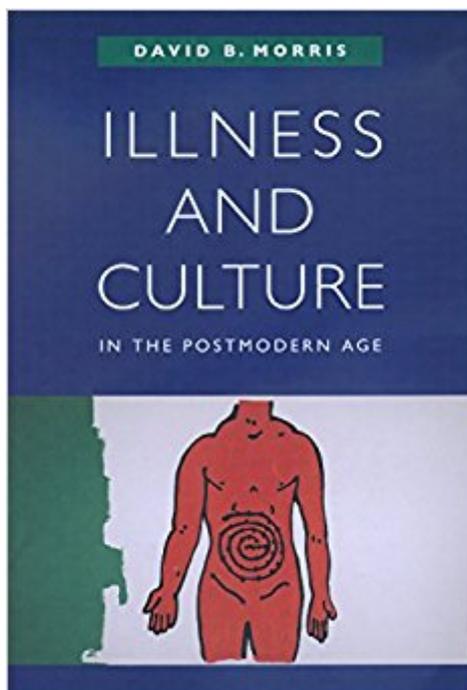


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# Illness And Culture In The Postmodern Age



## Synopsis

We become ill in ways our parents and grandparents did not, with diseases unheard of and treatments undreamed of by them. Illness has changed in the postmodern era—roughly the period since World War II—as dramatically as technology, transportation, and the texture of everyday life. Exploring these changes, David B. Morris tells the fascinating story, or stories, of what goes into making the postmodern experience of illness different, perhaps unique. Even as he decries the overuse and misuse of the term "postmodern," Morris shows how brightly ideas of illness, health, and postmodernism illuminate one another in late-twentieth-century culture. Modern medicine traditionally separates disease—an objectively verified disorder—from illness—a patient's subjective experience. Postmodern medicine, Morris says, can make no such clean distinction; instead, it demands a biocultural model, situating illness at the crossroads of biology and culture. Maladies such as chronic fatigue syndrome and post-traumatic stress disorder signal our awareness that there are biocultural ways of being sick. The biocultural vision of illness not only blurs old boundaries but also offers a new and infinitely promising arena for investigating both biology and culture. In many ways *Illness and Culture in the Postmodern Age* leads us to understand our experience of the world differently.

## Book Information

Paperback: 360 pages

Publisher: University of California Press; New Ed edition (August 7, 2000)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0520226895

ISBN-13: 978-0520226890

Product Dimensions: 6.1 x 0.9 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 1 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.0 out of 5 stars 3 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #238,160 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #13 in Books > Textbooks >

Medicine & Health Sciences > Medicine > Special Topics > Essays #115 in Books > Textbooks >

Medicine & Health Sciences > Medicine > Special Topics > History #142 in Books > Textbooks >

Medicine & Health Sciences > Medicine > Clinical > Diseases

## Customer Reviews

Our minds live in particular bodies, of course -- hence the psychologically shaping influence of biology, as sickness soon enough reminds us. The onset of a disease gives us plenty of opportunity

