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Automatic identification of variables in epidemiological datasets using logic regression

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Abstract

Background: For an individual participant data (IPD) meta-analysis, multiple datasets must be transformed in a consistent format, e.g. using uniform variable names. When large numbers of datasets have to be processed, this can be a time-consuming and error-prone task. Automated or semi-automated identification of variables can help to reduce the workload and improve the data quality. For semi-automation high sensitivity in the recognition of matching variables is particularly important, because it allows creating software which for a target variable presents a choice of source variables, from which a user can choose the matching one, with only low risk of having missed a correct source variable.

Methods: For each variable in a set of target variables, a number of simple rules were manually created. With logic regression, an optimal Boolean combination of these rules was searched for every target variable, using a random subset of a large database of epidemiological and clinical cohort data (construction subset). In a second subset of this database (validation subset), this optimal combination rules were validated.

Results: In the construction sample, 41 target variables were allocated on average with a positive predictive value (PPV) of 34%, and a negative predictive value (NPV) of 95%. In the validation sample, PPV was 33%, whereas NPV remained at 94%. In the construction sample, PPV was 50% or less in 63% of all variables, in the validation sample in 71% of all variables.

Conclusions: We demonstrated that the application of logic regression in a complex data management task in large epidemiological IPD meta-analyses is feasible. However, the performance of the algorithm is poor, which may require backup strategies.

Keywords: Meta-analysis, Data management, Logic regression, Epidemiology

Background

Today, many scientific insights are gained with meta-analyses, rather than with single studies or trials, which is illustrated with raising numbers of publications based on meta-analyses. Individual participant data (IPD) meta-analyses are far less frequent, but increasing steeply as well. Depending on the scientific question, IPD meta-analyses are superior to publication-based meta-analyses in many aspects, including the possibility to choose uniform statistical models with uniform adjustment, and—if the search is systematic—a better control of publication bias [1]. Prospectively planned pooled analyses—however optimal [1]—are still very rare, given the unproportional higher organisational effort needed.

Of course, the conduct of an IPD meta-analysis is far more laborious than a publication-based one. One large part of the workload is the harmonization of the acquired datasets. To facilitate the statistical analysis, all datasets must be transformed in a consistent format, which includes using uniform variable names and coding. In a
The PROG-IMT project (Individual progression of carotid intima media thickness as a surrogate for vascular risk) is a large IPD meta-analysis project, with the aim to assess whether the annual change of intima media thickness (IMT, a high-resolution ultrasound measure within the carotid artery wall) is a surrogate for clinical endpoints, like myocardial infarction, stroke, or death. The project works in three stages, where a large number of datasets have been acquired, and their number is steadily growing. Details of the project plan have been published in a rationale paper [5]. The acquired datasets stem from large epidemiological population studies, from hospital cohorts and from randomized clinical trials (RCTs), each comprising between 200 and 2000 variables and between 100 and 15,000 participants. They have in common that the same set of variables is used for statistical analysis, including demographic data, vascular risk factors, and IMT. When the current project was started, we expected to acquire up to 250 individual participant datasets in heterogeneous format and coding.

In order to design a computer program that helps to reduce the workload of dataset harmonization, the first step is to find criteria to assign the correct source variable to a specific target variable in the created uniform dataset (‘allocation’). This can be attempted with simple rules, like ‘< cholesterol’ in ‘variable name’ indicates the target variable ‘total cholesterol’>; or ‘< a median value greater than 94 indicates the target variable ‘systolic blood pressure’>. To obtain reliable performance, several of these rules have to be combined.

Logic regression is a relatively new statistical method that enables to combine simple binary rules in complex logic trees, and that provides methods to find optimal Boolean combinations [6]. As yet, this method has mostly been used in genetics [7–11] and oncology [12] to optimize complex models for disease prediction; to the best of our knowledge it hasn’t been applied to data management problems. Aim of this study was to apply logic regression techniques to the problem of assigning variables, as explained above, and to validate the performance of this approach, using data from the PROG-IMT project.

**Methods**

The PROG-IMT project is involved in using datasets from population-based epidemiologic studies, from risk populations and from RCTs. At the time these analyses were started, 34 datasets were available that were already manually harmonized. These were randomly (1:1) assigned to a construction subset, or a validation subset (Table 1). All these datasets include many variables; some of those correspond to predefined target variables, which are needed for the statistical analysis of the main project. This set of target variables is shown in Table 2. The overall algorithm followed is shown graphically in Fig. 1.

