


Jan Domaradzki 

Uniwersytet Medyczny im. Karola Marcinkowskiego



BUILDING BRIDGES BETWEEN MEDICINE AND SOCIOLOGY

Book Review of **Włodzimierz Piątkowski**. *From Medicine to Sociology. Health and Illness in Magdalena Sokołowska's Research Conceptions*. Bern: Peter Lang, 2020, 274 pp. ISBN 978-3-631-82057-5.

In 2020, Peter Lang published a book *From Medicine to Sociology. Health and Illness in Magdalena Sokołowska's Research Conceptions* by Włodzimierz Piątkowski. The author of the book is one of the leading Polish medical sociologists and a professor at the Medical University of Lublin and Maria Curie University. Based on his long acquaintance with the scientist with whom, in various forms, Piątkowski had collaborated for over fourteen years, the author offers an in-depth account of the intellectual biography of Magdalena Sokołowska (1922-1989), the “mother of Polish medical sociology” and co-founder of the European medical sociology.

From Medicine to Sociology brilliantly draws the intellectual path of this great Polish female scholar, who started her professional carrier as a nurse and a physician with the American degree in public health and then became a sociologist. Even though Sokołowska is somehow marginalized by the history of Polish and European sociology, Piątkowski observes that she belonged to the first generation of socially orientated physicians and was among the few scholars who pointed out that while physicians were not interested in sociology, sociologists themselves were not so much concerned with the problems of health and illness. Moreover, Sokołowska was among those who defined the relation between medicine and sociology, set the framework and standards for the new discipline, defined its character, shaped its “identity” and developed a theoretical and empirical foundation for sociology of medicine, health and illness. Consequently, she was included among medical sociologists who helped to build the bridges between medicine and sociology¹. Furthermore, while she pioneered many research projects in medical sociology, she also introduced this young sociological subdiscipline to Europe and Poland. Thus, Piątkowski brilliantly shows

Jan Domaradzki, Uniwersytet Medyczny im. Karola Marcinkowskiego, jandomar@ump.edu.pl; ORCID 0000-0002-9710-832X.

¹ R.H. Elling, M. Sokołowska (Eds.), *Medical Sociologists at Work*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Books 1978.

that Sokołowska not only was the cofounder of (Polish) medical sociology but also lay ground to many conceptual endeavors in medical sociology, sociology of medicine, sociology of disability, sociology of health and sociology of health promotion. To support this argument with a great passion and erudition the author describes the studies Sokołowska initiated in the field of the women's work and health, occupational, industrial and medical sociology, disability and rehabilitation, (dis)functioning of the medical system, sociothanatology or complementary and alternative medicine, inequalities in health and illness or sociology of health promotion.

The book is divided into seven chapters. It opens with the Introduction which draws Sokołowska's biography and intellectual path from medicine to sociology. However, apart from providing the readers with some important biographical facts, Piątkowski describes how twenty years of Sokołowska's experience as an active physician influenced her interest in social hygiene and social medicine that lead her towards medical sociology. Simultaneously, the author suggests that because Sokołowska never received formal sociological training, she often felt as a "foreign body" among other sociologists.

The first chapter describes Sokołowska's, then industrial and occupational physician, involvement in the creation of the foundations of industrial health-care service in the post-war Poland. While characterizing her organizational and social activity, Piątkowski outlines the political and ideological backroad of the era which influenced Sokołowska's research activity. As she was then strongly involved in building of the new socialist system preoccupied with industrialization and working conditions of the working class, she focused her research on the problems of work and industry, the determinants of health and illness. Simultaneously, the chapter highlights Sokołowska's gradual transition from medicine to sociology when she first assumed the role of sociologist, promoted "sociologization" of medicine and also introduced many medical themes into general sociology and its various subdisciplines.

Chapter two outlines Sokołowska's research on women's health. While describing the Sokołowska's shift in focus from social hygiene perspective to sociomedical description of women's work, Piątkowski presents how she pioneered sociological interpretation of what she called "the women's issues" and became the founder of the Polish "feminist version of medical sociology". He presents Sokołowska's sociomedical description of women's work and explanation of the causes of the lower status of women in industrial employment, which, was the first attempt to combine the medical and sociological perspective. Thus, the chapter describes how Sokołowska analyzed and criticized the socio-cultural determinants of women's work and health: the unequal position of women in the workplace, the poorer working conditions of women in the industry, the symptoms of gender discrimination on the labor market, worse pay,

fewer promotion opportunities. It also sketches her analyses of the sex-determined needs related to pregnancy, childbirth and post-partum period. Finally, Piątkowski presents Sokołowska as an active advocate of women's rights, not only in the field of work and health conditions, but also in the context of social life and politics. Thus, while stressing Sokołowska's engagement in the struggle for women's equal rights, Piątkowski suggests that the main inspiration for her engagement in the emancipation and social advancement was women's poorer health.