for thought, and in no time, rather often, we are a source of worry for some and of shame for others, depending on what ails us and where we happen to live. In a sense, then, genes, viruses, or bacteria, for all their decisive say in who gets what disease, have only so much of a hold on things. The families to which we belong and the neighborhoods or nations in which we live exert their influence on us not only as patients but also as persons who learn to accommodate ourselves to certain cultural (and religious) norms -- the values, ideals, practices, and preferences that inform the world we call our own. None of the foregoing is all that surprising; it is the stuff of common sense. Even so, this book by an essayist who has observed modern medical life deserves respectful attention. David Morris has already (in *The Culture of Pain*; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991) tried to link a universal aspect of medicine to certain historical and cultural circumstances through literature and art, as he does here again; indeed, this book's title announces his intellectual intent, and his discussion of pain helps him approach his essential subject matter -- the way in which a person's place in life and his or her beliefs, hopes, and worries all come to bear on what pain does, how it is interpreted and handled, and what the consequences are. Pain "is more than a medical issue," he insists, "and more than a matter of nerves and transmitters." Here, and throughout this book, Morris takes on what he terms, with no admiration, "the mechanistic biomedical model." Morris calls on a most persuasive and prominent witness, the novelist Reynolds Price, whose struggle with a tumor of the spinal cord prompted not only a search for medical care but also a deeply felt search within himself, an intense scrutiny of his life, its purpose, and its meaning. To Morris, Price is a hero, his look inward and outward a kind of transcendence. By implication, Price's doctors, and many others, fell far short of such an achievement, wedded as they were to an insistence on understanding this or that illness physiologically or anatomically, with little or no concomitant interest in trying to know the afflicted person and trying to figure out what has happened to him or her in mind, in spirit, in manner of living and working, and in outlook on life. Not that most clinicians need to be reminded that a changed mental state is an aspect of clinical duress. Many diseases certainly prompt melancholy stories that started after cells began to run amok or viruses became destructive, even lethal, invaders of a body. We are, of course, asked to keep in mind black-lung disease and malaria, illnesses that make the book's point, that occur as a result of a certain kind of lifestyle: work done here, travel undertaken there -- culture as a determinant of illness and of the character of illness, its manner of expression. A chapter titled "Neurobiology and the Obscene" delves into that subject: "In coprolalia, we confront not just a neurological disorder such as uncontrolled twitching but a mobilization of the complex cultural resource called obscenity." So it went in the 19th century for workers who got mercury poisoning while making hats. They were

plagued by tremors and twitches and were viewed as odd and crazy because of their speech. Hence the phrase "mad as a hatter" -- a vernacular and intuitive expression that exemplifies the author's point. In our time, other troubles come to some of us, and they, too, tell of us -- illness as telltale evidence of life in society and of values that prompt behavior that in the long run becomes exceedingly hurtful to a body, to health. Morris cites a historian who reminds us that "an epidemic such as AIDS could not have occurred before the mingling of races, before the liberalization of sexual mores, and, above all, before medicine had controlled serious infectious diseases and introduced both intravenous injections and blood transfusions." Nor is anorexia nervosa without a decided connection to our modern era -- what the author calls "the biology of self-starvation." It is a consequence of culture (advertising on television and in magazines) come to bear on human desire and, literally, appetite: it is better to abstain forthrightly than to appear "heavy," even if one risks dying. There are fine moments in this book -- when, for instance, Morris calls on the poets Wallace Stevens and Dante or when he evokes our gadget-filled world (computers, the Internet, television) and indicates our susceptibility to it as well as to germs. Even heart disease and cancer can be prompted by that world and by the activities and habits of consumption it urges on us. It is well for us doctors to be aware of these effects, but at moments, alas, we learn that our failures of clarity or vision are shared by others. "Every utterance constitutes a miniature text," Morris tells us, "and Jacques Derrida makes the crucial point when he writes that `there is no genreless text.'" Other such murky theoretical flourishes from French writers (Foucault appears frequently) supply ironic evidence that culture can shape not only the way we act and feel while we are sick, but also how we think and, worst of all, how we talk and write. Reviewed by Robert Coles, M.D.

"Morris [has authored] a highly readable study of the context of how we hurt."--"GQ

Illness and Culture in the Postmodern Age  
Reviewer: Veronica S. Albin from Houston, TX USA  
I used Illness and Culture in the Postmodern Age for the first time this semester as a text book for Spanish 307 (The Language and Culture of Medicine and Health Care) at Rice University in Houston, TX. Most of the students enrolled in this advanced Spanish course are juniors and seniors headed for the top medical schools in the country. My students' response to the book was overwhelmingly positive. Their one complaint about it was that sometimes Morris required pages and pages to make a point and that by the time the point was made, the reader was fairly tired. Nonetheless, they unanimously labeled it as one of the most provocative books they had ever read, and that by having read it, they were now able to see the negative side of the biomedical model and the positive side of

