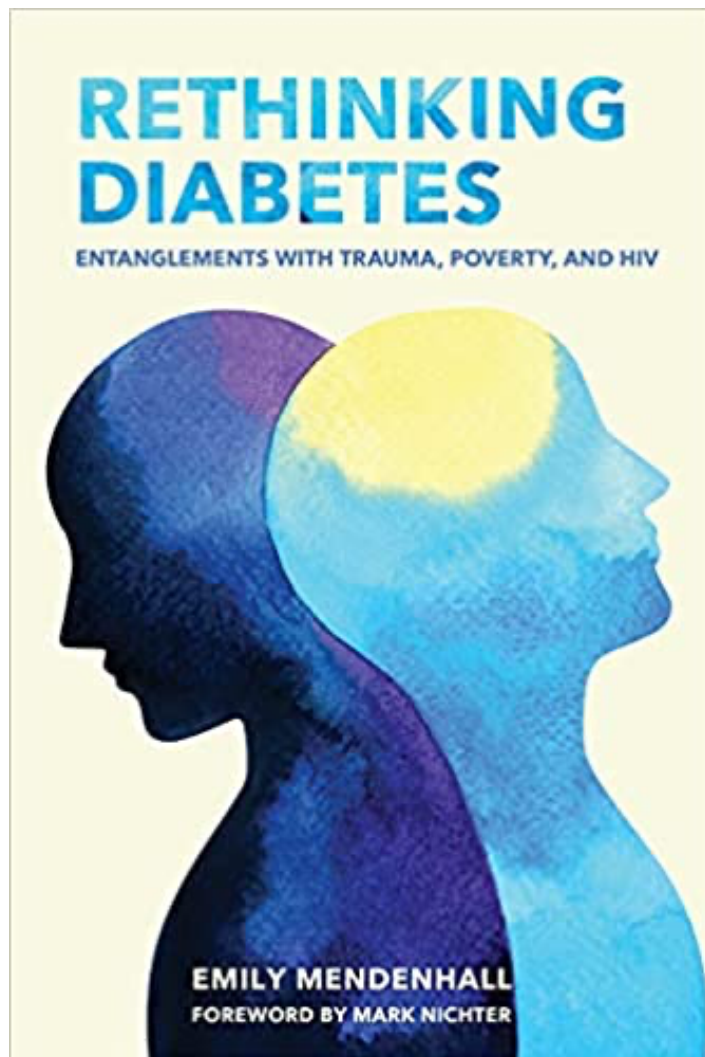


Book Review: Rethinking Diabetes: Entanglements with Trauma, Poverty, and HIV

By: Emily Mendenhall, Cornell University Press. 2019. ISBN: 9781501738432. \$125.00 (Print).
Reviewed by Elisha R. Oliver, Oklahoma State University-OKC.



Diabetes is a chronic disease resulting from insulin secretion deficiencies or insulin resistance (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022)¹. In 2021, the International Diabetes Federation estimated that there were approximately 537 million diabetic patients (International Diabetes Federation, 2022)², and this number continues to climb. The growing increase in the number of individuals with diabetes have lent significant importance to diabetes-related research practices and procedures.

Employing diverse research methods, researchers across an array of disciplines most commonly explore diabetes using biomedical nosology. Because “there is no one size fits all biomedical approach to treating diabetes (p. ix-x),” in *Rethinking Diabetes*, Mendenhall departs from traditional medical research frameworks and utilizes a mixed-methods approach to disentangle conceptions and understandings of diabetes as a disease of complexity. Against this backdrop, it is important to examine diabetic entanglements within the context of ethnographic writing, which may be viewed as an entry point into a deep examination of diabetes within frameworks of trauma, poverty, and HIV as presented in the case studies in *Rethinking Diabetes*.

Structurally vulnerable and displaced populations are often subjected to intergenerational and sustained trauma. In the case studies, presented in this book under review, diabetes is most often experienced within the context of forms of social suffering coupled with obesogenic environments and “commerciogenic products (xi).” In her book, “*Rethinking Diabetes: Entanglements with Trauma, Poverty, and HIV*,” Dr. Mendenhall’s central argument is that, while diabetes is a disease of comorbidity and multimorbidity, it is also a disease of syndemics framed by ecosocial and cultural contexts.

Dr. Mendenhall is a medical anthropologist and professor in the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University. Her book “*Rethinking Diabetes: Entanglements with*

¹ Center for Disease Control and Prevention. (2022 April 21). *Diabetes*. Center for Disease Control. <https://www.cdc.gov/diabetes/index.html>

² International Diabetes Federation. (2022 April 21). *Facts and Figures*. International Diabetes Federation. <https://www.idf.org/aboutdiabetes/what-is-diabetes/facts-figures.html>

Trauma, Poverty, and HIV provides a cross-cultural and geographical series of ethnographic case studies of populations affected by diabetes, diverse intrapersonal and interpersonal traumas, economic insecurities, HIV, and cultural enactments of diabetes and HIV. Mendenhall systematically and logically structures the case studies in her book in a way that positions diabetes experiences within place and space, focusing on social suffering and illness enactments. The positioning broadens to include narratives “as a central orienting tool (p. 13),” adding to the complexity of her book. Notably, Mendenhall’s book reveals the importance of the narrative within medical anthropology, particularly, the study of chronic illnesses, the importance of researcher reflexivity and positionality, and the use of mixed methods to generate a theory of syndemic suffering. She organizes her book “around two major focal points—the material and the subjective—which illustrate how diabetes is organized within and across societies and how it becomes embodied in individual narratives (131).”

To conduct her research, Dr. Mendenhall employs narrative collection, interviewing, administering surveys, scales, and questionnaires, and training research assistants to conduct multi-step interviews and administer mental health inventories. Mendenhall suggests the comparative data collected using mixed methodologies “open up opportunities to think about how intersectionalities of gender, class, social trauma, negative emotion, and chronicity become embodied in health and illness (p. 17).” As mentioned earlier in the review, Mendenhall’s methodology aids in the framing of her work using syndemic theory. Demonstrated in each case study, health, health experiences and enactments, and social issues are intimately intertwined.

Dr. Mendenhall’s work draws attention to the unique and complicated challenges of experiencing HIV and diabetes. For example, the no to the low cost of ART juxtaposed with the exorbitant cost of diabetic medicines and foods add to the challenges of care-seeking, maintenance, and gendered labor. Mendenhall writes: “understanding how structural violence and poverty fundamentally transform diabetes risk in such contexts reveals not only geographic vulnerabilities but also how intertwined food, finances, stress, family and ecological livelihoods have become (Mendenhall, 2009, p. 137)” Empirically, this case study collection illustrates the entanglements and intersections of and between personal insecurities, financial inequities, and health disparities.

Mendenhall’s *“Rethinking Diabetes”* is an ethnographically rich book that draws attention to the ways in which diabetes is understood and experienced cross-culturally. The significance and impact of this book rest in Mendenhall’s propositions that: “rethinking diabetes syndemically requires that we understand how multiple latitudes of suffering become visible within the body, are enacted in lived lives, and materializes within and between communities (Mendenhall, 2009, p. 38).” Dr. Mendenhall’s book demonstrates that this is best understood through the power of storytelling as seen in the stories shared by María, Beatriz, Meena, Sibongile, and Kandace.

The inclusion of narratives coupled with qualitative data collected from various scales and surveys are the strength of this book. This is an accessible and public-facing book from which diverse audiences can benefit. Undergraduate and graduate scholars across the social sciences and health and community sciences, medical students, and professionals will find Mendenhall’s writing illuminating and thick with description.