Book Reviews


Menopause - an important stage in female life experience - has been subjected to many reconsiderations and reinterpretations during recent years. One of the latest discussions is the alleged possibility of reversing menopausal events due to progress in medical science (see, e.g., Editorial ‘Stop that clock’, New Scientist, 2nd October 1999, No. 2206, p.3).

In biomedical terms menopause is described as the last menstrual period identified in retrospect after 12 months of amenorrhoea (World Health Organization, 1981).

Though menopause is a biologically universal event among human females and is associated with the process of ageing, in modern societies it is often considered as a kind of disease that needs to be cured with special medication. The present book opposes this view, among many others, and shows the phenomenon of menopause in its suggested complexity with biological, cultural, social and philosophical issues involved.

The book consists of four parts and an Introduction, written by the Editors, in which they define the aims of the volume as to give multifaceted versatile meaning to the menopause: ‘If there were to be a single thesis that emerges from these pages, it would be that there is no such thing as the menopause. There are menopausal experiences,’ (p.13).

In the first part, called ‘Menopausal bodies’ (three entries by Mackie, Rothfield, Komesaroff) biomedical characteristics of the menopause are reinterpreted within the framework of modern philosophical theories.

The second part – ‘Politics of the Symbolic’ – revisits some myths about menopause, in the context of psychoanalysis (Campioni, Gardner) or popular culture, e.g. Hollywood images of ageing women (Kaplan).

The third section of the book – ‘Discursive Strategies’ – discusses women’s experiences in ‘mid-life’ through their own voices as based on 150 women’s accounts (Daly); debates that menopause is a ‘magic maker’ in the sense that it separates menopausal women from the rest of the society (Gulette); and describes changes in views on menopause within social contexts (Sybylla).

The last part – ‘Metaphors and Mutations’ – discusses menopause in terms of abjection as described by Julia Kristeva (Rogers) and critically argues with some metaphoric images of women’s bodies as machines designed for production (Martin) or with the metaphor developed by D. Haraway as that of the cyborg (Kwok Wei Leng).

All of the discussed issues are put in the perspective of modern philosophical discourse and feminist analysis and will be of interest to those who are concerned with women’s and feminist studies. From a biological anthropologist’s point of
view, I think it would be better to add a few other dimensions to menopausal reinterpretation, and look at it as an important evolutionary stage of human experience (see some recent studies, e.g. Bogin, 1999).

It would also be interesting within the framework of those ‘menopausal experiences’ to hear voices of women from certain societies and countries (Russia included) where the options of HTR or other kinds of medical treatment of menopausal symptoms are not yet an issue; but then of course this may be a subject for a new book.

References


E. Godina
Moscow State University


This edited volume is the published outcome of the Wenner-Gren International Symposium number 115, held in 1992, which broadly bears the same title as the volume. The editors claim to break new ground by moving biological anthropology into the political sphere. While they see the work as representing an important contribution to the reintegration of anthropology, it is not clear to me that in general either biological or cultural anthropologists are ready to respond to this call to reintegration. What then, does the book achieve? The authors are largely eminent, and address a wide range of issues covering historical and theoretical developments in biological and social and cultural theory. Furthermore, the volume is replete with case studies that demonstrate the ways in which social and political factors have influenced, and continue to influence, human biology among past and present populations. In addition, various ways in which a critical biological anthropology might emerge and develop are examined.

In the first section, four chapters examine the history of, and theoretical developments in, biocultural studies. The first of these, by Goodman and Leatherman, considers the theoretical differences between social and biological understandings of humanity, and the extent to which they address issues of overlapping interest between the two fields. The second chapter, by R. B. Thomas, presents a strong case for the incorporation of political and economic processes within human adaptability paradigms, and for a move towards a more integrated approach to the study of the biology of poverty. The next chapter, by W. Roseberry, argues against the use of ideotypes such as ‘household’, ‘community’, ‘class’, in social study, and argues instead for a ‘social fields’ approach when trying to understand health and humanity. The chapter that follows, by M. Singer, considers the implications of critical medical anthropology for biological anthropology. Critical medical anthropology does not
advocate a rejection of biology as an area of study in anthropology, nor does it heed post-modern calls for a shift from a materialist perspective in science. Rather, the critical approach in science is concerned with the recognition of the historically bound, culturally created, socially influenced nature of science, with the ultimate aim of increasing the analytical scope of this paradigm.

