

## Book reviews

### **Improving the Health of the Nation. The Failure of the Government's Health Reforms.**

By Colin Francome & David Marks. Pp. 310. (Middlesex University Press, London, 1996.)

This book is published at a time when the legitimacy of 17 years of Conservative Party rule in Britain is being questioned by more people than at any other time. Given the importance of the British National Health Service (NHS) to politicians and people alike, it is impossible to read this book with detachment from the ideologies that are driving the changes to this system. The authors have a clear position with respect to the NHS: they are strongly opposed to its steady dismantling in the name of free market economics and promises of improved efficiencies in service. In 1990, the NHS Act passed by Parliament promised the greatest reform of the NHS since its inception. In a steady, reasoned account, the authors describe the state of health care prior to 1990, briefly state the ideas lying behind the 1990 NHS Act, and evaluate the effects of this policy change on measurable health indicators.

This critical evaluation examines the ways in which the drive for increased efficiency has increased stress and dangerous practice, and the ways in which the promise of improved care has usually fallen foul of severe under-resourcing. After considering the general effects of the government's changes, based on the authors' own surveys of general practitioners' perceptions of change in their experience of health care provision, they turn to the management of a number of important medical conditions. These are the focus of the government's five target areas for health change, and include coronary heart disease and strokes, cancer morbidity, mental health, HIV infection, sexually transmitted diseases, and accidents. A further chapter considers areas of health outside the government's targets, focusing on orthopaedics and nephrology. In nearly all areas, the authors point to a decline in service. Previously published data from a variety of sources are used in the authors' evaluations and included in the text of this volume. This makes it rather more interesting and useful than the now frequent statistically-unsupported criticisms of government that one gets accustomed to. The authors are constructive as well as critical, and each chapter ends with recommendations for improvement. In the final chapter, the authors elaborate a framework for health improvement in Britain, concentrating largely on egalitarian measures which might reduce the social disparities which are in large part associated with increased health risk among the poorer sectors of society.

This book is a good read; I recommend it to all those interested in the state of health among the British population, especially health care professionals, regardless of level of seniority.

STANLEY J. ULJASZEK

**The Human Biology of the English Village.** By G. A. Harrison (with a chapter by G. W. Lasker). Pp. 147. (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1995.) £39.50.

This book provides a concise summary, clearly written by the principal investigator, of many studies on the Oxfordshire villages research project already published as journal articles and chapters. An advantage of the book is Harrison's relatively informal style of presentation and his attempt to cut through the seeming complexity of the findings to the main conclusions. Of course, this same style often leads the critical reader to many unanswered questions about concrete detail in technique of measurement, sampling and design, and alternative interpretations considered but ultimately rejected by the researchers. The solution to this problem would appear to be to read the original papers cited in Harrison's individual chapters. None the less the book stands as an excellent introduction to the variety of studies on selected aspects of the biosocial context of everyday life in contemporary English villages.

Harrison starts with a crisply written introduction about human population biology and a rationale for studying health and well-being in a social environmental context. This first chapter also describes the outline of the research project, the geographic sampling of the villages in the Otmoor region, the phases of the research, and the scientific personnel involved. He includes a brief discussion of the representativeness and potential bias of the study sample for English villages as the population.

Chapter 2 describes the demographic changes over several centuries in the villages based on parish vital records. Harrison explicates the influence of regional, national and global economic, political and historical events, and concludes that the study villages appear similar to other English villages through time. Occupational structure is described in the third chapter, and Harrison here begins to delineate the effects of immigration and economic development on occupations through time. Chapter 4 continues the demographic description with a detailed consideration of exogamy and marital distances, but introduces the importance of social class, social mobility and immigration in understanding the human population biology of Oxfordshire villages. He concludes that 'shared ancestry' is not different between social classes or residential parishes.

Chapter 5 offers a test of this conclusion using standard blood group genetics. There appear to be no genetic differences by social class, although there were suggestive clusters of the top two and the bottom two social classes. Spatial effects could be detected. This chapter also introduces IQ and Harrison frankly and sensitively explains his and others' efforts to exploit the IQ data for evidence of its relation to social class mobility and immigration. In fact IQ is different by social class (assessed by occupation, or husband's occupation) and interrelates with immigration. The next chapter presents limited supportive evidence for spouse concordance in several biological and behavioural traits, even after adjusting for the effects of social class. Spouse concordance is only present in those born outside the Otmoor area.

Most interestingly chapter 6 continues with the presentation of the interrelations among IQ, social class and mobility and immigration. Harrison presents clearly the evidence that indicates that higher IQ is causally related to upward social mobility (in the occupational hierarchy). He concludes with a cautious, and to this reviewer, wise, agnosticism about the role of genes in IQ.