In a first step, a set of simple rules was manually created (four to 41) for every target variable, by an epidemiologist experienced in the handling of data of this type. These rules are described in Additional file 1: Table S1. These rules included conditions on the variable name, the variable label, variable type (number, date or string), scale level (ratio, ordinal or nominal, dichotomous nominal); in nominal or ordinal variables the number of values and the proportion of the most frequent value; and in ratio variables the median and the interquartile range.

For rules that involved a cutoff value (eg. median greater than 44), this cutoff was optimized with ROC analysis, with the aim to maximize the expression ‘sensitivity + specificity’. For every target variable, logic regression models were created by Boolean combination of the specific rules, or a subset of these. To find an optimal Boolean combination of rules (example in Fig. 1), we applied the ‘simulated annealing’ algorithm [4].

Simulated annealing is a generic optimization procedure commonly used to optimize non-convex optimization problems. It presupposes that an application specific score or evaluation or loss function has been defined which assigns a penalty to each state of a system. Simulated annealing then iteratively perturbs the system using applications specific basic operations, in this case tree pruning manipulations as mentioned below, with the aim of reducing the score value of the perturbed state. The perturbations are chosen in a random way with state transition probabilities changing in the course of the iteration. This lowering of transition probabilities is the analogue of lowering of temperature in random motion in physical science and is the basic mechanism in simulated annealing to reduce the danger of missing the global optima, while at the same time allowing for convergence of the iteration. In the current work transition probabilities were systematically reduced from 0.1 to 0.0001. When using simulated annealing for logic regression in the context of identifying source variable names, the states of the system are logical expressions, like for example (R1 v R2) R3 that assign a true or false value to candidate variable name based on the rules R1, R2, R3. The evaluation function was a weighted least squares function of the type $SWS_{res} = \sum w_i (\hat{y}_i - y_{i,\text{pred}})^2$, which in the case of classification, where $y_i$ and $y_{i,\text{pred}}$ are 0 or 1, is just a weighted misclassification.
### Table 1 Datasets used for construction and validation

