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 **Handbook of medical sociology, 3rd edition.**

Author(s) : [FREEMAN, H. E.](#) ; [LEVINE, S.](#) ; [REEDER, L. G.](#)

Book : [Handbook of medical sociology, 3rd edition.](#) 1979 pp.xi + 516 pp.

**Abstract :** The third edition of this handbook holds few surprises and contains new material, although the contents have been reorganized, updated, revised and written by different authors. Several new topics, such as the relationship of environment and health care are included.

The authors draw almost exclusively on North American sources and more than 50 chapters are purely descriptive accounts of aspects of the North American health care system, for example, those on the organization of medical and dental practice and hospitals. Elsewhere the data presented and studies reviewed are also from North America and no systematic comparisons are made with other countries. I men

discount the value of these reviews but to point out that they may be of limited value to a non-American reader.

The introduction emphasizes the place of sociology in the medical curriculum and is clearly aimed primarily at medical students. However, it is also said to be for "those who work in the health field" and "the experts of other disciplines". For several reasons I hesitate to recommend this book as an introductory text to any of these groups. A book of this size and complexity, with such impenetrable prose, will probably be an average overburdened medical student or busy health-care worker. If medical students are to be encouraged to open their minds to sociology they must be stimulated with new ideas, not stultified with excessive numbers of references and passages that belong to heavy-weight biochemistry or pharmacology texts.

Secondly, basic sociological ideas are not explained sufficiently clearly to the general reader. The concepts are nowhere defined in simple terms, but they are freely peppered with meaningless jargon (see, e.g. p. 56). One chapter, however, is largely free of jargon and is particularly well written: *Patient-practitioner relationships*, by S. W. BLOOMER and WILSON, gives a very clear exposition of Parsons' ideas about the sick role. Whether such theoretical debate is the kind of material with which medical students should be asked to grapple, remote as it is from their own experiences of doctoring, is another matter. Thirdly, the contents of this book, which claims to be a sort of compendium, do not accurately reflect the field of medical sociology. As all the authors are from the functionalist school of sociology, the reader gets nothing like the full flavour of the field. It approaches: no true taste is gained of Marxist analyses of the inequalities of the health care system, or the acute observational detail of ethnomethodological accounts of institutional life. These are glaring omissions for a book which claims to be a comprehensive text on medical sociology.

I can find little to recommend in this large and disappointing book. It may be of some value for the painstaking descriptions of the U.S. health-care system and the large amount of material it contains. In all other respects, however, it has been superseded by texts of more modest proportions and less pretentious aims.

*Jane Hughes.*

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