Chapter 7 pertains to the most recent studies in the project, on sleep and catecholamine excretion in the villagers. The important biological and behavioural influences on these patterns are presented, such as caffeine intake, cigarette smoking, job demands, and self-reports of satisfaction, frustration and fatigue. Chapter 8 presents the findings of self-reported health, including missed work days, existing diagnoses, and perceived health and emotional and psychological items. Harrison is cautious in interpreting these last findings, and admits that the cross-sectional design does not permit causal inferences between self-reported symptoms and self-reported illness. It is not fair to criticise research for what was not done, but it is unfortunate that no biological health information was collected, for it would have been interesting to see the relations among catecholamine excretion, self-reported health, etc, and key metabolic, immunologic and cardiovascular factors.

Due to the brevity and sometimes almost discursive nature of the book, certain details are lacking which detract from understanding the studies described. Age ranges, sample sizes, psychometric estimators of certain measures, conceptual justifications and key assumptions are omitted from this presentation. This affects my enthusiasm for recommending the book as a text. However, I do think this book should be in the collection of interested human biologists as a clear introduction and reference to the many studies conducted by Harrison and his colleagues in Otmoor.

I enjoyed the concrete attempts to understand some of the dynamics of social class in a study of human biology. This is admirable, as many US biomedical researchers are only now discovering the vacuity of using terms such as race or even ethnicity to understand the underlying effects of social and economic forces on American public health and human biology. Also, I much enjoyed Harrison's piquant use of exclamation points throughout the book, often when describing life's eternal verities and battles!

Finally, one certainly hopes that future human biologists will consider further research among the Otmoor villages. It seems imperative to conduct longitudinal follow-up, as the study participants age, to test relations of biological and functional health measures with the wonderful variety of sociodemographic, biobehavioural and self-report data described in this book.

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**Genetic Variation and Human Disease: Principles and Evolutionary Approaches.** By K. M. Weiss. (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995.) £16.95.

It is a commonplace that our understanding of genetics has been transformed by the continuing revolution in molecular biology. This profound change is well reflected in a new generation of text-books explicitly addressing the implications for human and clinical genetics. *Genetic Variation and Human Disease*, now published in paperback, is a landmark in pursuing the significance of such changes not only for clinical and anthropological research methods, but also for their implications for the basic corpus of theory of Mendelian and population genetics. It is no exaggeration to say that the

revolution at this level is just as profound as the transition from classical genetic markers to DNA polymorphisms, though we must acknowledge that far fewer people will come to appreciate it.

Weiss's book is a blend of detailed exposition of the basis of practical analysis, combined with thoughtful reflection and a personal view. My own reaction to this style is very favourable. By not writing a text-book but rather an essay on ideas, Weiss can better develop his arguments and illustrate them with apt examples, without the text-book writer's burden of being comprehensive and canonical.

The book clearly focuses on genetic disease, and reviewers of the hardback have acknowledged its relevance for clinicians and clinical researchers, but I would emphasise here the general relevance for human biology and biological anthropology, taking diseases as one particularly well documented class of phenotypes. Researchers, graduate students and advanced undergraduates will find that this book approaches from an individual perspective a number of issues that are rarely dealt with in the standard literature. Especially appealing to me is the coverage of non-Mendelian inheritance, and the analysis of the increased discrimination between genotypes through molecular biology, with the consequent convergence between traditionally qualitative and quantitative phenotypes.

I began this review by noting the speed of advance in matters genetical, and it will soon be the case that Weiss's book needs to have some areas of detail updated. It is to be hoped that he can see his way to do this, for on the strength of its ideas the book should continue to command a unique bridge spanning the areas of medical genetics and population genetics.

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**The Anthropology of Pregnancy Loss.** Edited by Rosanne Cecil. Pp. 256. (Berg, Oxford, 1996.) £29.95, hardback; £12.95, paperback.

This 'novice editor', as Rosanne Cecil describes herself (p. vii), has put together an interesting book about involuntary pregnancy loss. As she rightly claims, this topic, while receiving attention within psychology, has lacked any detailed ethnographic investigation in anthropology. Yet it does beg anthropological interest, touching upon aspects of reproduction, birth and death, and raising questions of whether lost fetuses are considered to be human and how they are privately or publicly mourned in various cultural and historical contexts. Pregnancy loss is often felt as an embarrassing reproductive failure, difficult to communicate to the family or wider social network, and analyses are here offered of this 'widespread yet so private event' (p. 5).

