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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Department of Epidemiology and Population Sciences, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, Keppel Street, London WC1 and M G Marmot, E J Brunner, Mandy Eeley, Ian White (Department of Community Medicine, University College and Middlesex Hospital Medical School, Gower Street, London WC1, UK)

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
S S M Walsh, S N Jarvis (Department of Child Health, University of Newcastle upon Tyne); W Clarke (Northumbria Police Authority); and S Raybould (North East Regional Research Laboratory, Centre for Urban and Regional Development, University of Newcastle upon Tyne, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK)

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

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
sport 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 etiology 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
indicates 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, i.e.
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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