Book Reviews


This concise book is meant for all those concerned with health and social research. It provides accurate scientific tools for social science research and practical suggestions for students of medicine, nursing, social work, environment and public health, sociology and anthropology. The entire gamut of the work—from the initial planning stage of research to writing it up, getting the message across, and trying to influence policy and practice—is succinctly portrayed in this book.

The author has organized the book into 12 chapters. In the introductory chapter, she clearly states the objective of the book, which is introduction of the main social science research techniques that would aid in gathering evidence about the health needs of communities for appropriate policy changes. Although there are arguments regarding the merits and demerits of qualitative and quantitative research, the author takes the position that both types of research are equally valuable and complementary.

Chapter 2 describes briefly how to plan research work. Various steps such as establishing a steering group, setting up aims, objectives and priorities, selecting appropriate methods for finding out the objectives of the research, checklists, and time-tables with examples, importance of involving the wider community and using experts and professionals for research are all dealt with.

Chapter 3 discusses collection of data. It highlights the advantage of combining qualitative and quantitative data. The definition of a variable, difference between dependent and independent variables, etc. are illustrated with examples.

Chapter 4 elucidates the importance of using secondary data and also discusses the limitations of this. Guidance is given to the reader in professionally assimilating and using secondary data. This chapter gives details of potential sources such as books, the Internet (with details of relevant international websites), newspapers and reports of governments. To complete the list, I would recommend inclusion of unpublished reports.

Chapters 5–8 cover techniques for collecting primary data. Chapter 5 presents ways of selecting respondents for a study. The cardinal criterion of defining the population for a study from the different types of demographic, institution-based and interest-based groups is vital for generalizing study findings. In most research, only an appropriate sample is taken. Different methods of sampling such as simple random sampling, stratified sampling, multi-stage sampling, cluster sampling, quota sampling, snowballing and purposive sampling are briefly explained. The appropriate sampling technique has to be decided by the researcher.

Chapter 6 is about asking questions. There is a systematic method for asking research questions. These include constructing a topic list of questionnaires and interview schedules. Less structured methods such as in-depth interviews or diaries are also described. Group discussions, focus group discussions and the difference between the two are dealt with. The importance of pilot testing a questionnaire and the points to keep in mind while conducting pilot testing are also emphasized. Observational techniques of systematic observation and listening are given in Chapter 7. The structure of observation, both overt and covert, and ethical issues related to them are also given. Visual recording and the skill needed for photography are also discussed. Chapter 8 describes some of the main tools and packages that could be used for the assessment of health needs. These include the highly specialized and structured Nottingham Health Profile, Short Form-36 and the Townsend Disability Scale. Other approaches described are priority search, the compass community profiling software package and rapid appraisal. In addition to this, the longitudinal or panel approach is mentioned. Finally, the problems of evaluative research are also discussed.

The last three chapters of the book concentrate on analysis and presentation of research findings. Chapter 9 discusses steps in processing and analysing quantitative data. Unlike previous chapters, this uses some technical terms. Univariate, bivariate and multivariate analyses are discussed briefly, with the importance of significance tests highlighted. Association among variables, correlation and regression analyses are also described. The limited information provided in this chapter is acknowledged and the need for consultation with a statistician is underscored.

Chapter 10 describes the steps in the analysis of qualitative data. The focus is on ways of transforming largely unstandardized data into texts that can be coded into concepts and categories. This involves data transcription, inspection, coding and interpretation. This chapter also suggests ways by which visual images can be analysed. Chapter 11 is about presenting the evidence. I rate this as one of the most important aspects of research and it has been appropriately and laudably dealt with. The author describes the usual format of a report (Introduction, Methods, Results and Discussion). The need for organizing the findings, keeping in mind the people for whom the report is prepared, is also discussed. The chapter gives excellent guidance on how to print the report including the font size and style. The importance of publicity, and approaching and dealing with the press are all amply explained. Finally, the implications of policy and the importance of combining the efforts of the researcher, fund providers, ministry and non-governmental organizations for appropriate policy changes based on the findings of the research are highlighted. Excellent case studies for preparing press releases are given as exercises.

