AN INTRODUCTION TO HEALTH GEOGRAPHY

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OBJECTIVES

• Explore how definitions of health lead us to consider the influence of our social and physical environments
• Consider how core geographic tools can be used to understand health
• Examine some ways geographers study health
...What is it?

- “A state of complete physical, mental, and social, well-being” (World Health Organization, 1957)

- “A resource for everyday living that allows us to cope with, manage, and even change our environments” (Epp, 1986)

Absence of health easier to detect than health itself...

How do we measure poor health?

- Mortality
  - Crude Death Rate
  - Infant Mortality
  - Age standardized
- Morbidity
  - Incidence and prevalence
  - Chronic and acute
  - Infectious
HEALTH

Source: Canadians in Context, Statistics Canada
Retrieved from: http://well-being.esdc.gc.ca/misme-iowb/d.4m.1.3n-eng.jsp?id=6

Life Expectancy:
- Number of years a person could expect to live, given age-specific mortality rates

Health adjusted life expectancy:
- Number of years a person could expect to live in good health if current mortality and morbidity rates persist
HEALTH

• Perceived health
  • Indicator of overall health status
  • Rated on a scale

• How do you think this might have changed since 2008?

HEALTH

• Health is constructed
  • Disease ≠ illness
    • Can feel unwell without a detectable “abnormality”
      • E.g., chronic fatigue
  • Impairment ≠ disability
    • “socially and culturally constructed form of exclusion” (Gatrell & Elliot, 2014: 9)
HEALTH GEOGRAPHY

“Our health and our geographies are inextricably linked”
(Gatrell & Elliot, 2014: 5)
- E.g., Access to resources
- E.g., Health care
- E.g., Hazardous wastes/environmental contamination

HEALTH INEQUALITIES

- “As social scientists we need to understand the reasons for these huge disparities, and as concerned citizens we (you) need to do something about them?” (Gatrell & Elliot, 2015: 126)

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HEALTH INEQUALITIES

“In the past 15 years, the gap in life expectancy between First Nations and other Manitobans has widened to 11 years. First Nations women live on average to age 72, compared to the rest of Manitoba women, who live to age 83. First Nations men live on average to age 68, while the rest of Manitoba men live to age 79, on average.”

HEALTH GEOGRAPHY

Geographic tools for health research:
1) Scale
2) Location
3) Distance
4) Borders
5) Distance
6) Time
7) Environment
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Scale
- Helps us to zoom in and out
- See processes as nested or interconnected

Location
- A fixed point or geographic area on the earth’s surface
  - (e.g., grid reference, postal code)
- What we mean by location depends on scale
- Not charged with meaning
...E.G., JOHN SNOW

John Snow’s Map of Cholera Cases

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**Distance**: Relates one location or place to another

- Euclidean distance
- Travel time/cost
- Cognitive distance
- Social distance
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Place: A segment of space combining location, locale, and sense of place (Cresswell, 2013)

Location: R7A 6A9

Locale: School

SOP: Home away from home

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• Place is different from space
  • e.g., a house is a space and a home is a place
HEALTH GEOGRAPHY

- Therapeutic landscapes are places that have achieved a lasting reputation for providing physical, mental, and spiritual healing.

Borders

- Lines that signify limits or discontinuities in space (Popezuc, 2010).
  - Political/jurisdictional
  - Professional
  - Cultural
  - Geographical

E.g., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fuEuP0C6go

Giesbrecht et al., 2016
HEALTH GEOGRAPHY

**e.g., Borders**

“Patients should go where they’re best treated and most effectively treated. Most times for acute injuries, that’s the closest centre and that’s Winnipeg for most centres in northwestern Ontario.”


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HEALTH GEOGRAPHY

**Time**

- “Places may be good or bad for health at different times” (Gatrell & Elliott, 2014: 14)
  - E.g., SAD
  - E.g., Walk in hours
HEALTH GEOGRAPHY

Environment
• Built environment
• Climate
• Geology

E.G., POPULATION AGING

• Health geographers ask:
  • What care is needed;
  • Where to locate care;
  • How to deliver care;
  • Who should provide care?
...E.G., SMOKING BANS

- Explore the role of social, cultural, and physical environments on compliance with legislation (Ritchie et al., 2010)

...E.G., EXERCISE EXPERIENCES

- Examine the role of physical features in supporting or limiting exercise
  - Natural beauty
  - Restrooms
  - Water fountains
  - Safety?

Krenichyn, 2006
SUMMING UP

Health geography can...

• Provide us with tools to explore what makes people and places healthy
• Identify the relationships between larger scale political and economic processes and individual/population health
• Inform policy and programming
• Uncover spatial and social injustices that need to change.