
Book reviews

Epidemiological Studies: A Practical Guide. A. J. Silman. Pp. 175. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. £14.95 (pb), £40.00 (hb). ISBN 0 521 43979 5 (pb), 0 521 43371 1 (hb).

The results of epidemiological surveys are very valuable in guiding clinical practice and formulating health policies. However, if the surveys are designed by those with little or no training in the field they are often flawed giving meaningless results and wasting valuable resources. Alan Silman's book aims to rectify this situation. It is a practical guide to epidemiological studies which takes the reader through all the steps involved in clear and concise stages.

The book assumes no prior knowledge of the subject and contains many examples which illustrate each point. The text is concise and easy to read with plenty of subheadings for easy reference. The volume has four sections, which throughout emphasize a practical approach. The introductory section outlines the scope of epidemiology and defines the main problem areas; part two addresses study design; part three the selection of the study population; part four data collection and part five analysis and interpretation of data. Problems are approached in the form of questions – for example: retrospective review or prospective notification? – followed by a discussion on the merits and suitability of each option. The use of flow charts to illustrate the appropriate strategy is helpful.

The author tells us that this book evolved from a teaching programme in epidemiology for public health students, and it has obviously benefited from refinements made by feedback from participants. Medical students and qualified doctors alike are often reluctant to learn the principles of epidemiology although most who carry out research are likely to use the principles of study design in some form. Their reluctance is probably due to the mathematical formulae and statistical calculations involved. However, these days computer packages can cope with the mathematics; what is needed is firm understanding of study design. In this regard Alan Silman's book is a very useful and user-friendly volume as an introduction to the field of epidemiology.

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Democracy, Chaos and the New School Order. S. J. Maxcy. Pp. 197. Thorsand Oaks, California: Corwin Press Inc. (Sage Publications), 1995. £18.95. ISBN 0 8039 6199 5.

From the red, white and blue starred and striped cover, the intimacy of its acknowledgements and the speculative titles of its seven densely written chapters, this book is delightfully American in content, philosophy and style. Professor Maxcy's stated purpose, in writing this book, is to inspire all those concerned with education, from parents to policies makers, to make 'beautiful and successful people for the new millenium'. How or why anyone should wish to regulate a process so idiosyncratic is unclear.

To my anglicized intellect, Maxcy's linguistic gymnastics are exceedingly complex, although in the end hugely entertaining. Every sentence had to be read and reread, then turned on its head before being transposed into something I could assimilate. For instance 'Morality is artistic when we engage in dramatic rehearsals' and 'Critical pragmatism provides understanding of the scaffolded explanatory devices used to underwrite school research' do convey the conflicting concrete and abstract qualities of Maxcy's writing even though such sentences were, at first glance, puzzling. However by avoiding becoming marooned in phrases such as 'A Postliberal, Postmodernist-Post-structuralist, and Critical Pragmatic Critique' I moved swiftly ahead.

The book is a theoretical analysis of how democracy (in America) has straightjacketed its educational process. Maxcy talks about radical individualism dominating and stultifying American education today and identifies the importance of moral artistry in the restructuring of schools; of replacing the current scientific (logical, linear) educational design with a more artistic (visionary) one. Maxcy proposes that chaos theory (in which the formalism of disciplines is maintained but outcomes are less predictable) will bridge the perceived gap between the 'scientific' approach and the 'artistic' approach and allow moral and ethical issues to influence pedagogy. Indeed he warns of a total collapse of public education in America unless this change is effected.

However, his ultimate claim, that to reflect on one's experience is the process by which we gain greater control over our future experiences, is as old as experience itself. Maxcy, in reworking an established philosophy, demonstrates that there is little that is new: nevertheless, the