

FOREWORD: SOCIOLOGY OF HEALTH AND MEDICINE

VALENTINA MARINESCU¹, RAMONA MARINACHE^{*}

Sociology of Health and Medicine is a fast growing sub domain of sociology. The sociological scholarly interest on this sub domain grow as more and more studies from medical sciences revealed that health or the lack of it is not only the result of biological conditions, but a result of intertwining of biological and social conditions (Pescosolido *et al.*, 2011) and also as a consequence of the ‘crisis’ of scientific medicine determined by people disillusionment with its answers in front of medical and social problems (Lupton, 2003). Thus, social life can be the ‘independent variable’, and health level the ‘dependent one’, but also health and lack of health can be the main causes of social problems and/or social change.

A variety of recent studies (one could look at journals like *Sociology of Health & Illness*, *Journal of Health and Social Behaviour*, *Social Theory & Health*, *Social Science & Medicine*) have shown that the outcomes of the sociological study of health and medicine could help national and international authorities in developing better health policies in a world in which according to *The European Health Report for 2015* of WHO (World Health Organization) the five main causes of premature mortality are cardiovascular diseases, cancer, diabetes and chronic respiratory diseases with the major risk factors being social behaviours alcohol consumption, tobacco use and overweight and obesity. Moreover in the European health policy for the 21st century, *Health 2020*, essential concept are considered to be aspects like ‘community resilience’, ‘sense of belonging’, ‘sense of control’, ‘participatory governance’, ‘life-course approach’ or ‘empowerment’, to name only a few (WHO, 2013). Thus, the existing knowledge on sociology of health and medicine accompanied by future endeavours in the field could contribute not only at the development of the science, but could have long term impact by offering the

¹ Professor Habilitated at the Department of Sociology, Faculty of Sociology and Social Work, University of Bucharest, Romania. E-mail: vmarinescu9@yahoo.com

* Assistant lecturer, Faculty of Letters, University of Bucharest. E-mail: ramona.marinache@yahoo.com



fundaments for good health public policies that will lead to the reduction of premature mortality.

The articles from this special issue in original empirical (qualitative and quantitative) researches, tackle themes like: homeopathic practices and value that patients ascribe to medical care and treatment; the effects of socio-economic status on Nigerian women's health; the history of Western medical-zoological engagement with venomous Indian snakes within the context of making and consolidation of British health policy in colonial India during the late eighteenth to the mid nineteenth centuries; plastic surgery phenomenon among South Korean women and an analysis the effect of online anonymity, as a privacy issue.

Alexandra Ciocănel's article ("How to Choose Among Different Therapeutic Options? Patients' Registers of Valuing in Mediating Homeopathy and Biomedicine") examines how patients that undergo biomedical and homeopathic forms of therapy value medical care and treatment. Based on an analysis of semi-structured interviews, the author devised what she called "registers of valuing" through which respondents talk about good or bad medical care and treatment. Those analytical devices (e.g. "registers of valuing") lead her to the construction of an analytical framework useful in describing how patients choose among or combine different therapeutic options. The analysis showed that in choosing and in talking about their options, patients accomplish so-called "valuing work", continuously evaluating and giving value to medical care and treatment by employing criteria that include efficacy, professional competence, communication and a suspicion of monetary interests. The four "registers of valuing" identified by Ciocănel set homeopathy and biomedicine in a relationship that simultaneously involves contrast, succession, and continuity. Patients employ registers of valuing to justify their choices as reasonable, simultaneously pragmatic and oriented around a half-articulated philosophy of gentle healing.

The second article entitled "Socio-Economic Status and Women's Healthcare Utilization: A Study of Selected Areas in Nigeria" (by Jemisenia John Oluwaseyi, Ezenagu Nnedinma Roseline and Adejoh Arome) focuses on the effects of socio-economic status on Nigerian women's health and using the data collected using two methods (survey and focus group) the authors describe "women's beliefs about the effects of socio-economic status in their utilization of health care services in Lokoja and Dekina Local Government Areas of Kogi State". The results of the study reveal that women request health care services especially when they experience acute phases of their chronic disease (for example: hypertension or diabetes). Also, that education, occupation and income have great effects on women's decision, quality of treatment, frequency of visits to the hospital, length and duration of hospital stay, time of visits to the hospital, and the type of health facilities visited. To improve the social reality they described, the authors' recommendation is for social policies that will help Nigerian women to have a better socio-economic status and hence a better utilization of healthcare services.