| Acronym or designation | Study name                                                                 | Study type       | Number of variables | Number of participants | Use             |
|------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------|---------------------|------------------------|----------------|
| AIR                    | Atherosclerosis and Insulin Resistance study                                | general population | 136                 | 435                    | Construction   |
| ARIC                   | Atherosclerosis risk in communities                                          | general population | 10108               | 15042                  | Validation     |
| BCAPS                  | Beta-blocker Cholesterol-lowering Asymptomatic Plaque Study                  | RCT              | 134                 | 1544                   | Validation     |
| BHS                    | Bogalusa Heart Study                                                        | general population | 1220                | 1986                   | Construction   |
| BKRE                   | Konyang University Hospital CIMT Registry                                    | RCT              | 109                 | 205                    | Validation     |
| Bruneck                | Bruneck Study                                                               | general population | 141                 | 821                    | Validation     |
| CAPS                   | Carotid Atherosclerosis Progression Study                                   | general population | 692                 | 6972                   | Construction   |
| CCCC                   | Chin-Shan Community Cardiovascular Cohort Study                             | general population | 110                 | 3603                   | Construction   |
| CHS                    | Cardiovascular Health Study                                                 | general population | 1426                | 5901                   | Construction   |
| CIMT_TIME              | CIMT TIME Project                                                          | risk population  | 144                 | 671                    | Validation     |
| CMCS-Beijing           | Chinese Multi-provincial Cohort Study-Beijing                               | general population | 141                 | 1324                   | Construction   |
| CREED                  | Cardiovascular Risk Extended Evaluation in Dialysis patients               | risk population  | 53                  | 138                    | Construction   |
| DIWA                   | Diabetes, Impaired glucose tolerance in Women and Atherosclerosis           | general population | 129                 | 644                    | Validation     |
| EAS                    | Edinburgh Artery Study                                                      | general population | 74                  | 1593                   | Construction   |
| Ekart et al.           | None                                                                        | risk population  | 102                 | 54                     | Construction   |
| EPICARDIAN             | EPidemiologia CARDiovascular en los ANcianos, Cardiovascular Epidemiology in the Elderly in Spain | general population | 76                  | 446                    | Construction   |
| EVA                    | Etude du Vieillissement Arteriel                                            | general population | 212                 | 1135                   | Validation     |
| HD-IMT                 | Carotid ultrasonographic parameters as markers of atherogenesis and mortality rate in patients on hemodialysis | risk population  | 130                 | 85                     | Validation     |
| HOORN                  | The Hoorn Study                                                             | general population | 128                 | 3103                   | Construction   |
| IMPROVE                | Carotid Intima Media Thickness and IMT-Progression as Predictors of Vascular Events in a High Risk European Population | risk population  | 103                 | 3703                   | Construction   |
| INVADE                 | Interventionsprojekt zerebrovasculäre Erkrankungen und Demenz im Landkreis Ebersberg | general population | 1581                | 3365                   | Validation     |
| Kato et al.            | None                                                                        | risk population  | 131                 | 284                    | Validation     |
| KIHHD                  | Kuopio Ischemic Heart Disease Risk Factor Study                             | general population | 151                 | 1399                   | Construction   |
| Landecho et al.        | None                                                                        | risk population  | 69                  | 248                    | Validation     |
| Niguarda               | Niguarda-Monzino Study                                                      | risk population  | 88                  | 1564                   | Construction   |
| NOMAS/INVEST           | Northern Manhattan Study                                                    | general population | 334                 | 857                    | Validation     |
| OSACA                  | Osaca Follow-Up Study for Carotid Atherosclerosis                           | risk population  | 108                 | 291                    | Construction   |
| Papaggianni et al.     | None                                                                        | risk population  | 73                  | 84                     | Construction   |
| PIVUS                  | Prospective Investigation of the Vasculature in Uppsala Seniors             | general population | 98                  | 1017                   | Validation     |
| PLIC                   | Progression of Lesions in the Intima of the Carotid                        | general population | 264                 | 2607                   | Validation     |
| RIAS                   | Resistive Index in Atherosclerosis                                          | risk population  | 67                  | 158                    | Construction   |
| Rotterdam              | Rotterdam Study                                                             | general population | 34                  | 7983                   | Validation     |
| SAPHIR                 | Salzburg Atherosclerosis Prevention program in subjects at High Individual Risk | general population | 141                 | 3127                   | Validation     |
| SHIP                   | Study of Health in Pomerania                                               | general population | 320                 | 4308                   | Construction   |
| Variable               | Unit      | Construction sample | Validation sample |
|------------------------|-----------|---------------------|-------------------|
|                        |           | Sensitivity  | Specificity | PPV | NPV | Sensitivity  | Specificity | PPV | NPV |
| Age                    | years     | 1            | 0.975498    | 0.78 | 1   | 0.965227    | 0.94545     | 0.511628 | 0.999739 |
| BMI                    | kg/m²     | 0.973684     | 0.997777    | 0.973684 | 0.997777 | 0.454545     | 0.98958     | 0.789474 | 0.99533  |
| Urea                   | mg/dl     | 1            | 0.78333     | 0.004065 | 1   | 1          | 0.822693    | 0.005797 | 1    |
| Cholesterol            | mg/dl     | 0.913048     | 0.99778     | 0.954545 | 0.99956   | 0.588235     | 1           | 1     | 0.998188 |
| Cholesterol SI         | mmol/l    | 0.956522     | 0.463366    | 0.000902 | 0.999521 | 0.375        | 0.443609    | 0.002788 | 0.994189 |
| Creatinine             | mg/dl     | 0.947368     | 0.727595    | 0.0014446| 0.999695 | 0.777778     | 0.825311    | 0.010264 | 0.999373 |
| Diabetes               | -         | 1            | 0.005797    | 0.009331 | 1   | 0.757576    | 0.015625    | 0.00657 | 0.882353 |
| Education              | -         | 0.866667     | 0.499778    | 0.005727 | 0.99914  | 0.888889     | 0.508799    | 0.004197 | 0.999492 |
| Ethnicity              | -         | 0.916667     | 0.998671    | 0.647059 | 0.999778 | 0.625        | 0.998706    | 0.5     | 0.999223 |
| Event date             | -         | 0.771084     | 0.455221    | 0.025755 | 0.990695 | 0.580645     | 0.407407    | 0.02354  | 0.975301 |
| Fasting glucose        | mg/dl     | 0.954545     | 0.980022    | 0.189189 | 0.999774 | 0.5625       | 0.994555    | 0.3    | 0.998179 |
| Fasting glucose SI     | mmol/l    | 1            | 0.0015289   | 0.00314 | 1   | 0.866667    | 0.020477    | 0.003428 | 0.975309 |
| Fibrinogen             | mg/dl     | 0.928571     | 0.515622    | 0.005912 | 0.99957  | 1           | 0.556648    | 0.00467  | 1    |
| Hemoglobin             | g/dl      | 0.923077     | 0.145104    | 0.0031   | 0.98476  | 0.875        | 0.124191    | 0.00264  | 0.997921 |
| Hemoglobin SI          | g/l       | 1            | 0.0024326   | 0.0001132| 1   | 0          | 0.047065    | 0     | 0.968085 |
| HbA1c                  | %         | 0.944444     | 0.99913     | 0.009524 | 0.999778 | 0.666667     | 1           | 1     | 0.998965 |
| HDL cholesterol        | mg/dl     | 0.35         | 0.999334    | 0.7     | 0.997122 | 0.1875       | 0.998704    | 0.375  | 0.999636 |
| HDL cholesterol SI     | mmol/l    | 0.863666     | 0.978246    | 0.162393 | 0.99932  | 0.705882     | 0.977178    | 0.12   | 0.998675 |
| History of CVD         | -         | 0.611111     | 0.98368     | 0.311321 | 0.99525  | 0.348485     | 0.967923    | 0.277108 | 0.976801 |
| Hs-CRP                 | mg/l      | 0.875        | 0.99823     | 0.466667 | 0.999778 | 1           | 0.998702    | 0.807692 | 1    |
| Hypertension           | -         | 0.941176     | 0.971511    | 0.02     | 0.999542 | 0.965517     | 0.961238    | 0.158192 | 0.999729 |
| Intima Media Thickness (IMT) | mm | 0.73494 | 0.013541 | 0 | 0.99115 | 0 | 0.057866 | 0 |
| Intima Media Thickness (IMT) SI | mm | 0.354911 | 0.098703 | 0.791045 | 0.33195 | 0.070588 | 0.969044 | 0.138462 | 0.936682 |
| Arterial diameter      | mm        | 0.685393     | 0.989184    | 0.559633 | 0.993662 | 0.509259     | 0.998406    | 0.901639 | 0.986097 |
| Income                 | -         | 1            | 0           | 0.000884 | 0     | 1           | 0           | 0.000516 | 0    |
| LDL cholesterol        | mg/dl     | 0            | 1           | 0     | 0.995582 | 0           | 1           | 0     | 0.996902 |
| LDL cholesterol SI     | mmol/l    | 0.73913      | 0.092451    | 0.333333 | 0.99866  | 0.5          | 0.996368    | 0.391304 | 0.997662 |
| Leukocytes             | 1/μl      | 0            | 0.993803    | 0     | 0.998 | 0           | 0.997411    | 0     | 0.997152 |
| Dyslipidemia           | -         | 0.923077     | 0.999335    | 0.8     | 0.999778 | 0.416667     | 0.998464    | 0.454545 | 0.998187 |
| Antidiabetic medication| -         | 0.761905     | 0.997074    | 0.831169 | 0.995506 | 0.571429     | 0.998688    | 0.878049 | 0.992954 |
| Antihypertensive medication | - | 0.98362 | 0.591699 | 0.04887 | 0.999619 | 0.886364 | 0.607057 | 0.073724 | 0.993438 |
| Lipid-lowering medication | - | 0.987179 | 0.510227 | 0.034131 | 0.99956 | 0.982143 | 0.5093 | 0.028527 | 0.999486 |
Table 2  Sensitivity, specificity, PPV and NPV of the optimal Boolean combinations in the construction and in the validation sample (Continued)

