

Book Review

Sociology for Pharmacists: An Introduction, 2nd Edition

Kevin Taylor, Sarah Nettleton and Geoffrey Harding (eds), ISBN 0 41527 487 7, 2003, Taylor and Francis, London.

“On being introduced to sociology” Kevin Taylor and his co-authors Sarah Nettleton and Geoffrey Harding remark, students often assume that it is *“soft, vague, undisciplined and on occasions pretentious”*. *“But”*, they continue, *“this disregards the fact that sociology is a coherent discipline...(it) is a science, generating and testing hypotheses, rigorously applying robust methods of empirical investigation.”*

Taylor, Nettleton and Harding subsequently describe selected sociological concepts such as C. Wright Mills’ *“sociological imagination”*, which relates to understanding illnesses and other private troubles of individuals in the communal and historical contexts that determine their occurrence and consequences. This useful book goes on to explore topics such as public perceptions of health and illness, the evolution of pharmacy practice, professionalism and the causes of health inequalities. It also outlines social research methods.

The authors’ case that modern pharmacists need an informed awareness of phenomena like social class and other forms of social stratification, and the ways in which attempts to maintain social order can, at times, promote injustice and inefficiency rather than positive progress towards goals such as better public health, is well made. But whether or not pharmacists who develop an understanding of sociology will end up agreeing with Taylor and his colleagues that undergraduate students are wrong to suspect it of being a *“non-science”*—or historically perhaps more accurately a failed science in terms of what its early pioneers were hoping to achieve—is debatable.

The essence of much traditional pharmacy practice lies in applying *“objective”* evidence derived from the physical sciences in ways that facilitate the appropriate manufacture, supply and use of medicines. This, in practice often relies on consistently applying *“rules”* based on facts which

can, for all practical purposes be regarded as absolute. From a sociological perspective the public standing of pharmacists in the UK as *“partial professionals”*, with limited discretionary powers in relation to the medicines at the centre of their professional identity, has partly reflected their role as regulators of pharmaceutical care rather than as clinicians *per se*.

Sociological inquiry, by contrast, often serves to underline the relativity of social facts, and the shifting nature and plurality of experienced social *“truth”*. The gulf between the contrasting world views that are embodied in pharmacy’s past on the one hand and current sociological reflection on the other should not be under-estimated. The fact that there is a perceived need for a special interpretation of sociology for students of their profession could be, to a degree, an indicator of its depth.

Even when compared with other human sciences, such as psychology and economics, sociological thinking is particularly likely to challenge the mind sets often associated with activities such as ensuring the accuracy and appropriateness of dispensing. It might be that *Sociology for Pharmacists* could in future editions be further strengthened through further discussion of this and allied topics, such as why—until recently, at least—doctors and nurses may collectively have been more open in developing their sociological imaginations than pharmacists. As its authors suggest, the consequences of extending pharmacists’ roles into areas where responsiveness to service users’ varying requirements is a prime imperative (as opposed to achieving compliance with closely defined product use instructions) on the nature of pharmacy is, in this context, a key issue to explore.

As is inevitably so with introductory readers, this book offers a starting point rather than a complete overview. Tyro’s *“pharmaceutical sociologists”*

might, for example, find the subject easier to unlock if they are also provided with complementary material like that offered in publications such as Gabe, Bury and Elston's *Key Concepts in Medical Sociology*, and on websites like www.sociologyonline.co.uk.

Nevertheless, *Sociology for Pharmacists* will be of great value to readers who want to build an initial understanding of sociology as a discipline, and how it casts light on the ways in which medicines

are—and in future might be better—provided and used. Taylor, Nettleton and Harding's work hence deserves to be used widely in the education of future pharmacists.

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