

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

JACQUELINE LOW, *Using Alternative Therapies: A Qualitative Analysis*. Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 2004, xi + 151 p. index.

The heart of this book – the core of it that makes the whole thing work – is influenced by the great pragmatist lesson that human group life is problem-solving behaviour. I fear that too frequently the sociological community nods to human agency and then charges ahead as though it does not matter. Low's fine analysis in *Using Alternative Therapies* never loses sight of the importance of framing the discourse and activities of members in terms of the problematics of the worlds they engage. The volume is stronger for this.

This book is a dissertation that has been re-worked for publication. It carries with it some of the structural qualities of its former life. The first half of the text is dedicated to setting the stage – clarifying concepts, making distinctions between alternative and allopathic therapies, and framing participant perspectives of the hows and whys of engaging alternative therapies. For the undergraduate student coming to these issues for the first time this is useful material. The author's willingness to allow for ambiguities in the definition of concepts within alternative therapies is a strength, which, in the hands of an effective faculty member, opens spaces for lively in-class discussions.

The analytical strength of the text is to be found in its last half. Here, Low addresses a series of rather fundamental questions that make this book relevant for readers outside of the substantive field to which it belongs. Participants' initial interests in alternative therapies are fueled by an attempt to address health-related concerns that are not resolved through other available means. Fair enough, this is a career of involvement that is well established in the literature. However, Low moves well beyond an interest in understanding the process of becoming a "user" of alternative therapies to examining the implications for participants. I will briefly discuss what I take to be the three most important of these themes.

First, Low examines the corresponding changes and adjustments in worldview which accompany the process of learning the perspectives that accompany an alternative model of health. By associating alternative health perspectives with the concepts of holism, balance and control, Low articulates the perspectival shift that may accompany the work undertaken by members to embrace alternative therapies. This material has much in

common with other research that attends to the process of conversion to the worldviews of various subcultures. For those interested in the generic social processes that accompany the change and transformation of worldviews this is a valuable text.

Second, Low examines the implications of engaging alternative therapies for the self – for adopting identities as a “healer,” for subjective perceptions of self, for self understandings of personality, and for changes in personal understandings of a good life. Appropriately, the understanding of self offered here is attentive to self/other identities and the relational qualities of the identities we attempt to maintain relative.

Third, reflecting the reality that some audiences may view alternative therapies and those who champion them in more negative terms, Low addresses her research to the themes of deviant behaviour and deviant identities. It is here that the relevance of the text to readers outside of the specific substantive area of the research is most clearly articulated. By so doing Low’s research within the alternative therapy community locates alternative therapies in the context of a larger health care system that may define “regular medicine” as more appropriate than alternative practices that may be defined as unorthodox, disreputable or unwelcome in a variety of ways. For people who embrace alternative therapies and practices, the disreputable qualities that are attributed to the practice may also hold implications for self. By grounding her work within classic symbolic interactionism, Low addresses stigma management and the various strategies participants may utilize to account for deviance and to limit, restrict or otherwise come to terms with the unwelcome designations of others.

This is a thoughtful and accessible qualitative study of the experience that accompanies the use of alternative therapies and the related public policy implications.

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