a biocultural model. *Illness and Culture* proved to be so rich in topics that all 35 students found not one but several topics that were of personal interest to them. Student athletes, for example, most of them headed to Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, or to Sports Medicine, found the section on how the American fixation on sports and exercise backfired and instead of improving health, brought more medical problems to our society (ACL tears, stress fractures, tennis elbow, heat stroke, etc.) Students who have an interest in art were fascinated by the connections Morris establishes to the experience of illness. Those interested in literature found the sections on narrative outstanding. The chapter on suffering truly moved students in light of the recent events of September 11 and got them thinking about the suffering of others, not just our own. Students interested in linguistics and neuroscience were fascinated by Morris' chapter on the obscene and Tourette's syndrome. And, of course, the threat of bioterrorism was in everyone's mind and Morris' treatment of the subject proved to be highly stimulating. I start the course by telling my students that they need to write smart and different med school application essays in order to stand out. When I first ask them what they are going to write about, their answers are thoroughly predictable: they love medicine, love humankind, they believe in altruism, they want to study medicine because as good Christians, Jews, Muslims, etc., they want to relieve suffering. After reading *Illness and Culture*, my students no longer have good answers to my "what are you going to write about" question, for they realize that there are very few answers to most of Morris' provocative questions... and perhaps there are none. Instead they have a myriad intriguing thoughts and questions buzzing through their minds. And intriguing thoughts, without a doubt, are much better stimulants than boilerplate answers for writing intelligent med school application essays. Questions, in fact, make us better thinkers, they make us participate in human affairs. Questions stop us from being mere bystanders in this difficult postmodern world of ours. Trying to solve what seem to be paradoxes, dilemmas, inconsistencies is, after all, what makes us human. In short, David B. Morris has helped open the eyes of 35 extremely bright students at one of our country's top universities this term, and I plan to keep on using his book in the years to come.

Vero Albin  
Hispanic and Classical Studies  
Rice University

Nice and valuable. I have owned many knives over the years, but this is the first real "bread product that I have ever owned. I really like the construction and design. It works exactly as advertised. I have used it on bread and tomatoes and it did the job perfectly well. I would recommend this product to anyone who needs a quality bread product." very kind and the best seller. fast and in time.. jimmy love it ,

In this self-important, boringly long, intellectually dishonest solipistic monologue, Morris manages to parade a litany of postmodern politically correct sacred cows. However, his central thesis that western medicine distinguishes disease as objective and illness as subjective is patently wrong as recourse to any medical dictionary will reveal. This is just the first of his outright disinformation, exaggerations, and many false strawmen that he creates in nothing less than a frontal assault on western medicine that is full of ill-will and a transparent invitation for postmodern gurus to take over as self-appointed high priests of a deconstructed medicine. Morris kindly allows a small role for a properly humbled and subservient science and the remaining carcass of medicine as we know it. This is an anti-science, anti-medicine, anti-western, anti-rational diatribe that is supposedly an argument for a new biocultural theory to supplant western medicine. It is rambling, tangential, and plays fast and loose with facts. It is another chapter in the effort of postmodernists to construct a worldview in which the mantra is "culture uber alles," not by any rational argument but by simple repetitive assertion intermixed with false strawmen in an effort to deceptively prop up their nihilism while viciously deconstructing anything that gets in the way of their imperialistic jihad against anything that is western or caucasian (or at least male caucasian). This book confirms my worst fears about postmodernism. It will appeal to that cadre of perpetual toddlers who masquerade as quasi-intellectuals but are intent on destroying culture by declaring everything as culture and political, and thus returning us to the primeval jungle. Unfortunately it may appeal also to those who are vulnerable to the chic attack of postmodernists. However, any informed critique will reveal that debunking Morris is so easy that it is not even sport. It is like shooting fish in a barrel -- red herrings to be exact. If anyone buys this book they should carefully examine the facts and argument that Morris makes, but I would not recommend that anyone buy it.

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