| Variable                  | Pack years | Specificity | PPV    | NPV     |
|---------------------------|------------|-------------|--------|---------|
| Nicotine consumption      | 0.8        | 0.998891    | 0.714286 | 0.999482 | 0.833333 | 0.998964 |
| Carotid plaque            | 0.613636   | 0.999108    | 0.953757 | 1       | 1        | 0.997843 |
| Diastolic blood pressure  | 0.965116   | 0.985364    | 0.999315 | 0.764706 | 0.983255 | 0.378641 | 0.996817 |
| Systolic blood pressure   | 0.674419   | 0.999775    | 0.993733 | 0.510638 | 0.996602 | 0.648649 | 0.994004 |
| Socioeconomic status      | 0.875      | 0.999334    | 0.999334 | 0.6875  | 0.998444 | 0.647059 | 0.998703 |
| Sex                       | 0.972603   | 0.20229     | 0.019592 | 0.997785 | 0.75     | 0.26145  | 0.013632 | 0.987154 |
| Smoking status            | 0.969697   | 0.099853    | 0.008182 | 0.998377 | 0        | 0.077201 | 0        | 1       |
| Triglycerides             | 0.969697   | 0.136849    | 0.008182 | 0.998377 | 0        | 0.077201 | 0        | 1       |
| Ultrasound date           | 0          | 0.999553    | 0.988729 | 0       | 1        | 0.988897 | 1       |
| Average                   | 0.799584   | 0.707405    | 0.34172  | 0.947871 | 0.619019 | 0.710383 | 0.325339 | 0.941999 |
count. In order to increase sensitivity without undue loss of specificity, much higher weight was given to the positives (0.9995, opposed to 0.0005 to the negatives), thus compensating the much higher number of negatives, and the basic operations are changes in the logical expression like “alternating leaves”, “alternating operators”, “growing a branch”, “pruning a branch”, “splitting a leaf” or “deleting a leaf”.

