

Book Review

Explaining Health and Illness: An Exploration of Diversity. By Wendy Stainton Rogers. Exeter, UK: Harvester Wheatsheaf (Simon & Schuster), 1991. 274 pp. \$21.95¹

The intent of this work is to expand the theory of explanation to include areas of biological/medical interest as well as order and disorder. The goal is to advance the scholarly effort to understand the role of explanation in social being. Wendy Stainton Rogers has created an important and useful work by systematically weaving together the broadest theories and research techniques used in psychology, sociology, and anthropology. Her guiding light has been the use of Q methodology as a means not only to free the data collection process from the inherent paradigm biases of the older and firmly rooted parent disciplines, but also to deconstruct the Health Locus of Control Scale as an instrument whose time and usefulness has long since come and gone. "Using an approach which is sensitive to people's 'artful use of language to give meaning to the world' made it possible to find treasures buried and hidden by techniques which assume that people all share common constructs that are equally salient to all" with regard to what contributes to their own health or illness.

Describing herself as a social constructionist, Stainton Rogers believes the appropriate methodological approach ought to be dialectical, i.e., both dislocative for the purpose of discovering structural diversity, and relocative to explain the diversity in contextually sensitive terms. She demonstrates the power of Q methodology when used in skilled hands to reveal diversities inherent in so subjective an area as personal perceptions of health and illness. The "richness of the diversity detected" amounted to no less than seven different "accounts" (factors) used by individuals in their reasoning about what influences their own health, illness, recovery, and their ability to enjoy greater health in the future.

¹A memorandum from Scholarly Book Services Inc. of Toronto indicates that *Explaining Health and Illness* is due to be published in North America at a cost of \$28.75 (U.S.).

Having discovered a diverse structure by means of a *dis-locative* process, she remained faced with the dilemma of how to *explain* wellness, illness, recovery, and health promotion, all within the terms which individuals use to ascribe responsibility and blame regarding their own health status. The technique of Cultural Analysis is employed to *re-locate* valid but diverse accounts of reality back into their social and cultural contexts, "rather like a hologram which, while separate from the whole, nonetheless implicates the whole."

Along the path, Stainton Rogers appeared tantalized by what she saw as an unignorable opportunity to use Q as a potent weapon to further her case that it offers a "highly sensitive technique for investigating and describing accounts in a way that mindless and disjunctive scale responding can never do. With Likert scale instruments, the most distinctive features of accounts remain untapped." The object of her deconstructional wrath is a venerable tool known as the Multidimensional Health Locus of Control (MHLC) Scale which she does indeed succeed in deconstructing through the use of her own Q-based Influences on Health and Illness (IHI) Scale. Her clever study combines in one matrix the results of factors identified when she probed for diversity together with by-person factor analysis of data obtained for both the MHLC and the IHI scales. The result is all the worse for the MHLC scale which, according to the author, comes up woefully inadequate to explain the most distinctive features of personal viewpoints about health and illness.

Her use of Q methodology permitted the uncovering of even muted accounts which other approaches to participant sample selection and data interpretation tend to submerge, as evidenced, for example, by the clear emergence of religion as an important aspect of some people's beliefs regarding what affects their health status, even while the majority of persons today would strenuously deny or reject the salience of its influences.

Much of her success is due to a use of Q technique as a method to inform the investigator. Participants were always permitted, even encouraged, to write explanatory or amplifying comments on the cards as they sorted. Such spontaneous voluntary annotations can offer valuable insights to the researcher which most probably would never be detected even with the powerful and sensitive by-person factor extracting and rotational methods now in general use. In one of her studies she allows the

Q sort to guide the structure and content of personal follow up interviews held with some of her participants.

In all her studies, Stainton Rogers confines her interpretive work only to the most exemplary Q sorts made by participants who represented each particular factor. She did not explain accounts in terms of synthetic composites of all Q sorts loading on a particular factor.

Stainton Rogers is well aware that success with Q is to a large extent based upon the development of the Q sample to be sorted. She carefully explains her thinking behind decisions of what was present in the concourse but subsequently excluded from the Q set, because she sees this step as crucial to an understanding of Q as an emancipatory methodology. Too many workers might view this level of care merely as unnecessary detail. "Within Q methodology it is the analyses and classification that the people participating in the study impose upon a particular concourse of propositions that are the focus of the study, and it is the job of the researcher not to reanalyse these further, but rather to seek to understand them better." Clearly, Wendy Stainton Rogers understands Will Stephenson well.

The book is based on the author's Ph.D. dissertation research conducted during 1985-86 and successfully defended at the Open University (UK) a year later. There is an extensive literature review (more than half the text) in which research theories, methods and tools are examined. The author evaluates strengths and weaknesses of many alternative research methodologies and catalogs the ways in which they enable understanding of how individuals think about and explain health and illness. Stainton Rogers draws heavily from the theoretical fields of psychology, sociology and anthropology to compare and contrast the relevant literature. She demonstrates her knowledge of alternative empirical approaches such as lay explanation, folklore, studies using social determinants, and the literature of explanatory sympathy. The obvious care with which Stainton Rogers pursues her scholarship is both a strength and a weakness for the book. The meticulous attention she gives to the cross-blending of the three traditionally separate fields of psychology, sociology, and anthropology easily lend an unquestioned credibility to her study. However, in her breathless rush for completeness, she leaves the reader bewildered by too much jargon, inadequate background preparation, and a needless collection of poorly de-

defined terms and abbreviations. The book suffers from the use of a standard academic layout for a Ph.D. dissertation. The consequence is an imbalance of materials which sometimes obscures Stainton Rogers' real purpose for publishing her work. Complex writing style, fuzzy content organization, unclear use of abbreviations, and poorly organized tables all could have benefitted from the sympathetic eye of a good editor. Unfortunately, no such help was apparently available. The result is a difficult read for all except the best informed in all three of the major fields.

Stainton Rogers anticipates some of these shortcomings with an apologetic Introduction. However, she would have done better to have advised readers to proceed immediately to Chapters 5 through 8 if they are directly interested in her own contributions. Very much to her credit, throughout the book the author's reasoning and personal biases are thoroughly explained and labeled along with the techniques and tools used in her studies.

Although the book deals with explaining health and illness, it was not written primarily for medical professionals. For this reason, the book is unlikely to convince health practitioners or research clinicians to use its techniques as a way of understanding the complexities of their own areas of inquiry. The book is much more valuable for other graduate students who ought to find much wisdom and value in its detailed explanations associated with the explorations of diversity.

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