

Book review

How big should we be? A Herculean task accomplished

Chief editor and author Thomas Samaras does not identify the intended audience for his book reviewed here, *Human Body Size and the Laws of Scaling: Physiological, Performance, Growth, Longevity and Ecological Ramifications*⁽¹⁾. Interested readers will include a wide range of diversified generalists and specialists, such as nutritionists, physicians, nurses, demographers, epidemiologists and public health professionals – and more besides.

It is quite extraordinary to discover a book with such a wide range of potential professional readerships. Usually publishers target a particular readership and market their books to a specific population. An author can have a fantastic concept for a book, but publishers will not consider it without the ‘critical mass’ within a specified readership. This trend has always existed within the for-profit press, and now sadly has infiltrated the academic and scientific press. Nova Science, the publishers, must be applauded for their far-sightedness.

Why do men die younger than women?

I have read this book as a gerontologist – an area for which I have held a professorship for the past 32 years. In all this time I have been troubled by the fact that there is not a single entry-level gerontological textbook that fails to assert that women live longer than men. This simple bivariate relationship is usually treated as a ‘law-like’ statement. For example, on quizzing a professor of biology, I learned that there exists a statistically significant difference in height and weight for human males and females. Correspondingly, there is no significant difference in the density and weight of the heart muscle for males and females. However, we continue to believe that gender is the primary cause of earlier heart attacks for males, rather than height and weight. Why?

Thomas Samaras provides important evidence suggesting that the relationship between gender itself and longevity is spurious. One of the contributors to his book, David Rollo, states that when he adjusted for weight differences between male and female mice the difference in longevity disappeared. Another contributor, Andrzej Bartke, reports that dwarf male mice live longer than their normal-sized female siblings.

Although I have searched for research that addresses this proposed spurious relationship between height and weight and human gender, there are no direct studies in Samaras’s book or elsewhere. Why? The data needed for

such a study is available from life insurance companies, but thus far they will not share it with researchers. An open-minded investigator can make a name for himself or herself by demonstrating that the relationship between height and weight, human gender and longevity is spurious. Citations facilitating such research include Samaras’s earlier work⁽²⁾ and other work^(3,4).

Economic, social and environmental aspects

My own interest in Samaras’s work is founded in gender longevity, but his book has much greater relevance. Thus, he links macro and micro concepts. He notes a correlation between economic prosperity and height and weight. As Third World countries progress economically, their populations increase in height and weight.

Although on the surface this finding seems insignificant, he illustrates a conceptual linkage to the Earth’s ecology. Larger people consume greater resources. The long-term consequences of this simple phenomenon for the Earth’s ecological system can be quite devastating for humanity. My physician strongly advocates that her patients select smaller portions on their plates. After reading Samaras, I see that her insistence is not merely for the sake of personal health, but rather a personal responsibility we have to our immediate environment.

He also links sociological variables to height and weight. Height, in particular, is linked to greater social status within Western cultures. He shows that taller people have a greater probability of gaining leadership positions than shorter people. This induces parents to pursue strategies that increase the height of their children.

Such coercive forces within our social structure are as powerful as the forces of genetic predisposition. Unlike genetic predisposition, which can only be transmitted within the frame of face-to-face contact, the emergence of a social force is not inhibited by geography. Our vast network of communications, such as television and the Internet, has been exponentially promoting height as a status symbol. Thus, height is no longer a Western phenomenon, but now seems to be a universally accepted social value. The impact on the earth’s ecology is abundantly apparent.

A book for all libraries

This book is cross-disciplinary. The writing style and content are written for those with specialities in both the

natural and social sciences. This has been a Herculean task, and Thomas Samaras has succeeded.

Two criticisms are commonly levelled against edited volumes. The first is uneven quality: some chapters have greater quality and substance than others. Second, edited volumes generally have weak transitions from one chapter or section to the next. Typically, such monographs have choppy or non-existent linkages. None of these commonly observed problems can be found within Samaras's work.

I write a large number of book reviews. If the book is good, I conclude by citing what particular professional category should read it. In addition, I commonly specify what special libraries should adopt the book. *Human Body Size and the Laws of Scaling* is an important multidisciplinary work that goes beyond public health and nutrition professionals. I recommend this volume for every academic library. Students with a focus on the natural and social sciences are likely to need this volume in their studies. Professional policy makers should have access to and read this volume. Thomas Samaras's work should inspire legislators. In addition, college-educated

citizens who have a general interest in the Earth's ecology will want to read it. For them, most public libraries should acquire it. *Human Body Size and the Laws of Scaling* is an outstanding and revelatory book.

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References

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2. Samaras T (1994) *The Truth about Your Height*. San Diego, CA: Telcolote.
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4. Madigan F (1957) Are sex mortality differentials biologically caused? *Milbank Mem Fund Q* **35**, 202–223.