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Book review: 'The health of populations'

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As new discoveries in the biomedical sciences make it increasingly possible to identify individuals whose characteristics, whether genetic, psychological, biological, or behavioural, put them at risk of diverse health problems, it is important to keep in mind that health is also a function of our broader social context (1 , 2). In his captivating new book, 'The Health of Populations', Stephen J. Kunitz reminds us of the constant tension between our individual destinies and the communities we live in (3).

Part I of the book describes contemporary theories of disease causation. Chapter 1 discusses the emergence of two opposing schools of thought following the Industrial Revolution - the "New Public Health", which used "scientific objectivity" to highlight individuals' responsibility in promoting their own well-being, and the "New Social Medicine", which lay the "social environment" at the roots of disease. As described in Chapter 2, these two conceptualizations of health were later reconciled by the generalized susceptibility paradigm, which posits that an individual's risk of disease is related to an interaction between individual characteristics and environmental risk factors.

Part II reviews evidence on social determinants of health in different settings. The author's main hypothesis is that the health effects of economic or social factors, such as income and social integration, vary across contexts. Chapter 3 argues that the relationship between income levels and health is mediated by the existence of large-scale social programs, and particularly, broad-reaching healthcare. Hence, the policy context matters. The data presented in Chapter 4 show that the health effects of social determinants also depend on the epidemiological context; most health problems are especially frequent among disadvantaged populations, but some show a different pattern: for instance infectious diseases kill rich and poor alike leading to weak social gradients in this area. Chapter 5 focuses on the role of community, arguing that it is strongest when surrounding political institutions are weak. Chapter 6 argues that the health effects of globalization are positive only if increases in wealth are accompanied by policies that limit inequalities and protect the most vulnerable groups. Thus, the health impact of broad social factors is mediated by the political context.

Chapter 7 brings together the issues discussed in preceding chapters through the example of the AIDS epidemic: the causes of the epidemic can be interpreted differently depending on ideology, population risk varies according to levels of inequality and community characteristics, and globalization influences both the degree of risk and possible responses through its effects on labour markets and political institutions. Stephen Kunitz concludes by warning the reader against oversimplifying generalizations and urges researchers to consider the context of the phenomena which they study.

So where does this leave us? The historical background on the social, political and economic structures that surround us presented in this book is fascinating. However, how do scientists translate the idea that context matters into testable research hypotheses? Which of the many contexts that surround each one of us matters most? In the introduction, the author discloses his view that government plays a central role with regard to health. However, the data he presents also show that more proximal settings, such as the family or the neighborhood, matter as well. Thus, to understand the determinants of population health it appears important to conduct research on different levels of social contexts.

The author repeatedly warns about the dangers of broad generalizations. Yet, such upstream inferences are necessary to propose theory (4). For instance, the effects of social isolation may be more or less severe depending on the broader context, but recognizing that socially-isolated individuals are in poor health across diverse contexts is informative from the perspective of population health research and policy (5).

Overall, 'The Health of Populations' is a richly-documented, thought-provoking, book that forces the reader to reconsider his or her ideas about the role of social factors in health. It is an important read for researchers aiming to understand population health.

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