

Comparing perinatal mortality in small samples

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***Helicobacter Pylori* and gastric cancer**

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Socioeconomic differentials in cancer in men

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Socioeconomic factors, menopause, and coronary heart disease risk factors

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Relationship of the rate of use of general health examinations by adults to the use of inpatient services by the elderly in a nationwide survey in Japan

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Non-orthodox health care use: substitute or supplement?

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Children and accidents: a survey of exposure to accident risk among schoolchildren

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A future for the Community Nurse practitioner?

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Road traffic accidents in childhood

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Self assessment of health status and mortality in middle aged British men

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Diets of primary school children in nine British towns

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Health and employment status in late middle age: evidence from the west of Scotland twenty-07 study

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BOOK REVIEWS

Health and Lifestyles. Mildred Blaxter (Pp 268; £12.95) Tavistock/Routledge, 1990. ISBN 0-415-00147-L.

Based on the Health and Lifestyle Survey, this is a large national survey of some 9000 adults in England, Wales, and Scotland carried out in 1984/5 by a multidisciplinary team (containing, among others, a physiologist, a nutritionist, a psychologist, a sports scientist, and a sociologist) based in Cambridge. The survey was funded by the Health Promotion Research Trust, which in 1987 published a preliminary descriptive report of the main findings. Data from the survey have been lodged in the ESRC Survey Archive and are available to researchers.

In this book Mildred Blaxter reports on an analysis which pulls together a large number of variables into summary indices of concepts such as "health", "social circumstances", and "lifestyles", in order to examine the relative importance for people's health of social circumstances and more "voluntary" health related behaviours. This is an ambitious project, as the author admits at the beginning. In focusing on general determinants of health in the population, rather than on the aetiology of specific disorders or the health of particular groups, this is, however, an important and unusual task well worth undertaking.

As always Mildred Blaxter writes well and directly, and she spells out clearly the reasoning underlying the strategy of analysis

and interpretation of results. A wealth of material is presented in some detail in the book, however, and therefore despite the lucidity of the author's style it is possible for the reader to get bogged down in the data. It is not a book to be read quickly in a single sitting in order to get an overview of the topic or analysis, but rather one to be selectively reread in order to derive maximum benefit from the presentation of detailed data and arguments on specific topics.

Blaxter must be one of the few researchers brave enough (and competent enough) to collect and analyse verbatim responses to open ended questions addressed to a sample of 9000. Her fascinating use of the resulting data in a chapter on concepts of health vindicates this unusual use of open ended questions in large scale survey research, and shows that the analysis of these sorts of rich data need not be confined to small scale or less representative research.

The analysis proceeds first by constructing summary indicators and describing their distribution. These cover health (divided into fitness, disease, illness, and psychosocial health: chapter 4); social circumstances (social class, occupation, income, region, type of area, employment, housing etc: chapter 5); behaviours (smoking, alcohol consumption, diet, and exercise: chapter 6); and health related knowledge and attitudes (chapter 7). Various univariate analyses are then presented; for example the relationship between income and fitness, social class and smoking, or health related attitudes and exercise. Finally, the results of multivariate analyses are presented.

The conclusion from the closely argued analysis is that "circumstances"—not only socioeconomic circumstances and the

external environment, but also the individual's psychosocial environment—carry rather more weight, as determinants of health, than healthy or unhealthy behaviours. There is no doubt that the four behaviours examined, and in particular smoking, are relevant to health. They have most effect, however, when the social environment is good: rather less, if it is already unhealthy. Unhealthy behaviour does not reinforce disadvantage to the same extent as healthy behaviour increases advantage" (p233). This is an extremely important conclusion with fascinating implications. The finding of an interaction between social circumstances and health related behaviours in their impact on health is interesting, as is the particular form this interaction takes; one might, for example, have hypothesised the reverse process, ie, that unhealthy behaviours have greatest effects among those already socially disadvantaged.

Doubtless some may dispute certain aspects of the analysis, or the interpretation of the results. What should not be doubted however is the importance of the questions being addressed, nor the usefulness of undertaking this type of analysis on such a large sample. Mildred Blaxter is to be congratulated for taking on this fascinating but difficult analysis.

This book should stimulate further research and thinking about general determinants of health in the population, and among different subgroups in the population, and can be highly recommended as a thought provoking and sometimes surprising read.

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