The second section gives examples that link politics and social structure to biology in studies of past populations. The first of these chapters, by D. J. Saitta, links human biology and political economy in the North American archaeological record. The second of these, by A. H. Goodman, describes the relatively new discipline of palaeoepidemiology and its use in the study of past populations in Sweden, the United States and the Sudan. In the third chapter, D. Martin considers the use of a political-economic approach to bioarchaeological research of North American Southwest populations. In the following two chapters, A. C. Swedlund and H. Ball present a social demographic analysis of infant mortality in historical Massachusetts, 1830–1920, while L. M. Morphin gives a sociopolitical analysis of the 1813 Mexico City typhus epidemic.

The third section gives case-studies and examples from contemporary populations. In the first of these chapters, T. L. Leatherman describes the ways in which the interaction of large-scale forces with local environments shapes the context for human biology and health in the Peruvian Andes, while the second chapter, by R. V. Santos and C. E. A. Coimbra, considers the ways in which the human biology of the Tupi-Monde peoples of south-western Amazonia has been shaped by political and economic forces. In the chapter that follows, B. R. De Walt illustrates how a comparative perspective, including political, economic and human ecological approaches, can be used in understanding increasing population size and malnutrition in southern Honduras. In the next chapter, M. Daltabuit and T. L. Leatherman describe the biocultural impact of tourism on Mayan communities, and conclude that the social and biological costs to the Maya of assimilating into the Mexican national economy are likely to be very high. Following this, D. L. Crooks examines the relationships between poverty, nutrition and childhood growth in the eastern Kentucky region of central Appalachia.

The final section is called ‘Steps toward a critical biological anthropology’, and has five chapters, each considering different ways in which this discipline could integrate more political, economic, historical and socio-cultural perspectives. The first of these, by G. Armelagos, considers the lack of utility of the notion of race in either human biological research or in epidemiology. In the second chapter, M. L. Blakey considers problems associated with theory-building when attempting to create a humanistic, critical, and political-economic approach to the study of human biology. In her chapter, L. M. Morgan argues that any attempt to introduce political economy into biological anthropology will be as influenced by circumstances outside the academy as by attitudes and views within it. In the following chapter, S. Valko and A. Escobar develop the theme of political ecology and its usefulness as a tool for social movements striving to counter modern economic development and modern concepts of nature. The final chapter, by G. A. Smith and R. B. Thomas, titled ‘What could be: biocultural anthropology for the next generation’, summarizes the most important outcomes of the Wenner-Gren Symposium: this was clearly a bridge-planning meeting, with many blue-prints for possible bridge-building being put forward.
The volume is largely exploratory, and is as a consequence patchy. While one might welcome a greater degree of analysis, there is considerable imagination displayed by various authors. The extent to which anthropology is at crisis is debatable, and therefore the extent to which the messages of this book will be widely accepted can be questioned. That said, many of the chapters are interesting, useful, and attempt to break new ground. This book should be bought and read, at least in part if not in totality, by medical anthropologists and human biologists of all persuasions, because the tensions described by many of the authors here are very real, will not go away, and will have to be addressed seriously if the discipline is to develop.

Stanley J. Ulijaszek
University of Oxford and St Cross College, Oxford


Anyone who has tried to teach courses on research methods will know well the problem of finding statistical texts that are both comprehensive and comprehensible, and methodological texts that include some substantive discussion of the crucial stages of research design, construct specification, and measurement validation. Now comes a rare thing indeed: a completely new text on social science research by only a single author that lives up to its claim to integrate three crucial topics that are usually treated in separate kinds of literature. This book is aimed at university lecturers and postgraduate students of research methods and statistics in sociology, education studies and anthropology and fills a major gap in the textbook market. A substantive introduction to the challenges of research design is followed by a clear synopsis of the basic statistical approaches used in a majority of research projects. It obviates the need for lecturers to scour the stacks for useful readings on how to plan and conduct social science research or for research students to buy a multitude of books only parts of which will help them.

