Child Growth as a Window onto Society: Case Studies in the Social Determinants of Health

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Major national and global health organizations are increasing their focus on the social determinants of health, both at home and abroad. The World Health Organization, the National Institutes of Health, and the Centers for Disease Control are all arguing for developing a greater understanding of the multiple correlates and causes of poor health, particularly health disparities across the social, ethnic and geographical landscapes. This perspective is not new to anthropology, and anthropologists have much to contribute to this understanding through collaborative research that takes into account the diversity and complexity of environments in which health is facilitated or constrained. In this paper, I offer two examples of anthropological fieldwork, one complete (Appalachian Kentucky) and one on-going (Zambia, Africa) which shed light on the ways in which social relations shape human environments and human/environment interactions, with resulting short-term consequences for children’s growth and nutritional status, and possible long-term consequences for adult health.

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