



Book Review: Alternative professional projects - Biographical accounts of doctors who practice non-conventional medicine

Reseña: Proyectos profesionales alternativos - Relatos biográficos de médicos que practican medicinas no convencionales

Betina Freidin. *Alternative professional projects - Biographical accounts of doctors who practice non-conventional medicine*. Buenos Aires: Ediciones Imago Mundi; 2014. 128 pages. ISBN: 978-950-793-188-8.

*Esteban S. Grippaldi*¹

In the context of development of therapeutic modalities, Argentina offers an increasing number of research studies on the promotion and use of alternative medicines. The research object of this production of knowledge tends to be focused on patients and specialists who have no education in biomedicine. In her recent book, sociologist and PhD in Social Sciences Betina Freidin^[a] focuses on

a phenomenon seldom approached at the local level. In this way, the author investigates the biographical journeys and the perspectives of allopathic physicians who have strayed off the traditional medicine to practice alternative and complementary medicines.^[b]

The book, which is the result of an empirical research study in sociology of health, is intended for academic readers. The object of the research study, as Freidin explains in the first few pages, is a group of "heterodox physicians,"^(1 p.3) specially, homeopaths, acupuncturists and ayurvedic practitioners within the Metropolitan Area of the Province of Buenos Aires (AMBA) [Área Metropolitana de Buenos Aires.] The sociologist highlights three closely related purposes of her research study which also serve as the central arguments of the book. In this regard, she proposes to determine the following: in the first place, "the personal circumstances and professional experiences" which lead this group of professionals to become involved in alternative medicines, in the second place, "the impact of such interest on their professional lives and identities" and, finally, "the several ways in which alternative medicines can be applied to different contexts within their professional practices."^(1 p. 17) Furthermore, what then is the research strategy used by the author to build up and to approach these purposes?

To conduct this study on heterodox professionals, Freidin started from a constructivist theoretical approach. She specifically adopted the principles of symbolic interactionism and emphasized an interest in the construction of meanings from the perspective of the actors.

¹Undergraduate degree in Sociology. PhD in Social Sciences, Universidad de Buenos Aires. PhD scholarship holder, Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas (CONICET), offered at the Universidad Nacional del Litoral, Santa Fe, Argentina.



This analytic key helped the author to explore and understand the processes of identity construction and to acquire new professional knowledge. This theoretical conception is inextricably linked with the methodological strategy. Therefore, by adopting both conceptions the author develops and addresses the research objectives.

Being consistent with the assumptions of symbolic interactionism, Freidin adopts a methodological qualitative approach with a biographical orientation. In this way, through bibliographic accounts, the author identifies the inflection points, the tensions with the biomedical paradigm, the crisis [between what?], the obstacles in the implementation of new practices, and the transformative experiences throughout the professional lives of the interviewees. The study sample includes 42 semi-structured interviews with an equal number of men and women. The selection criterion was the following: the interviewed candidates had to be physicians from different allopathic specialties who practiced non-conventional medicines – homeopathy, acupuncture, and Ayurveda – within the AMBA. In addition, for the selection of cases, the sociologist sought age diversity. This criterion helped collect, through their testimonies, several experiences from physicians who graduated in different decades, which guaranteed that they worked in different time periods throughout health care history.

From the objectives proposed, the analytical focus of the research study was primarily approached from the microsocial level. However, anchoring on this dimension does not necessarily suggest overlooking the relationship between the medium and macro dimensions observed in the object of study. Therefore, to understand the experiences and itineraries of heterodox professionals, Freidin recurrently frames the voices of these actors within a wider historical and sociocultural context in which they are interacting. Supported by current studies on the medical field conducted in Argentina and worldwide, the author states that, in contemporary societies, as a result of a far-reaching historical process which is not free of conflict, biomedicine, which is part of the dominant medical system, increasingly coexists with holistic approaches and alternative therapies. In the context of late modernity, there is a noticeable increase in the available options provided by health care through specialists and users, accompanied by questioning the expert knowledge of the biomedical paradigm that is based on western scientific rationality. Therefore, in the current scenario, characterized by “therapeutic pluralism,”^(1 p. 4) there is a promotion of alternative and complementary therapies and, in this sociohistorical context, recovering the testimonials of the heterodox professionals with an interest to gain knowledge of more comprehensive and humanized treatment practices becomes of central importance.

Now then, what did the biographical accounts reveal? The different testimonies do not provide a single answer. One of the main merits of the book is its ability to describe this complex scenario from the perspectives and experiences of heterodox physicians without reducing the diverse perspectives and positions. Thus, far from blending the multiple voices into a single opinion, as if it were a homogeneous group, the author rebuilds the different professional experiences and accounts of the physicians engaged in non-conventional medicines, showing the contrasting elements, which reveal the significant differences among them.

