

## Book Review

# More Inclusive Ambitions for Public Health

**BOOK REVIEWS: *ECOLOGICAL PUBLIC HEALTH: RESHAPING THE CONDITIONS FOR GOOD HEALTH (2012)* BY G. RAYNER AND T. LANG. LONDON: ROUTLEDGE**

Use of the term “ecological” in relation to public health has most commonly been in the health promotion field, with “ecological models” describing the complex set of layered, primarily social determinants of health and health practices (Richard et al. 2011). For Rayner and Lang, both in their book *Ecological Public Health: Reshaping the conditions for good health* (Rayner and Lang 2012) and their follow-up article (Lang and Rayner 2012), “the power of ecological thinking is its acceptance of complex and multilayered connections.” Citing Robert Constanza’s work, they note that human health “depends upon eco-systems health. They interrelate, interact and are in tension, but they are also inseparable. ...this is the core dynamic tension at the heart of what we call Ecological Public Health.” (p. 52) Addressing public health more broadly on this environmental conception of health, they argue that it “is now the twenty-first century’s unavoidable task.”

In this core thesis, the authors’ perspective is likely in agreement with that of most readers of the EcoHealth journal. Their book joins a spate of articles and books coming from public health or global health (e.g., White et al. 2013) which build on the work of public health–ecohealth boundary spanners (e.g., McMichael, Hancock, Last, and Butler). They incorporate biological–physical as well as social complexity, and ecological thinking, as fundamental to improvement of human health globally. Though more circuitous in their arguments than some readers of EcoHealth may have patience for, Rayner and Lang do so in sufficiently innovative ways to make their book worth a read, particularly by professors, students, and

civil society organization members interested in human health and ecosystem linkages.

They start (Chap. 1) with a set of nine competing *images* of public health among which the following may resonate with the *Ecohealth* community: ... responding to pandemic disease; focusing on ... wider determinants; health as the operation of systems; and public health as interactions and transitions. Chapter 2 turns to *ambitions* which should characterize “good public health” in the twenty-first century several of which are consonant with *Ecohealth* perspectives: recognize the challenge of complexity; recast public health as interdisciplinary collaboration; build public health around the fact of continuous change; and rethink public health on ecological principles. In the last, they refer to Charles Darwin’s “entangled bank” metaphor which “suggests the coexistence of different [kinds] of life: animals, plants, soil, energy, the environment...and hints at the role of humans and their reflective intellectual competence at unravelling its realities.” (p. 63). Chapter 3 presents yet another approach, drawing primarily on European and North American public health history, to present five *models* of public health among which Sanitary-Environmental and Ecological Public Health will be most familiar. They propose an expanded version of the latter to overlap with other models as an integrated approach.

Recognizing change as a core notion in public health, the authors use Part II of the book to describe nine *transitions*, key to understanding fundamental global dynamics which shape both health outcomes and the possibilities of public health interventions. The authors are trying to push traditional public health analysis from the two more familiar ones—demographic (Chap. 4) and epidemiological-health (Chap. 5)—to more equally consider a range of other transitions : urban (Chap. 6), energy (Chap. 7), economic (Chap. 8), nutrition (Chap. 9), cultural (Chap.

11), and democratic (Chap. 12). Their treatment of transitions which are more familiar to EcoHealth readers—microbiological and natural ecological (Chap. 10)—are summary at best. This is understandable, perhaps, in a book taking such a sweeping view. The history and emergence of infectious agents are a focus of the microbiological transition, and reference is made to Millennium Ecosystem Assessment in the ecological transition, including that project's approach to drivers of change. This chapter most explicitly cites examples from lower and middle income countries, unfortunately not prominent in much of rest of the book. The authors roughly categorize current social and political responses to the evidence of the Ecological Transition as follows: denial and economic-technological optimism are least dramatic; international agreements, conservation, and costing externalities are incremental approaches; and the use of eco-systems approaches in everyday life, drawing on indigenous knowledge and enhancing biodiversity is the more radical approach.

The final part (III), including Chap. 13, lays out a set of eight *implications* of their analyses. Implication 1 “Use ecological thinking to address public health” argues for moving the expanded Ecological Public Health model from being marginal, as in most public health writing and action, to more central, unifying, and encompassing of a wide range of social actors and sectors. The authors exhort us to “Invoke the public health imagination” (implication 4) to bring about society-wide change, harking back to their discussion of *images* and the need for persuasive, energizing narratives around which to advocate.

Their analysis of the food system, its current negative impacts and the potential for change is exemplary, drawing on their own scholarship and work with policy makers. Among the other implications (8) “Unify natural and human sustainability” is consonant with much *Ecohealth* thinking. By citing a Nigerian pediatrician's views on the essential role of democratic leadership, they are expanding the usual framings of sustainability in ways that link to implication 7 “re-energize public health as a social movement.” I find this point particularly important given the slow process of institutional change toward sustainability.

Overall, the authors' work on historical and conceptual synthesis is illuminating. Their comprehensiveness means that some parts of the book may be already well known to some readers or not of interest to others. Fortunately, the iterative nature of the book's story means that such chapters or sections can be skimmed without major impacts on readers' grasp of the book's messages. In addition, the book

is mostly grounded in high income country experiences, incorporating much less of lower or middle income experiences and literature than I would have expected, given the authors' professed interest in improving health globally. At times, the authors' invoking of Ecological Public Health as the answer, neglects the extent to which the notion will mean different things to different people in different contexts and lead to different sets of actions accordingly. The authors' appreciation of heterogeneity and complexity should countenance greater humility!

Nevertheless, within the broad tent of ecohealth-informed scholarship and practice (Parkes 2012), I think that Rayner and Lang's advocacy of Ecological Public Health has a place. For those among us rooted in public and environmental health, they push us to broadly integrate other models. For those with other disciplinary or practice backgrounds, particularly in conservation medicine and ecology, they provide multiple bridges upon which to argue links with social and cultural changes that are important for the biosphere. Conceptually, they prompt us to think of continuity with historical thinking and well as imagining new sets of ideas. Practically, they call upon us to jointly fire up the public's imagination, emphasizing some images in the public eye that have greater possibilities of overcoming recalcitrant forces and bringing about change.

Donald C. Cole

Dalla Lana School of Public Health, Institute for Global Health Equity & Innovation,  
University of Toronto, Room 402 (Ste 400), Health Sciences Building, 155 College Street, Toronto, ON M5T3M7, Canada  
e-mail: donald.cole@utoronto.ca

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