

Commentary II

Evolution of some epidemiologic methods and concepts in selected textbooks of the 20th century: a review

Dr. Susser is professor emeritus at the Gertrude Sergievsky Center, Columbia University in New York

Assuming I was editing your journal, I would not hesitate to publish this brief review of epidemiological texts. Of course, since one of my books is also one of the subjects of the review, you might well sniff bias. I regret that I do not have the time right now to write an adequate commentary; I leave for South Africa within a short while for a two month-sojourn. Should you choose to publish some or all of these few comments, you are welcome to do so.

Overall, I think the commentary is generally well-written, fair and appropriate; given the brevity of the review, it earns a description as succinct. It seems to me that the selection of texts and the discussion are generally satisfactory. Each book, that the authors choose to denote one period from another, does reflect something of a new departure for each generation. One point of detail: the choice of MacMahon & Pugh (1970) considerably misplaces in time the true and earlier impact of MacMahon, Pugh & Ipsen (1960), the forerunner of the later 1970 text, which was essentially the innovative first edition of the 1970 text.

With regard to my own work, as with any author one may be oversensitive to omissions and error. The authors refer to the topic of ecological systems and fallacies as being addressed only more recently than the appearance of the texts

reviewed. It happens that this is the only omission worth noting in respect of my own work. My book on *Causal thinking*, for the first time in any epidemiological text as far as I know, addresses the fundamentals of ecological systems virtually from the outset of the work. Certainly it is inherent in my conception of what I intended the book itself to do. The text also treats of the ecological fallacies that always may snuggle within such systems. The risk of fallacy is dealt with both directly and indirectly in Chapter 6.

I recognize that the authors have carefully circumscribed their topic to cover texts and not papers. I believe, however, that in discussing development across generations they might with benefit consider the conceptual framework of successive scientific revolutions provided by Thomas Kuhn and placed the texts reviewed within that context. Admittedly the concept in epidemiology is fully developed neither in my own nor any other of the texts discussed, but only much later in my papers on "The evolution of epidemiology since WW 2" and on "Choosing a future for epidemiology" (with Ezra Susser). Still, I think that I can say that the idea is in fact present in nascent form in *Causal thinking in the health sciences*.

Mervyn W. Susser

References

MacMahon B, Pugh TF, Ipsen J (1960). Epidemiologic methods. Boston: Little, Brown and Company.

MacMahon B, Pugh TF (1970). Epidemiology: principles and methods. Boston: Little, Brown and Company.

Susser M (1981). Epidemiology in the United States after World War II: The evolution of technique. *Epidemiol Rev* 7: 147–77.

Susser M, Susser E (1996). Choosing a future for epidemiology: I. Eras and Paradigms. II. From Black Boxes to Chinese Boxes. *Am J Publ Health* 86: 668–78.

Address for correspondence

Prof. emer. Mervyn W. Susser
School of Public Health
Sergievsky Center
630 W. 168 St.
New York, NY 10032, USA
e-mail: mws2@columbia.edu