Current Online First Articles: A Digest

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This new feature for MSo provides a personal selection of articles shortly to be published in a range of relevant journals – Health; Qualitative Health Research (QHR); Social Science and Medicine (SSM); and Sociology of Health & Illness (SHI). The spread of current articles certainly reflects the breadth of medical sociology (both in relation to topics studied and the methods employed) and its international reach.

At the quantitative end of the spectrum, Semyonov, Lewin-Epstein & Maskilevson have analysed data from 16 countries in order to explore the “wealth-health” gradient. “Where wealth matters more for health: the wealth-health gradient in 16 countries” (SSM). They found that, although the average health of national populations rises as economic resources increase, the tie between wealth and health does not weaken. However, a more equitable distribution of resources does not improve health at a population level, but the link between wealth and health is weakened.

In SHI there is another quantitative paper on “Suicide rates and socioeconomic factors in Eastern European countries after the collapse of the Soviet Union” by Kõlves, Milner & Värnik. The former USSR kept its suicide rates secret and unpublished until the transition period of the 1990s when reporting suggested rates were increasing. The number of GPs in the population was used as a proxy of social integration and regulation at a wider societal level. The study shows that social integration and regulation have impacted on suicide rates in Eastern Europe since the collapse of the former Soviet Union. While the suicide rates of the Baltic and Slavic republics of the former Soviet Union have decreased since the mid-1990s, this region continues to have the highest suicide rates in the world, especially of men. The authors claim that having more educated doctors would increase the resources available to recognise and treat potential suicides.

Still addressing the topic of health inequalities, but focusing on the Norwegian experience Kravdal (SSM) addresses poorer cancer survival amongst the unmarried and examines the role played by co-morbidities.

Drawing on data from an ethnographic study, Spencer (Health) takes a critical look at the notion of empowerment in relation to young people and health and offers a new conceptual framework for understanding empowerment as a generative concept. She explains that these forms of empowerment capture and synthesize individual, structural and ideological elements of power that differentially, and sometimes inconsistently, shape the possibilities for young people.

Another paper which looks at the relationship between conceptualization and behaviour is featured on the Health website. This is by Baart & Widdershoven and is entitled “Bipolar disorder: idioms of susceptibility and disease and the role of ‘genes’ in illness explanations”. This reports on a focus group study which identified two contrasting orientations amongst members of the Dutch Association for People with Bipolar Disorder. In particular the paper explores the implications of these two approaches for self-management.
"Co-construction of chronic illness narratives by older stroke survivors and their spouses" by Radcliffe, Lowton & Morgan (SHI) also explores the creation of meaning – in this case utilizing joint interviews with couples. Glenn, McGannon & Spence (QHR) have carried out an analysis of media representations of weight-loss surgery, using an eclectic approach to discourse analysis. This research relates to coverage of a specific Canadian bariatric clinic. In particular the paper examines the role of gendered and biomedical discourses.

Both SSM and Health feature articles about ADHD. Edwards & Howlett (SSM) explore the dynamics of knowledge production about ADHD in Ireland, and focus on how parents of children with ADHD are intervening in knowledge creation regarding the effectiveness of different treatments. The paper draws on interviews with parents and professionals active in this arena. In Health Frigerio & Montali compare the ADHD discourses of Italian mental health professionals, teachers and parents. Their approach integrates positioning theory (from CA), dialogical thinking and discourse analysis to study stakeholders' “reflexive and interactive positioning in terms of the attribution of rights, duties, responsibilities and power issues.” The authors conclude that the loop of mutual refusal to recognize the rights and agency of others may have concrete negative implications for children, since it may prevent effective collaboration.

The last two papers selected both address ethical issues. Drawing on observations and interviews with one UK-based group of neuroscientists, Brosnan, Cribb, Wainwright and Williams (SHI) explore what ethics means for these researchers, active both in the laboratory and in the clinic. The paper articulates and explores the notion of ‘tangible ethics’ as enacted in everyday practice where the scientists’ discursive distinctions between right and wrong could be challenged.

The final paper “Bioethics in practice: addressing ethically sensitive requests in a Dutch fertility clinic” reports on observations carried out at multidisciplinary ethics meetings (as part of a bigger ethnographic study) by Gerrits, Reis, Braat, Kremer & Hardon (SSM). This afforded the opportunity to focus on real life cases, rather than having to rely on hypothetical vignettes. Although health professionals’ autonomy might be invoked occasionally to withhold treatment, the authors highlight the uncertainties involved and show that, in some cases, patient autonomy is appealed to with couples being left to weigh up risks.
References


Grace Spencer, G. Young people and health: Towards a new conceptual framework for understanding empowerment, Health, February 4, 2013: DOI 136345931247361


Kravdal, O. (2013), The poorer cancer survival among the unmarried in Norway: Is much explained by comorbidities? http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2013.01.012


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