It is suited for use in a comprehensive set of dove-tailed courses on research design, methods and analysis which would extend over at least two terms or semesters, but will be a useful source of presentation and testing materials for tutors and lecturers and a handy reference for students and junior researchers. It is very sensibly organized into six parts: ‘Introduction to Research Design’; ‘Measurement Design’; ‘Turning Data into Information Using Statistics’; ‘Ex Post Facto, Experimental and Quasi-Experimental Designs: Parametric Tests’; ‘Non-Parametric Tests: Nominal and Ordinal Variables’; ‘Describing Non-Causal Relationships’. These are followed by the obligatory statistical tables, a useful Glossary of Mathematical Symbols, Equations and Excel Function, and a perhaps less useful Introduction to Spreadsheets. The statistical sections will be comprehensible to anyone with a secondary or high school level understanding of mathematics. Most noteworthy, the emphasis is on training investigators to think scientifically, and thus analytically and
statistically, rather than simply to attempt to dignify their studies by the peremptory incorporation of poorly specified quantitative data. The layout is appealing and serviceable, and there are some extremely helpful diagrams. There is good and detailed guidance on performing standard data cleaning and analysis functions in Excel and references to the greater power and functionality of SPSS® and SAS®.

I have some reservations that the text is rather wordy and tends towards over-explanation of topics. Students who are completely new to the ideas may find it all a bit overwhelming on a first read, and I suspect any future editions will be pruned down based on feedback from course tutors. The examples are weighted towards the sociological and therefore may not appeal strongly to students in anthropology, behavioural sciences, public health or community nutrition. Nevertheless, along with a good field methods manual in the appropriate discipline (e.g. Bernard’s recently updated Methods in Cultural Research) it should help provide the grounding many postgraduate students now need to get on with a project.

Daniel Sellen
Departments of Anthropology and International Health,
Emory University


Since 1912 when the term was first coined, vitamins have captured the imagination of the general public. Even at this stage, namely the infancy of the golden age of nutrition, the perception of vitamins promulgated by the popular press was one of miracles. Since this time there have been vocal proponents and opponents of vitamin supplementation, and all attempts to regulate vitamin supplementation have met with fierce consumer opposition. Vitamania traces the controversy since the 1910s and investigates the roles of the full gamut of players: scientists, manufacturers, pharmacists, policymakers, politicians, vitamin retailers and the consumers. Two common themes emerge from the arguments of the opponents, namely the continued desire for consumer protection and the authority of science. The opponents, on the other hand, are not enamoured with the patronizing fervour of the would-be regulators, or the threat of removing their right to decide on the vitamins they wish to consume in supplement form.

Vitamania is packed with useful pieces of historical information as it traces the milestones in this tale. Some key areas covered are the fight over who should be the primary purveyor of vitamin supplements to the public, pharmacist or grocer; the dilemmas faced by scientists over funding sources for research, patents, or who should advise on their use; the various legislative modifications, including that of 1975 which resulted in the reclassification of vitamin supplements from drug to food and the implications of that change. The author draws heavily on the account of the commercial availability of vitamin D to illustrate the tricky position the scientist is in. In fact this section of the book seems to me to be overextended and my interest waned.

On one level it is startling how little has changed over the 90-year history of this debate. Yet marked change has occurred, including recognition of the limitations and
misuse of the R D A s and the now common-use ideal of attempting to define intakes for optimal health. The original arguments of nutritional insurance versus the elixir of optimal health still remain, but there is a feeling that progress is being made, be it at an infinitesimally slow rate.

Above all, one can’t help but be astounded by the fact that the public will respond with vocal indignation when adequate motivation is there: people can be nudged from their complacency and put pen to paper when an issue which they believe to improve their lives is involved. In a 12-month period ending in the spring of 1994, more than 100,000 letters and telephone calls were received by Congress in support of the Hatch-Richardson bill (a modification which resulted in a reduced level of scientific agreement being required before manufacturers could use a health claim). Consumer action has been alive and well throughout this story.

This historical account will be of interest to those who require a clear idea of the steps and players in this debate. However, Vitamania has broader appeal as well. For example, students of marketing may be interested in the account of the development of food advertising, and anyone with a focus on consumer action will find the history of the use of vitamin supplements an excellent example. For nutrition scientists the message is sobering: the authority of science with respect to nutrition does not rank highly among Americans.

JILL SHERIFF
Curtin University of Technology,
Perth, Australia