The practical exercises given at the end of each chapter are extremely useful. One of the limitations of this book is that most of the examples are from developed countries. I would have been happier to see a few examples from developing countries. I would highly recommend this book to all those interested in social science research. I teach research methodology to public health students and I enjoyed reading this book enormously. The language is very simple and largely non-technical. I am sure this would be a valuable resource in the libraries of medical and social sciences schools. However, the price is on the higher side, which may restrict its use only to libraries.

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Ageing has always been associated with poverty, social isolation, chronic disease, cognitive impairment, nutritional deficiency, disability and physical dependence. Among the elderly, women generally have worse socio-economic parameters and the poor always have worse health parameters. Most developed societies responded to the health needs of older people by compartmentalizing them and adopting a disease-pathology model of health care. However, such an approach has not been economically viable and has only marginally improved the quality of life. As a result, there was a paradigm shift in health care policies for older people in recent years from the disease-pathology model to a long term developmental model. Such a model conceptualizes health in old age as the result of a process spread over the whole life and affected by several factors, most importantly the presence or absence of health-promoting actions. Health promotion has attained more significance now than ever before and in such a scenario, this book deserves attention.

Drs Keller and Fleury are registered nurses holding academic positions in university hospitals in the USA. Both have made major contributions to research in the field of cardiovascular risk factors in diverse populations.

This well researched book with 594 references has a stated objective of 'summarizing the state of the science regarding health promotion issues for older people'. It attempts to provide 'a foundation for understanding the requirements and goals as well as individual and community models that have been developed for health promotion in the elderly'. The book is targeted at clinicians who could incorporate some of the recommendations in their prescriptions and facilitate adoption of many more recommendations at the individual and community level.

The book has six chapters. In the first chapter, the age-related changes in different organ systems are described well. It also provides a detailed functional assessment schedule to detect the impairments in different systems and to distinguish between normal age-related changes and age-associated diseases. In the second chapter, health risks in older people are enumerated along with scientific evidence in their support. These include cigarette smoking, physical inactivity, falls, osteoporosis, malnutrition, risk factors for coronary heart disease, diabetes, hyperlipidaemia, menopause, depression, sleep disorders and hazards in the physical and social environment. This chapter also deals with socioeconomic and socio-cultural barriers to health promotion efforts. There is an obvious bias for cardiovascular risk factors in this chapter, partly because of greater availability of information in this area and partly due to the research interest of the authors. However, there are several other important health problems in old age such as dementia, which should have been dealt with.

The authors have devoted a full chapter to theoretical models for health promotion in older people at the individual and community level. This chapter makes interesting reading because the authors have rightly recognized the behavioural component of health promotion which is determined by education, economic status and many other unknown psychological factors. Issues dealt with here are complex and the authors have not been completely successful in providing a clear concept.

In the fourth chapter, the authors have detailed health promotion interventions for smoking, physical activity, nutrition, stress management, cardiovascular risk, depression and social network-
of the brave new world was ‘less government’. It was somewhat effective, especially because of the failure of the socialist experiment in the then Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. The NHS was a major target, and a so-called market model was created.

In actual practice, the less-privileged were badly affected. In less than two decades, the political project of Thatcherism was on the wane. Whether the so-called ‘New Left’ represented by Tony Blair has the will and the vision to provide a new path towards the ideal of a caring society which is sustainable is still to be seen, but the portents are not good.

