This book is one of the results from a European collaborative research programme on social variations in health supported by the European Science Foundation between 1999 and 2003. The programme was organized around three themes, namely life course approaches to the understanding of how health inequalities develop; social and psychological determinants of health inequalities and their psychobiological pathways through which they act; and the importance of macro-social environments for health inequalities. The book also reflects these themes, with an emphasis on the psychosocial determinants.

The book contains an introduction, eight chapters on mechanisms and processes at various levels and a final chapter describing the development of policies and interventions. The chapters are fairly different in style and content, but they all mainly summarize earlier works by the authors and others. Topics covered include the life course perspective, social integration and family structures, coping and control beliefs, aggregate deprivation and welfare state regimes. Thereby most of them can serve as excellent introductions to specific research fields. In the chapter on work and employment, for example, Siegrist and Theorell manage to present not only the demand–control model as well as the effort–reward imbalance model and the empirical underpinnings of these models, but also various processes leading into and out of paid employment. In addition, they discuss work stress as a mediator and effect modifier, and possible policy implications. Also the other chapters provide good overviews of both ideas and results, and sometimes add a new perspective or ideas for future research. In general, however, the reader active in a particular field will recognize most of the arguments and findings presented here.

Although filled with interesting chapters by high-class researchers the volume therefore lacks that little extra that I believe constitutes a great book. Partly this might be caused by the fact that very little new evidence is actually produced, despite the title. Partly it might be because some of the more interesting issues raised, like how social policy may impact social integration or how welfare state regimes affect health inequalities, are mainly only illustrated since the data needed to test these ideas were not at hand. But mainly I would have liked to see more of a synthesis coming out of this exercise. A final chapter where the empirical evidence and theoretical interpretations throughout the book could have been pulled together and new challenging ideas could have been put forward. A very difficult task indeed, but given the line-up of authors not an impossible one.

Some of this is actually covered in the introductory chapter. However, the discussion there is partly formed as a critique of the Black report, which is to kick in doors already open. Also, the editors tend to be advocates for the psychosocial approach to understanding health inequalities, which they feel has been neglected ‘...at the expense of an overly favoured material explanation’ (p. 7). While the debate between psycho-social and neo-material views has been central in the scientific discussion around health inequalities for some time, I believe that a continuation of this debate is fairly counterproductive.

Rather, there is much to gain from a more integrative approach\(^1\). This is also recognized by Siegrist and Marmot when they argue that the social gradient in poor health is likely to be the result of psychosocial factors in interaction with material conditions (p. 6). Therefore, an exclusive emphasis on psychosocial phenomena might be as problematic as an exclusive emphasis on physical life circumstances, and here the book in a sense represents a missed opportunity to advance our understanding of the interplay between the psychosocial and material sides of the coin. Probably this is the unfortunate consequence of this book being a result of a research programme being conceived and launched in the late 1990s when this debate was heated.

In sum, I find that the book could become important as an introduction for researchers and students that are going into the field of health inequalities research. It might also serve as a reference source for researchers who want to broaden their scope into areas they are not that familiar with. That are indeed important achievements, but I had hoped for more.

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This is an excellent contribution to the growing literature that examines environmental health and justice by focusing on how laypeople and their community organizations detect environmental health problems, conduct research independently or in collaboration with scientists and then effectively press for remediation and future prevention. The ‘street science’ driven by ‘local knowledge’ that Corburn documents uses ‘local insights joined with professional techniques’ to examine four efforts in the Greenpoint/Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, New York.

Corburn applies his theoretical toolkit to examine subsistence fishing in the East River and efforts by the Environmental Protection Agency and New York City officials to document cumulative exposures, asthma in the Brooklyn Latino community, childhood lead poisoning and efforts to address sandblasting of the Williamsburg Bridge and localized air pollutants in the region. He chooses them because they are contested environmental health hazards for which there is an organized sector of the community, because the activists use environmental health science and because laypeople challenge the descriptions and prescriptions of the situation offered by professionals. It is exciting to see the creative cultural, scientific and political efforts by groups such as El Puente and the Toxic Avengers youth group.

Several notable approaches to research have become prominent in citizen campaigns and in some government and academic grant programmes—participatory action research, community-based participatory research, popular epidemiology—and these have reshaped environmental health organizing. Many scholars working in this area have found kinships with environmental justice activists who press for action on unequal racial and class distributions of hazards. Together, the scholars and activists working in this arena creatively expand the notion of environmental health and justice to include community development, traffic patterns, crime and violence, school quality, food justice and virtually all elements of social life. However, a good deal of case study research on popular epidemiology and community-based research more narrowly focus on the conduct and translation of science; Corburn extends his analysis to the multi-faceted and creative ways groups not only conduct science, but also how they leverage it to support their organizing. Corburn richly describes how citizens group merge science with other cultural and political tactics, as most vividly seen in his portrayal of the Toxic Avengers youth group, whose wall murals breathe community life into their organizing activities.

This work is grounded in science, technology and society studies. From one of his mentors, Sheila Jasanoff, Corburn applies the notion of ‘co-production’ of science in which ‘science and politics are interdependent, each drawing from the other in a dynamic iterative process’. Corburn’s case studies are great examples of this dynamic interplay. For example, Corburn effectively shows us that ‘street science’ contributes extensively to many groups of actors. It helps professionals reveal problems they may have overlooked, fills data gaps, facilitates access to otherwise unreachable officials or regulators, expands the scope of implementation practices and boosts their success and improves trust and credibility. Street science helps citizens in their community organizing efforts, neighbourhood empowerment, community control, ability to engage in solutions and capacity to expand the range of responses to environmental hazards.

Perhaps one of the most compelling themes in Street Science is Corburn’s portrayal of the dynamic implications of research on organizing and politics. This is a tricky issue that many analysts have been unwilling to tackle, and it is good that Corburn raises it. Corburn wisely points to one of the problems seen in some communities that strategically leverage science.

Reference