

Thanks to improved hygiene and effective vaccines, the burden of some infectious diseases has lessened significantly during the 20th and 21st centuries. However, in many parts of the world, infectious diseases continue to pose a great threat to human health. Scientists have warned that as temperatures rise and weather patterns shift, the risk of vector-borne diseases like dengue fever and Zika virus will also increase. Moreover, as zoonotic diseases are transmitted to humans through close contact with domestic,

agricultural, or wild animals, the health of these animals has major implications for our own health. In this seminar, we will explore the relationship between infectious diseases, climate change, and planetary health using a few case studies.

Viral economies: bird flu experiments in Vietnam, by Natalie Porter, 2019

[Book](#) | **Essential** | Please read the Introduction chapter.

Avian Reservoirs, by Frédéric Keck, 2020

[Book](#) | **Essential** | Please read the chapter titled 'Global Health and the Ecologies of Conservation'.

2. Rethinking "Emerging Infectious Diseases" - in *Infections and Inequalities*, 2001-02-23

[Chapter](#)

Introduction: Human Animal Health in Medical Anthropology - in *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, by Hannah Brown; Alex M. Nading, 2019-03

[Article](#)

Climate change and infectious diseases: An introduction by CDC

[Website](#)

Coronavirus, Climate Change, and the Environment

[Webpage](#)

The making of a tropical disease: a short history of malaria, by Randall M. Packard, 2021

[Book](#) | An advanced reading for students who want to know more about the social aspects of controlling Malaria.

Climate change and infectious disease in Europe: Impact, projection and adaptation - in *The Lancet Regional Health - Europe*, by Jan C. Semenza; Shlomit Paz, 2021-10

[Article](#)

What Hong Kong's Urban Poor Can Tell Us About Climate Change's Toll on Public Health - The Diplomat

[Webpage](#)

An Ethnographic Approach to Characterizing Potential Pathways of Zoonotic Disease Transmission from Wild Meat in Guyana - in *EcoHealth*, by Marissa S. Milstein; Christopher A. Shaffer; Phillip Suse; Elisha Marawanaru; Thomas R. Gillespie; Karen A. Terio; Tiffany M. Wolf; Dominic A. Travis, 2020-12

[Article](#)

Week 4: Climate change and noncommunicable diseases (8 items)

Climate change is also a driving force for noncommunicable diseases like cardiovascular diseases, cancers, and chronic respiratory diseases. In this seminar we'll discuss how environmental issues are influencing the risk of NCDs.

Traveling with Sugar by Amy Moran-Thomas - Paper

[Book](#) | **Essential** | Read the three chapters in PART ONE: CONTEXTS: 1. Approach; 2. Past Is Prologue; 3. What Is Communicable?

Environmental risks and non-communicable diseases - in BMJ, by Annette Prüss-Ustün; Emilie van Deventer; Pierpaolo Mudu; Diarmid Campbell-Lendrum; Carolyn Vickers; Ivan Ivanov; Francesco Forastiere; Sophie Gumy; Carlos Dora; Heather Adair-Rohani; Maria Neira, 2019-01-28

Article

"I Feel Suffocated:" Understandings of Climate Change in an Inner City Heat Island - in Medical Anthropology, by Merrill Singer; Jose Hasemann; Abigail Raynor, 2016-11

Article

Global warming and the political ecology of health: emerging crises and systemic solutions, by Hans A. Baer; Merrill Singer, ©2009

Book

Introduction - in Global warming and the political ecology of health: emerging crises and systemic solutions, c2009

Chapter

Climate change and cardiovascular disease: implications for global health - in Nature Reviews Cardiology, by Haitham Khraishah; Barrak Alahmad; Robert L. Ostergard; Abdelrahman AlAshqar; Mazen Albaghdadi; Nirupama Vellanki; Mohammed M. Chowdhury; Sadeer G. Al-Kindi; Antonella Zanobetti; Antonio Gasparrini; Sanjay Rajagopalan, 2022-12

Article

Cancer and Ongoing Climate Change: Who Are the Most Affected? - in ACS Environmental Au, by Pei Yu; Rongbin Xu; Zhengyu Yang; Tingting Ye; Yanming Liu; Shanshan Li; Michael J Abramson; Michael Kimlin; Yuming Guo, 2023-01-18

Article

Cancer and climate change - in The Lancet Oncology, by Robert A Hiatt; Naomi Beyeler, 2020-11

Article

Week 5 - No class

Week 6 - No class

Week 7 Climate change and mental health (11 items)

This week we'll continue to look at the impact of climate change on NCDs, with a special focus on mental health.