The book under review is an attempt to understand the changes in health and social care in the UK in the last few years. It is a collection of 37 essays, loosely connected by the theme of various changes in health and social care. The quality of the essays are widely disparate; some are scholarly perspectives, while others have a strongly anecdotal flavour, and still others are very context-specific management techniques. Apparently, the book is a text for a course of the Open University in the UK. The wide range of essays may be useful in a course. The book is extremely interesting as a mirror of the vicissitudes of health care in general and nurses, social workers and occupational therapists in particular in the UK in the post-war years. It is very skimpy as regards the experience of doctors. For us in India, who have never seen anything more than lip-service towards the creation of a universally accessible, high quality medical and social care, the kind of services available in the UK even in the era of Thatcher appear unimaginable. It is inspiring to remember that it can be achieved. A major shortcoming of the book is that having sketched the problem, it offers no perspectives for the future, except for techno-managerial ones like reflective practice. And this is why, in the end, the book is disappointing.

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The World Bank has emerged as the leading financier of health programmes in developing countries, disbursing over US$ 9 billion in loans to the health sector in these countries over the last decade. India is the Bank’s single largest borrower, with outstanding loans of about US$ 34 billion (for all sectors). It is not surprising, therefore, that the institution has generated considerable controversy in India and in other developing countries. The stated priorities of the Bank’s assistance include: improving the health, nutrition, and population (HNP) outcomes of the poor in the world; enhancing the performance of health care systems (by promoting equitable access and use of affordable, effective and well-managed services); and securing sustainable health care financing by mobilizing resources, and by effective control over private and public expenditure. Certain policies of the Bank have attracted scathing criticism. These include the ‘forcible’ implementation of structural adjustment, its recommendations of user fees, and the use of disability-adjusted life years (DALYs) for implementation of cost-effective health care.

This book is the product of a series of papers presented at a national seminar organized by the Centre of Social Medicine at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi in 1994. Eminent scholars and experts debated the weaknesses of the Bank’s World Development Report—1993 (WDR-93), and highlighted the negative effects of structural adjustment policies (including restraints on public expenditure, cost recovery, defining essential clinical packages, shifting curative care to the private sector, etc.). The book is organized into 15 chapters, each written by an expert in the field. The text encompasses the entire gamut of health policy implications of the WDR-93, ranging from a detailed discussion of the history of health care in India, the impact of structural adjustment on welfare state philosophy, on primary health care, on the pharmaceutical industry, on privatization of health services, on the environment, and the gender implications of the report. The myths of an efficient and accountable private sector in contrast to an inefficient public sector are espoused.

The strengths of the book include its expert authors, the well-written and scholarly text, and comprehensive discussion (rather, criticism) of each aspect of the WDR-93. Chapters by Drs Shiva Kumar, Imran Qadeer, and late T.N. Krishnan are outstanding.

The principal weakness of the book lies in its presentation of a one-sided view of the World Bank and the WDR-93. While I agree with the criticism of the World Bank (and the WDR-93) on several counts, and there is every reason to question the evidence base for and the sustainability of the Bank’s HNP policies, it is unfair to characterize the WDR-93 as an example of a cleverly crafted display of concern for the deteriorating health of the world’s poor by the same institution which serves the vested interests of western governments and multinational corporations who, in their frantic search for the material resources of the entire planet, have reduced the majority of its human populace to a state of abject poverty (Chapter 13, Antia).

The World Bank is a powerful player in international health and its approach has undergone periodic changes. It has tried recently to be sensitive to the views of its clients, distanced itself from unpopular policies (such as user fees), recruited staff from its potential critics (such as the World Health Organization), has explicitly stated that reduction of poverty is its primary goal and acknowledged that improving health care and other services is an important aspect of reducing poverty. It would have been desirable to present an alternative perspective, so to say, perhaps by inviting a commentary by a World Bank official, either as a prologue, or an epilogue of the book. Perhaps that would have been a challenge for the authors, and may have distracted from its central uniform theme. I would recommend that interested readers also study a series of six articles by Kamran Abbasi (BMJ, 1999) that present a more balanced and contemporary view of the World Bank (in my opinion).

This book will be useful for students of health policy, international health, health systems research, and development studies. The paperback edition is affordable, and attractively presented.

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