



Book review: Research Methods in Health Humanities

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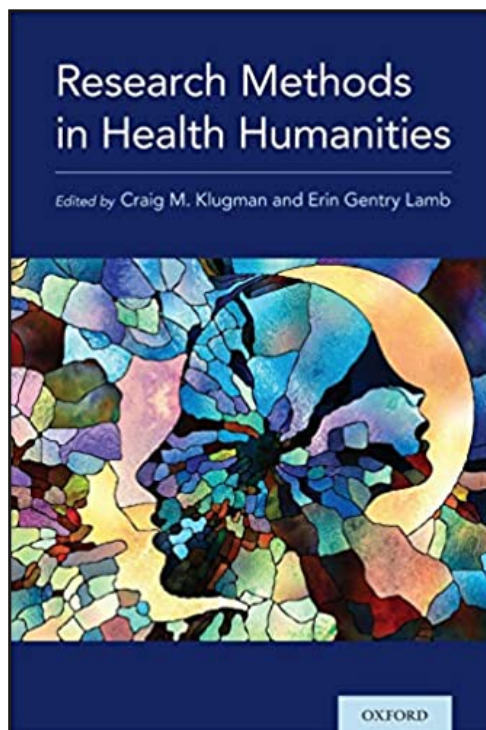
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Research Methods in Health Humanities, edited by Klugman and Lamb, and published by Oxford University Press, begins, most appropriately, by reiterating the need for medical students to have a grounding in both the sciences and the humanities, and it goes on to detail the progression from the Medical to the Health Humanities. The progression has been an interesting journey that continues to find its way through refinement of thought and action. As it builds upon the work already done, a strong case is made for the work in progress

to be accurately documented. For that to happen, we must use reliable data collected through robust research methods, and therein lies the strength of this book.

Medical researchers have traditionally been trained to use quantitative methods of research; however, the humanities requires a different capability – that of qualitative research. This book seeks to introduce the reader to methods likely to prove invaluable to health humanities researchers.

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The first thing to strike me was the cover. To me, the pieces of different sizes, shapes, and colors represent the diversity that is given in this field. The way the pieces fit together is a clue to the inherent inter-connectedness of the humanities and medicine.

The contributors are twenty five eminently qualified researchers from a diverse set of disciplines spanning - besides medicine - the arts, literature, and narrative medicine. There is also a comic artist and a chaplain among the authors; the book, thus, offers a wide array of perspectives befitting its transdisciplinary structure.

The content is organised into four sections: texts, contexts, people, and programs; each is linked to the next in an engaging sequence. Each chapter begins with a clearly defined set of learning objectives followed by an introduction, an overview, and then details of the research method, including limitations of the exercise. There follows a summary and a set of sample exercises to aid the reader. Generous resources and references are provided at the end of each chapter.

The first section, pertaining to texts, is about using language and its nuances as a research method; it's about life writing as a genre; about visual media like films and comics and art; and finally about using archives for research. Healthcare providers need to consider that the same word may mean different things depending on cultural and other contexts; and that the words one uses can impact how patients manage their health and their illnesses. I found the chapter on metaphors particularly interesting. Simplifying facts for patients through the use of metaphors is highly prevalent in medicine (body as battleground, for example); they are also used to creatively describe symptoms that could otherwise be difficult to describe (a headache: pounding with a hammer).

The second section, contexts, focuses on the

environment and introduces the reader to social justice and health disparities, to age and disability as identity categories, to political, cultural and religious influences on health and illness, and to digital health technology. The emphasis is on learning how to identify research problems in these areas, in using appropriate tools to fill gaps in knowledge, and advocating for change. I, for one, was glad to see an entire chapter devoted to ageism and ableism, given as how the covid-19 pandemic has exaggerated disparities and has, consequently, adversely impacted these very populations - the aged and the disabled.

The third section is about the people; about their experiences of illness as a group and, equally importantly, to get an understanding of the lived experiences of individuals; about community dialogues and interviews as health humanities tools; and about using fiction writing to understand beliefs, attitudes, and assumptions of people. I imagine that the chapter on interviews will be greatly welcomed by health researchers struggling to competently and effectively utilise this very complex and extremely versatile tool. The same can be said for the fourth and final section on programs. Designing and using surveys to get information directly from populations, and understanding mixed method research are must-know areas in health humanities research. The final chapters on program evaluation and evidence synthesis provide a fitting closure to this section, and to the book.

This book is a wonderful resource for anyone interested in researching the health humanities. In following the advice of the authors, new researchers will be able to produce a reliable document of their work for the betterment of the field.

I recommend everyone working or hoping to work in the field of health humanities to read this book and use it as a constant reference and guide.