The names of these operations are better understood, when visualizing a logical expression as a tree.

In order to understand the dependency of sensitivity and specificity on the tuning parameters of the annealing algorithm a factor analysis was performed. Two methods were used, classification and logistic regression, four different weights for the negatives, $5 \times 10^{-4}$, $5 \times 10^{-3}$, $5 \times 10^{-2}$, and $5 \times 10^{-1}$, two tree sizes 5 and 10 and two values namely 4 and 8 were used for the minimum number of cases for which the tree needs to be 1. A $2^3 \times 4$ hybrid factorial design was performed. This yielded 32 runs for sensitivity and specificity and allowed finding interactions between the factors.

An optimization with the aim of maximizing sensitivity (low limit 99%) and specificity (low limit 75%) followed by dynamic profiling gave the result that direct classification is better than logistic regression and that due to the high interaction between the weights and the classification method, low weights are important to achieve high sensitivity. The loss in specificity that results from lowering the weights is less important than the gain in sensitivity (Figs. 2 and 3).

To find optimal combinations of rules for every target variable we used the training subset of datasets. Logic regression was applied in several models, where different configuration parameters, such as the weight of cases (matching variables) and controls (non-matching variables), and the link function itself (classification or logistic model), were varied.

After optimal configuration parameters were found, the stability of the method was tested using cross-validation: each 10% of the data were predicted from models derived from the remaining 90% of data in turn. As it is a typical characteristic of logic regression that different source data result in qualitatively very different logic trees, these models couldn’t be compared on the procedural level. Therefore we compared the resulting

![Fig. 1](image1.png) Fictitious example of a logic tree combining allocation rules

![Fig. 2](image2.png) Sensitivity and Specificity as a Function of Tuning Parameters, weights, treesize, minmass and method. At the set point weights = exp(-7), treesize = 8, minmass = 10 for the classification method, the dependency of sensitivity and specificity upon these tuning parameters can be read off this multiple one dimensional plot. On the x-axis in the left most plot, weights are shown as natural logarithm of the actual values that effectively vary from 0.0005 = exp(-7.6) to 0.5 = exp(-0.7)
model quality in terms of sensitivity and specificity to detect a specific target variable.

The best model was fixed, and used to predict the correct assignment of variables in the validation sample. The resulting precision in the validation data was assessed using sensitivity, specificity, positive and negative predictive values. In the context of the present study, sensitivity of a target variable is the portion of matching source variables that are correctly identified. Positive predictive value (PPV) is the portion of identified source variables for which the identification is correct. Correspondingly, specificity is the portion of non-matching source variables that are identified as such and negative predictive value (NPV) is the portion of negatively identified source variables for which this identification is correct.

The source data were prepared with SAS version 9.3 (The SAS Institute, Cary, USA) and stored into a .csv file format. For the data handling and logic regression we wrote programs within C#, using R and R.NET libraries, including those from the R software package developed by Ingo Ruczinski, Charles Kooperberg, and Michael LeBlanc at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center in Seattle (CRAN package version 3). The design for the optimization of tuning parameters and the optimization were done with MODDE Pro version 11 (mks Data Analytic Solutions, Umea, Sweden).