Absorbing pressure: Bodily 'tension' in a changing Himalayan world - Developing Economics

Webpage | Essential

Emotional healing as part of environmental and climate justice processes: Frameworks and community-based experiences in times of environmental suffering - in Political Geography, by Marien González-Hidalgo; Daniela Del Bene; Irene Iniesta-Arandia; Concepción Piñeiro, 2022-10

Article | Essential

Eco-psychology: a critical paradigm in the climate emergency - in Australian Psychologist, by Paul Rhodes; James Dunk, 2023-05-04

[Article](#) | [Essential](#)

'Solastalgia' : a new concept in health and identity

[Article](#)

The impact of climate change on youth depression and mental health - in The Lancet Planetary Health, by Haris Majeed; Jonathan Lee, 2017-06

[Article](#)

Mapping the legal foundations of planetary mental health - in Global Mental Health, by Eric C. Ip; Daisy Cheung, 2022

[Article](#)

Public mental health and anthropology: An ecological approach - in Oxford textbook of public mental health, by Joshua Moses; Rob Whitley, edited by Dinesh Bhugra, 2018

[Chapter](#)

Ecological Emotion Research Lab

[Website](#)

Mental Health Impacts - in Climate change and public health, by Thomas J Doherty, edited by Barry S. Levy; Jonathan Patz, 2015

[Chapter](#)

What mental health professionals and organisations should do to address climate change - in BJPsych Bulletin, by Adam Monsell; Jacob Krzanowski; Lisa Page; Sharon Cuthbert; Guy Harvey, 2021-08

[Article](#)

The role of mental health professionals in the climate crisis: an urgent call to action - in International Review of Psychiatry, by Ching Li; Emma L. Lawrance; Gareth Morgan; Richard Brown; Natalie Greaves; Jacob Krzanowski; Sophie Samuel; Renzo R. Guinto; Gary Belkin, 2022-07-04

[Article](#)

Week 8. Food, Water, and Scarcity (4 items)

Food and water security are some of the greatest challenges facing humans in the Anthropocene. They also have a direct and profound impact on planetary health. In this seminar, we will examine the social and cultural context contributing to food and water (in)security, drawing on insights from anthropological research.

Food, Water, and Scarcity - in Current Anthropology, by Amber Wutich; Alexandra Brewis, 2014-08

[Article](#) | [Essential](#)

Misreading the Bengal Delta: climate change, development, and livelihoods in coastal Bangladesh, by Camelia Dewan, 2021

[Book](#) | [Essential](#) | Read Chapter 5 and the Conclusion chapter.

ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO THE GLOBAL FOOD CRISIS: UNDERSTANDING AND ADDRESSING THE “SILENT TSUNAMI” - in NAPA Bulletin, by David Himmelgreen; Nancy Romero-Daza, 2009-12-01

Article

Water Security in Africa in the Age of Global Climate Change - in Daedalus, by Allen Isaacman; Muchaparara Musemwa, 2021-10-01

Article

Week 9. Pollution and toxic exposure (8 items)

The health ramifications of environmental pollution is clear, yet in reality it is very difficult to prove that a health condition, be it cancer or multiple chemical sensitivity, is a direct result of pollution or toxic exposure. This seminar focuses on the politics and slow violence of pollution, and the promise and limitation of environmental justice.

Introduction to special issue: “Scaled ethnographies of toxic flows” - in Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space, by Camelia Dewan; Elizabeth A Sibilia, 2024-02

Article | Essential

Living in a Toxic World | Annual Reviews

Webpage | Essential

“Swimming in Poison”: Reimagining Endocrine Disruption through China’s Environmental Hormones

Article

Slow violence and the environmentalism of the poor, by Rob Nixon, 2011

Book

The art of unnoticing - in American Ethnologist, by LORETTA IENG TAK LOU, 2022-09-17

Article

An Anthropology of ‘Cancer Villages’: villagers' perspectives and the politics of responsibility - in Journal of Contemporary China, by Anna Lora-Wainwright, 2010-01

Article

Everyday exposure: indigenous mobilization and environmental justice in Canada's chemical valley, by Sarah Marie Wiebe, 2016

Book

Prosperous Pollutants: Bargaining with Risks and Forging Hopes in an Industrial Town in Eastern Serbia - in Ethnos, by Deana Jovanović, 2018-05-27

Article