The third chapter analyzes Sokołowska's involvement in the process of the formation of scientific identity of medical sociology, the theme that was the object of her interest throughout her entire professional activity. While analyzing the historical, political, sociocultural and ideological context of the 1960s, Piątkowski describes Sokołowska's role in building of the cognitive and social identity of medical sociology in Poland and (Eastern) Europe. The chapter also analyzes how her research on the concepts of health, illness and medicine understood as a system of knowledge and actions helped to establish a mutual relation between medicine and sociology, shaped its identity and defined the theoretical and empirical basics of a new sociological subdiscipline. Finally, it describes the character, stages and manifestations of the institutionalization of medical sociology in Poland heralded by Sokołowska.

Chapter four outlines how Sokołowska laid the foundations for studies on disability and rehabilitation. It describes her research on the causes of an increase in the number of the disabled in the society, social perception of disabled persons, including social stereotypes of the disabled, and social barriers encountered by them. Next, Piątkowski shows how Sokołowska operated between various disciplines ranging from medical sociology and urban sociology to sociology of the family. The author shows that in all these cases Sokołowska was always interested in the impact of urbanization, family and socialization on people's health.

In the final chapters, the author explores Sokołowska's analyzes of sociology of the medical profession, including the social role of physicians, sociothanatology and complementary and alternative medicine.

From Medicine to Sociology provides an in-depth insight into the scientific foundations of Polish medical sociology and shows how some important social, political and economic changes have influenced its transformations. Moreover, by showing the specific features of Polish investigations, it describes to what extent Sokołowska's way of thinking about medicine, health and illness was original or to what extent it was influenced by American research.

The unquestionable strength of the book is that although Sokołowska's role and merits for Polish and European medical sociology are somehow acknowledged, her scholarly, organizational and teaching achievements are still not widely recognized. Thus, Piątkowski's monograph is the first attempt to present

an intellectual biography of the “mother of Polish medical sociology” who is often marginalized by Polish and European sociology. For that reason alone it should be of interest to all sociologists interested in the history of sociology and sociology of medicine, health and illness. Moreover, although Piątkowski was Sokołowska’s disciple himself, he has managed to avoid falling into the trap, not so uncommon in the case of such publications, of an overly emotional relationship with the subject of his book. On the contrary, the author keeps distance and, while sketching Sokołowska’s intellectual portrait, he avoids both an apology typical of sentimental biographies and unjust criticisms. For example, while stressing Sokołowska’s pioneering works on the sociomedical dimension of women’s work, Piątkowski admits that her research was somehow naïve. Similarly, although he stresses that Sokołowska criticized some elements of the Soviet industrial society and policy, participated in the “Solidarity” movement and was a member of the Round Table talks, he acknowledges that for many years she was a committed member of the communist party which ruled the Polish People’s Republic and actively supported the principles of the socialist system and its ideology. Finally, the book shows how historical, social and ideological context, i.e. Marxist ideology prevalent in the 1950s and 1960s or the impact of ‘the Solidarity’ revolution influenced Sokołowska’s evolution from ‘medicocentric’ orientation to more critical, sociological orientation.

To conclude, Piątkowski’s book provides a thoroughly meticulous insight into the evolution of Sokołowska’s thinking from “orthodox socialist occupational medicine” to more social and sociological perspective of public health, the shift that was inspired by her experience and collaboration with various sociologists. Thus, not only does it describe the intellectual portrait of this great female scholar, but also fills the gap in our knowledge about the history of European and Polish sociology of medicine, health and illness. Even though Piątkowski might have offered a more profound discussion on the impact of Sokołowska’s research on future generations of sociologists, his book has restored the memory about Sokołowska’s role in the origins, development and institutionalization of Polish and European medical sociology. Thus, *From Medicine to Sociology* should be of interest to all social scientists investigating the relations between medicine, health and illness and society. However, it could be also an enriching read for medical professionals as it shows how sociological research can successfully be applied by healthcare professionals and that sociological imagination is crucial to explain various health problems of society.