The third article “Snakes, Snakebites and British Medical-Zoological Engagement in Early Colonial India: Health, Medicine and Ideology” (by Rahul Bhaumik) tries to trace the interesting history of Western medical-zoological engagement with venomous Indian snakes within the context of making and consolidation of British health policy in colonial India during the late eighteenth to the mid nineteenth centuries. The author shows that while the British colonisers began to exploit flora and fauna of the newly subjugated land for their material benefit, they confronted wild Indian creatures like venomous snakes and anxiously noticed the huge mortality from snake poisoning in India. This threw a direct challenge to the healthy livelihood of the colonisers because of their insufficient knowledge about such a variety of snakes and their envenoming powers. The article shows how Indian snakes formed a significant part of the British medical-zoological imagination of Oriental wilderness seen as a cruel, chaotic and disease-laden condition posing a threat to the life and health of the Europeans. At the same time, Bhaumik presents how the difficulties faced in snake-ridden India were engaged with the idea that India was essentially different from Europe: environmentally and medically. This paper concludes that Western medical engagement with venomous snakes and the consequential health measures which flourished under the British agency provided the tools to order and control the snake-ridden landscape of India and paved the way for the assertion of an intellectual superiority over the colonised people. In this regard, Western medicine and health policy, not only as practice but also as ideology, served to justify the colonial rule and became a true instrument of the British Indian Empire.

The fourth article, written by Carmen Voinea (“Plastic surgery phenomenon among South Korean women. The instrumental body in a rite of passage to the normative ‘Innocent Glamour’”) explores the plastic surgery phenomenon among young South Korean women and aims to depict the motivations of women as agentic subjects and social pressures that lead them to undergo facial modification. Based on field observation in Daegu (South Korea) between 2008–2009, on interviews in Bucharest (Romania) in 2011, mass-media and pop culture analysis and secondary statistical analysis, the author argues that facial modification among young South Korean is motivated by an instrumentalisation of the body as a “vehicle for success” in personal and professional life.

In their article “Privacy Concerns on the Internet: Investigating the Attitudes and Behaviours of Young Internet Users to Online Anonymity”, Chikezie Emmanuel Uzuegbunam and Henry Chigozie Duru started from the assumption that privacy on the Internet is a multi-faceted issue that requires attention on the user’s part, both to protect information from third-party data collection and to manage personal impressions across a variety of contexts and relationships. Their analysis investigated the effect of online anonymity, as a privacy issue, among young Internet users in Nigeria, placing their analysis within the framework of the deindividuation, uses and gratifications, and technological determinism theories.

The authors used methodological triangulation in their research, namely a survey made on a sample of 400 was selected from the study population and a structured questionnaire. The findings showed that online anonymity is common among a significant proportion of the users; and that they utilise online anonymity mainly for the purposes of protecting their privacy, shielding themselves against fraud and other Internet harms and abuses, and for the purpose of fun. Similarly, it was found that while the youths perceive online anonymity as socially beneficial, they at the same time view it as potentially destructive. Uzuegbunam and Duru also discovered that anonymity has not had significant impact on the Internet use habit of the respondents. According to their conclusion, this means that it is not a motivating factor that draws them to the Internet, and that it has neither not made them feel free to communicate nor lure majority of them towards communications that are ethically and legally undesirable.

In this special number of Romanian Journal of Social Sciences there are also the reviews of two fundamental books: one for the social study of health, illness, disease and medical practices – Rita Charon, “Narrative Medicine – Honouring the stories of illness” (by Ioana Silistraru), the other for communication studies – Nicholas John, “The Age Of Sharing” (by Ana-Maria Teodorescu). The first book “Narrative medicine – Honouring the stories of illness”, although it can be seen as ‘the bible’ of narrative medicine published in 2006, so far, has not been reviewed in Romanian scholarly journals. The second book “The Age of Sharing” (2017) brings into attention another stringent matter of contemporary societies that relates with all levels of social life, also with health and medical aspects, it’s that of ‘sharing’ in the digital era.

The papers compiled for this issue explore various topics related to sociology of health. The perspectives on this domain are diverse and, as guest editors, we hope that the articles published here will give readers a multifaceted perspective of sociology and health as a distinct research field. We would like to take this opportunity to thank the authors for all their patience during the revising process. Also we express our gratitude towards the reviewers who helped with observations and comments in order to improve the manuscripts received for this issue. Finally, we want to express our gratitude to the editors of the Romanian Journal of Sociological Studies for hosting this special issue on sociology and health.

REFERENCES

- LUPTON, D. (2003). *Medicine as Culture. Disease and the Body in Western Societies*. London: SAGE Publications.
- PESCOLOLIDO, B., MARTIN, J., MCLEOD, J. AND ROGERS, A. (eds.) (2011). *Handbook of the Sociology of Health, Illness and Healing. A Blueprint for the 21st Century*. London: Springer.
- WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION. (2016). *The European health report 2015. Targets and beyond – reaching new frontiers in evidence*.

WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION. (2013).*Health 2020. A European policy framework and strategy for the 21st century.*