



Study Guide: Socioeconomic Status

Issues and Questions

Last class we discussed health disparities and public health's impetus for closing these gaps. We examined the difference between health inequality and health inequity, and arguments in favor and against these approaches. We also began to look at evidence documenting stark health disparities in the U.S. and abroad. This week we continue our discussion by diving deeper into the social determinants of health, specifically focusing on the ways in which income, education, and employment are linked to health outcomes.

Epidemiologist **Michael Marmot** asks, "Shouldn't our responsibility, as people who are concerned with the health of individuals and communities, try and deal with the circumstances that led her [or him] to be ill in the first place?" The interview with **Marmot** brings up some essential points that contrast traditional medical practices with those in public health.

Chapters from **Berkman** and **Kawachi's** *Social Epidemiology* provide an overview of evidence linking socioeconomic status and health. Apart from listing extensive evidence, this work raises important questions about the limitations of current studies and the importance of understanding when and in what contexts interventions are most effective. **White's** piece presents an overview of an economic intervention found to have significant health impacts on poor children with emotional and behavioral problems, while **Muenning et al.'s** study provides evidence for the lasting effects of a prekindergarten educational intervention on adult health.

All of these readings give evidence linking socioeconomic status to health outcomes. While going through this week's assigned readings you should pay close attention to the research methods used by epidemiologists, including the emphasis on experimental studies, and the benefits and limitations that these approaches may hold.

Questions

1. How do Link and Phelan define the fundamental cause theory? What does this theory tell us about health in regards to the individual and social context? Where does the theory fall short and why is this shortfall important for policy? Along these lines, what do findings on income and education's impact on health imply about the role of heterogeneity in policy making?
2. Epidemiologists are interested in understanding the pathways through which health is altered. This is evident through a research emphasis on experiments that focuses on establishing causal relationships. Referencing chapters from *Social Epidemiology*, what is causal inference? What are some obstacles to establishing causal inference? And, how can these obstacles be addressed through the use of counter-factuals?



3. According to White, how do household finances impact children's health? What are the short-term impacts? What are the potential long-term impacts?
4. What did the Whitehall study discover about the social gradient? How does this relate to relative deprivation? What does this tell us about the relationship between mind and body?

Key Terms

Relative deprivation
Gradient of health
Healthy migrant effect
Fundamental cause theory
Social stratification theory
Critical/Sensitive Period
Accumulation of Risk
Trajectory/ Chain-of-Risk
Causal inference
Reverse causation
Confounding
Quasi-experimental
Cross-over and Spill-over effects
Natural experiments
Human capital
Grossman model

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