

## Review

*Journal of Health Psychology*  
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London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi,  
[1359-1053(199901)4:1]  
Vol 4(1) 109-110; 006664

Malcolm MacLachlan, *Culture and Health*  
Chichester, UK: John Wiley and Sons, 1997,  
316 pp.  
£15.99/US\$39.95 (pbk);  
ISBN 0-471-09662-6.

ISSUES OF CULTURE and diversity are important in all areas of psychology and the health professions today. As such, students, educators, and practitioners alike are all clamoring for the most pertinent and most relevant information and resources on various topics in the health professions with regard to the influence of culture. Unfortunately, despite the widespread recognition of the importance of this topic, and the influence it has in everyday life and in professional work, there is a glaring void in the literature that professionals and educators can access.

It is within this backdrop that this book, *Culture and Health*, is a welcome addition. It attempts to glean the relevant and most pertinent literature related to cultural influences on both mental and physical health into a single resource for the health practitioner. As one of the first, and perhaps to date only, book resource to do so, it attempts to fill an important gap in our knowledge, and provide an important service to those who work with cultural issues in their everyday professional practices, as well as to those who teach in these areas.

The structure and outline of the book are solid. The first chapter, 'Culture and health', serves as an introduction for the reader, defining culture, discussing the links between culture and both the physical and mental aspects of health. The second chapter, 'Understanding cultural differences', serves a similar purpose, providing readers with a frame of reference with which to understand cultural differences in health and treatment approaches.

Chapters 3 through 7 discuss culture bound syndromes, mental health, physical health, treatment, and health services, respectively, and represent more of a review of the available

literature in each of these areas with regard to the scientific and scholarly information related to each. The book closes adequately with a final chapter on health promotion and disease prevention across cultures.

One of the greatest strengths of this book, I found, was the compilation of the available literature in each of the areas in chapters 3 through 7. In chapter 3, for example, the author not only focuses the reader on two culture-bound syndromes (*koro* and *latah*) in depth, but also briefly discusses 10 others within the scope of the origins of such syndromes within each cultural milieu. The author then discusses models concerning how culture contributes to the development of such syndromes.

Likewise, in chapter 5 on culture and physical health, the author provides a convincing review of the role of social factors in health promotion or disease etiology, and introduces and discusses the relevant literature with regard to cultural differences in physical health outcomes, including recent work on pain and HIV/AIDS.

Another strength of the book is in the inclusion of guidelines for professional practice which are included at the end of each chapter. These serve as important, concise, bullet statement-like summaries of the material presented in the chapter, and in many cases go beyond the material to provide summative recommendations to health professionals who deal with such issues daily in their working lives. Thus, the niche of the book in terms of targeting mental and physical health professionals, as well as educators in these fields, is well served by such an inclusion.

One of the main weaknesses of the book, however, was its lack of a clear and concise definition of culture, especially in chapters 1 and 2. The author failed to draw on much relevant literature that is available over the past 50+ years in definitions and conceptualizations of culture, and how they impact on behaviors, psychology, and ultimately, health. This literature exists, and the exclusion of such a

literature gave me the impression at the outset that the book was not very scholarly in its writing. Although I believe the author did a much better job of including the relevant literature in later chapters, I found the material in chapter 1 painstakingly lacking in this regard.

One result of this lack of attention to the scholarly literature on culture definitions was the lack of a clear distinction between culture, race, and ethnicity. Indeed, most serious students of culture would argue that there are important distinctions between these, each having its own unique perspective on health issues that could have been fleshed out in the remainder of the book. Unfortunately, however, most of the book was written as if the word 'culture' encompassed all the terms. I believe that there are important differences between them, each of which has different consequences and ramifications for our understanding of health outcomes.

The lack of discussion concerning the definition of culture in the beginning of the book also resulted in the lack of a coherent message throughout the book concerning exactly what culture's influence is on mental and physical health, and treatment, diagnosis, and prevention. Rather, the material in chapters 3 and on, despite having the advantage of representing the available literature in each respective area, did not hold well together as a coherent whole. Instead, the material read as if it was a series of short essays and discussions on various topics that happened to be grouped according to the general topic dealt with. The lack of a coherent thread or message running through the entire text served as a great disservice to the material, and left me searching for ways in my own mind as to how to put the literature together. Instead, it should have been the author who presented his ideas to

the readers about what culture means and how it influences health, and then he should have those ideas in all subsequent chapters.

To be sure, this problem exists in large part in the field. That is, it is the field that has not sat back and considered how culture influences health, incorporating all of the available evidence into a single, coherent picture. The field itself has a long way to go not only in terms of research but also in terms of the development of theoretical models that can help incorporate and integrate research findings from as broad a range of areas as possible. Thus, the book's lack in this regard can also be seen as a reflection of this great lack in the field. On one hand, while the author has contributed substantially to compiling much of the relevant literature into a single resource, on the other hand, he has not pushed our knowledge much beyond the mere compilation of facts, and in so doing, has missed the opportunity to make a far greater potential contribution.

The best professional books are those that are scholarly in their approach, yet accessible and meaningful to those who need to apply that information in their professional lives. While the book does have some strengths as mentioned above, it also falls short in addressing the existing scholarly literature on culture and its influences on behavior, and in using that knowledge to integrate much of the knowledge presented. While the book definitely addresses a void in the literature, it also falls short of servicing the professional audience it intends to serve in this regard.

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