

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

SARAH PAYNE, *The Health of Men and Women*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006, viii + 229 p., index.

This text offers the reader a clear and well-rounded synthesis of research about patterns in men's and women's health. To the extent that research is available, Payne also attends to the ways in which health is affected by variables such as race and ethnicity, socio-economic status, age, sexuality, and geographic location. All of this is presented in six chapters, each of which discusses different theoretical and substantive issues, and has a conclusion to tie it all together.

Payne begins with a discussion of the relationship between sex, gender and health. As she argues, there are numerous studies that examine men's and women's health separately, although studies focusing on women and health far outnumber studies focusing on men and health. This is significant, given that medical research has historically focused on men as though their bodies could be used as a proxy for the population as a whole, and given that medical textbooks continue to suggest that the female body deviates from the normative male body. Nevertheless, some researchers are now beginning to examine the health of men *qua* men and there are a few journals explicitly devoted to the issue. What we have yet to see is a sustained consideration of similarities and differences between men and women, including "the relative importance of biological and socially constructed differences, and the way these intersect with each other and with other factors affecting the health of men and women" (3).

Early in the first chapter, Payne tells us that the concept "sex" refers to biological differences and "gender" refers to socially constructed differences, but she notes that so-called "biological facts" can also be socially constructed, so that neither sex nor gender can be regarded as objectively defined or constant. This is a problem, she points out, when it comes to making sense of medical research, and especially research that assumes that men and women are separate biological groups, more different than alike. In such research, differences within the categories of "men" and "women" are obscured, and Payne wants us to pay attention to those differences.

Payne is to be applauded for her careful attention to presenting research about sex-based differences regarding various aspects of health, and then drawing on research examining the various social factors that can explain why differences are found. For example, as part of her detailed examination of mental health differences she discusses the fact that women are commonly assumed to be vulnerable to poor mental health on account of the female reproductive system, and she identifies numerous social factors that contribute towards women's sense of well-being. One of the best examples of this is the phenomenon of post-partum

depression. As Payne points out, depression in new mothers can be explained by “exhaustion and lack of sleep, and changes in employment, social status and isolation” (99).

Indeed, Payne argues convincingly that “evidence for biology as a factor in the mental health of either women or men is relatively lacking” (99). Reviewing research that links low levels of testosterone in old men with depression, Payne points out that “[o]lder age is also a time when men’s lives are changing in other ways – the loss of paid employment and status, loss of personal relationships, and increased isolation can all affect mental well-being” (99). It is analysis such as this that makes Payne’s book valuable.

Others topics that Payne examines in detail are the gendered differences regarding: reported incidences of chronic illnesses such as irritable bowel syndrome or arthritis; sexual and reproductive health; and causes of death. In all cases, she offers a careful critique of research suggesting that biology alone can explain differences, and examines research that asks us to consider the ways in which social factors are responsible for creating the patterns we see in men’s and women’s health.

Another aspect of the book that is much appreciated is the attention to and integration of Canadian research. As readers of this journal are no doubt aware, studies too often come out that claim to be international in scope, yet the developed, English-speaking world is represented only by the U.S., the U.K., and sometimes Australia. It is rare to find comparative research that includes Canadian data. This is why it was so delightful to find Payne, very early in the book, building her argument by making reference to Canadian research.

Payne briefly discusses the issue of disability, arguing quite rightly that there are serious problems with the ways in which disability is typically conceptualized and assumed to affect health. She not only questions the assumption that disabled bodies can be objectively differentiated from able bodies. She also draws on research to show that disabled people and medical professionals are often at odds regarding how to understand their health status. It was refreshing to read her critique of the World Health Organization’s measures such as “healthy life expectancy” which assume that disability necessarily detracts from health. Payne also noted that the experience of disability varies depending on social factors, but it would have been useful to see her expand on this point, in order to more decisively drive it home.

Payne concludes her synthesis by offering a model for understanding the relationship between sex, gender and health. Presented as a table, her proposed model considers biological factors, structural/material factors, gender discourses, and treatment and research. The usefulness of her model is in the way it clearly delineates the complexity of the matter of gendered differences in health. Researchers and students alike should find it helpful as they work to make sense of the research about differences in men’s and women’s health. As a teacher in Sociology of Health and Illness, I can easily imagine pointing students towards this informative book for supplementary reading about the social determinants of

health. The detailed nature of the book can at times make for dry reading, but the text is accessible to undergraduate students and it is well organized.

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