To account the differences between those who choose to practice conventional versus non-conventional medicine, the author provides multiple reasons. These reasons include those of professional nature, “primarily, frustrations during medical training and unsatisfactory work experiences in the medical job market as well as university support for postgraduate training opportunities in alternative and complementary medicines,” along with personal reasons, “spiritual quest and personal experiences,”^(1 p.85) such as seeking to relieve pain. In addition, the position they adopted regarding the biomedical model takes diverse modalities. While, on the one hand, many testimonies attempt to increase the therapeutic resources by means of alternative medicines, on the other hand, other testimonies establish a more radical approach, as a result of undergoing some “deep crisis.”^(1 p.86) It is highlighted that the approach to heterodox

medicines is facilitated by professional and informal relationships during graduate and post-graduate training; the family of origin; an incursion parallel to the training in biomedicine, while seeking relief to personal afflictions or spiritual quests. In addition, although the majority of the interviewees include more than one alternative medicine in their professional practice, there are differences between those seeking to increase the therapeutic resources and those tending to become specialized in a heterodox approach.

Despite the diversity found in this study, the author still acknowledges the similarities among the physicians who practice non-conventional medicines. The common basis of this group, from which they build their professional identities as heterodox physicians, is their critical position regarding the orthodox medical model. Beyond the differences in biographic journeys, experiences, and reasons, a commonality among the accounts is the need to reconcile with their professional practice through alternative and complementary medicines.

Regarding the structure, the book has a logical and coherent organization. In the first pages, Freidin justifies the main components of the research study, explaining the precedents of this topic, objectives, analytic perspective, methodological strategy, and guidelines of the field research work. In the two subsequent chapters, the author addresses the results obtained, in strict accordance with the research objectives. Then, in the second chapter, the author describes the diverse "biographic journeys," which refers to the series of motives and reasons, and the personal and professional experiences that lead physicians with orthodox training to practice non-conventional medicines. In the third chapter, Freidin expands principally on the different ways interviewees practice alternative medicines and makes references to their workplace. In the conclusion, Freidin restates the main ideas of the argument. In a few pages, she summarizes the different aspects explained throughout the book. Finally, in the "Annex" she briefly describes the development of homeopathy, acupuncture and Ayurveda in Argentina; she specifically considers their promotion in medical circles, institutionalization processes, and involved regulatory aspects. Her writings properly integrate quotations of the interviewees to both clarify and illustrate how the arguments were developed.

The book by Freidin represents a valuable contribution of empirical knowledge on the perspectives and experiences of physicians trained in conventional medicine who reoriented their practices to alternative and complementary medicines, in a scenario framed by therapeutic pluralism. Freidin invites the reader to both explore and understand the perspectives of practitioners who dissent from conventional medical practice with respect to the ways in which they identify with their profession, the tensions and obstacles of their daily work, and the differences with biomedicine. In a cultural context which shows an increase in the therapeutic modalities, the author gives a voice to those who criticize the hegemonic medical model which is comprised of socialized individuals. Furthermore, Freidin highlights, from an innovative perspective, a disregarded line of work at the national level which helps to open new horizons for research and interpretation.

REFERENCES

Freidin B. *Proyectos profesionales alternativos: Relatos biográficos de médicos que practican medicinas no convencionales*. Buenos Aires: Ediciones Imago Mundi; 2014.

ENDNOTES

[a] The research study that gave origin to this book was financed by the Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas (CONICET) through the research project titled "La práctica de

la medicina integrativa en Argentina." Betina Freidin holds an undergraduate degree in Sociology and a masters' degree in Social Research granted by Universidad de Buenos Aires. Additionally, the author is an independent researcher of the CONICET and holds a PhD in Sociology awarded by Brandeis University, Massachusetts, EE.UU.

[b] The terms alternative medicine, alternative and complementary medicines, non-conventional medicines and heterodox medicines are used interchangeably in this article, a criterion followed by Freidin in the book cited herein.

CITATION

Grippaldi ES. Book Review: Alternative professional projects - Biographical accounts of doctors who practice non-conventional medicine. *Salud Colectiva*. 2012;12(2):307-310. doi: 10.18294/sc.2016.890.

Received: 22 March 2016 | Accepted: 11 May 2016



Content is licensed under a Creative Commons

Attribution — you must attribute the work in the manner specified by the author or licensor (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work).

Noncommercial — You may not use this work for commercial purposes.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.18294/sc.2016.890>

The translation of this article is part of an inter-departmental and inter-institutional collaboration including the Undergraduate Program in Sworn Translation Studies (English < > Spanish) and the Institute of Collective Health at the Universidad Nacional de Lanús and the Health Disparities Research Laboratory at the University of Denver. This article was translated by Amira Celeste Giudice and Ayelen D'Apice, reviewed by María Pibernus and modified for publication by Audrey Adler under the guidance of Julia Roncoroni.