This book offers 214 pages to remedy a 'cultural blanket of silence' (p. 105) on this topic, presenting five ethnographies (Part I) and five 'other studies' (Part II) by social anthropologists, a psychologist and a historian. In Part I, Patricia and Roger Jeffrey argue that meanings of pregnancy loss in rural North India are linked to issues of domestic organisation and politics. They also remark that reported data for 'falling babies' were 'far below any expectations based on Western medical views of pregnancy

loss' (p. 17); Western statistics would here have been useful, but the point is made that miscarriages are under-reported in contexts of high fertility and child mortality. Similarly, Elisa Sobó concludes that talk of 'false belly' in rural Jamaica serves to highlight social tensions and that 'as people discuss their bodies they discuss society' (p. 54). For Anne Winkvist, explanations for reproductive failures mirror gender relations and women's role in society, as illustrated in Papua New Guinea. Wembah-Rashid and Olayinka Njikam Savage then offer rich ethnographies on pregnancy in Tanzania and Cameroon respectively.

In Part II, Michael DeLuca and Paul Leslie depart from the largely qualitative information so far presented to review the available quantitative data on variation in risk of pregnancy loss among populations. Linda Layne then discusses the tragic-ironic content of newsletters from US pregnancy-loss support organisations—a very moving report on how women come to terms with 'senseless death' (p. 131). In South Africa, Beverley Chambers draws attention to the gap between women's personal experiences and the medical handling of miscarriages in clinical settings. In rural Northern Ireland, Rosanne Cecil sensitively handles the recollections of elderly women whose miscarriages and stillbirths could not be mourned with proper funerary rites reserved for real persons (the Irish wake). Finally, Mark Jackson provides a fascinating account of the kind of evidence required to judge whether women in eighteenth-century England had murdered their newborns or had miscarried as they claimed.

Interesting themes link these various contributions. I was particularly fascinated by the silence and spoken expressions used in various communities to convey the experience of early reproductive death.

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**Variability in Human Fertility.** Edited by Lyliane Rosetta & C. G. N. Mascie-Taylor. Pp. 225. (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996.) £35.00.

This book focuses on the biological, rather than social, aspects of fertility variation across populations. It serves to exemplify the place of biological anthropology for furthering understanding of fertility regulation and variability.

Part I (Hormonal aspects of fertility regulation) includes a short account of hypothalamo-pituitary-gonadal regulation of reproductive function (Thalabard *et al.*), a useful and well-written review of the lactational and social constraints on fertility in non-human mammals (P. C. Lee), and a paper suggesting that interpopulation variation in endogenous steroid profiles may underline variation in responses to manufactured contraceptives (G. R. Bentley).

Part II (Interpopulation variability) also contains three chapters: a comprehensive empirical and theoretical review of the developmental aspects of human ovarian function (P. T. Ellison), an examination of the sources and range of human fertility variation (L. Rosetta), and an account of the impact of infectious diseases on population subfecundity (C. G. N. Mascie-Taylor).

Part III (Metabolic and energetic aspects of regulation) begins with a general review

of evidence for metabolic adaptation in humans (P. S. Shetty), which includes only a very short section related to pregnancy. It is followed by a rather technical discussion of energy cost adaptations during physical activity, which makes absolutely no reference to fertility (M. Rieu). The next contribution is an accessible review of methods for measuring body composition, useful for studies of human fertility variation (N. G. Norgan). The final chapter, on the metabolic loads of breast-feeding and nutritional stress (P. G. Lunn), is challenging and undisputedly important.

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## **Editorial Note**

Mrs Margaret Herbertson will be retiring as Associate Editor of the Journal of Biosocial Science at the end of this calendar year. Mrs Herbertson, a graduate of Girton College, Cambridge (1952), where she read Natural Sciences, has been with the Journal since its earliest days. She was initially editorial assistant to Sir Alan Parkes (Editor, volumes 1–10), was formally recognised as Assistant Editor in volume 8, 1976, and later became Associate Editor in 1981 with Derek Roberts (Editor, volumes 11–22), a post she has continued to hold until now.

Since 1969 over 2000 papers have been submitted to JBS and Mrs Herbertson has very efficiently processed them, rewriting, sub- and copy-editing and corresponding with authors. Besides dealing with all aspects of the editing process she has also dealt with the numerous behind-the-scenes administrative activities of journal production, including negotiating with printers and distributors to ensure quality and punctuality of delivery. No matter the task, all were completed on schedule in her usual quiet and orderly manner.

All of us who have been associated with the Journal owe Margaret Herbertson an enormous debt and we, the present and past surviving editors, together with the Parkes Foundation, wish her all possible contentment in retirement and thank her for her dedication and commitment to the Journal over the last quarter century. We will miss her very much.

G. A. Harrison (Chairman, Parkes Foundation), D. F. Roberts (Editor, volumes 11–22) & C. G. N. Mascie-Taylor (Editor, volumes 23–).