

SOCIOLOGY OF HEALTH & ILLNESS

Book Prize Winner 2006

The BSA Medical Sociology Group announced the winner of the Sociology Health and Illness book of the year prize, 2006 at the Medical Sociology Group Annual General Meeting (14th September 2006, Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh).

Iain Wilkinson (2005). **Suffering: A Sociological Introduction**. (Polity Press, 2005).

Nominated by Alan Petersen

Iain Wilkinson's book is a landmark text in the sociology of suffering. Throughout its history, sociology has addressed the causes and implications of suffering, though few writers have explicitly and systematically explored the meanings and moral dimensions of the experience of suffering.

This book key message is the importance of attending to the *lived experience* of suffering. Wilkinson makes the modest claim of undertaking a 'ground-clearing' exercise; however, the book offers substantial insights into the significance of suffering in sociological and other writings in the field. He revisits the classics, showing the different and distinctive approaches of Marx, Weber and Durkheim to 'the problem of suffering' and its role in social change. He points to the limitations of these contributions to confronting the urgent questions of the present, which include growing global disparities in wealth and health, and asks how one might adequately represent and act upon suffering, especially in light of the pervasive mass-media.

Wilkinson introduces the reader to the contributions of writers such as Hannah Arendt and Veena Das, whose work on the subject of suffering may not be well recognised by many sociologists and considers the kinds of ethical frameworks required to nurture greater empathy for 'the other'. Sociologists have tended to focus their attentions on the impact of processes of modernisation and rationalisation on social relationships while neglecting the experience of suffering and its impacts on people and social relations. This would seem to reflect a more general neglect of emotional life in the history of sociology.

How may citizens in the relatively rich Western world respond to the daily barrage of mass media images of suffering in other, geographically remote parts of the world? Are people subject to 'compassion fatigue'? What kinds of perspectives may sociologists bring to this field? And, what might be the political applications and implications of sociological work on suffering? Surely these questions should concern sociologists, particularly sociologists of health and illness. This is a well-researched and an engaging book and I am confident that it will make its mark in the field.