Results
As expected from a classification algorithm using a tree based method the logic trees themselves were quite different among different cross validation runs and due to the character of the simulated annealing algorithm even for repeated runs with the same input data. However the measured sensitivity and specificity of different runs of the algorithm were quite stable and allowed for reliable comparisons. The complete best models for every target variable are shown in Additional file 1: Table S1. Table 2 shows the performance parameters of these best models. In columns 3–6, the results in the construction sample are displayed. Sensitivity was on average reasonable high (0.80), as was the specificity (0.70). The PPV was overall poor (on average 0.34), NPV was good (average 0.95). In columns 7–10 we showed the results of independent validation (in the validation sample). Here, sensitivity was considerably less (0.62), but specificity was comparable (0.71), just as PPV (0.33) and NPV (0.94).

Discussion
The performance was quite heterogeneous: in some target variables, sensitivity, specificity, PPV and NPV were very high (e.g. age, antidiabetic medication). However, many other variables showed PPV that was far too low to be useful even in the construction sample. For the intended use within a computer program to support the data manager, the performance of the models seemed reasonable at the first glance, in terms of sensitivity. However, in order to determine the correct source variable for a given target variable, the most important quality indicator is PPV, which is the portion of identified source variables for which the identification is correct. When the PPV is considered, the performance of the algorithm was much worse. In fact, the majority of variable had PPV values of 50% or less (63% in the construction sample, 71% in the validation sample). With failure rates as high as observed in the validation sample, a fictitious computer program would have to give a list of several candidate variables rather than a single result, for each target variable. Furthermore, an escape pathway would have to be implemented for the case that the true target variable was not on the list.
suggested by the program. However, even if the algorithm can only give a ‘first guess’ which is correct in 50%, it may reduce the workload of the data manager by nearly half.

Still, from a methodologic perspective, it is remarkable that a tree based classification method based on a random process such as the ‘simulated annealing’ behaves in a reproducible fashion, on the result level, i.e. regarding quality characteristics such as sensitivity and specificity. The overall performance of the optimized logic regression models in the validation sample, compared to the construction sample, is quite similar to linear regression prediction models, for example. A finding that is worth noticing is that our attempts to optimize for sensitivity were counteracted by the models. For the intended use, sensitivity is more important than specificity, and PPV is more important than NPV, as a human data manager has more difficulty reviewing many variables than a short list of candidates, as long as he or she can rely on the fact that the target variable is on this short list. Therefore, we undertook efforts to optimize the evaluation function of the algorithm for high sensitivity and high PPV. In the construction sample this worked nicely by weighting the positives by 0.9995 against 0.0005 for the negatives, i.e. a factor of 1999, for the negatives. This improved sensitivity from 0.976 (0.995 against 0.005, i.e. 199) to 0.99948, while reducing specificity from 0.87 to 0.78. Interestingly enough, as can be verified in Table 2, the same models with the same weighting turned out to be more specific than sensitive in the validation sample.

As reflected by the increase of the number of meta-analyses over time, many insights may be gained with large collaborative projects collating data from many participating cohorts in the future [13]. Although, from the methodological point of view, the best form of meta-analyses are most likely prospectively planned pooled analyses [1, 13], such projects are still rare. This may be due to the immense efforts and high volumes of funding they require; furthermore such enterprises take many years or even decades to complete. So in the near and intermediate future, we will most likely increasingly face the ‘second best option’ [1]: IPD meta-analyses that require retrospective harmonization of data [14]. Whereas some meta-analyses have developed impressively professional structures and algorithms [2–4] and the overall quality of IPD meta-analyses has improved over the last decade [15], there still remains scope for improving their processes and statistical methods [14, 15].

To date, the aspects that are discussed in published literature include mostly statistical modelling [15–19], sometimes screening [15, 16], and rarely the process of harmonization of data [2–4]. Fortier et al. [2] and Doiron et al. [3] both describe detailed algorithms for the harmonization of heterogeneous data including manual allocation of target variables. Bosch-Capblanc [4] suggested a computer program with a three-stage algorithm to detect the matching source variable for each given target variable. Compared to our algorithm, the identification criteria are less refined, and it includes alternative ways of allocating if the primary identification criteria failed. To the best of our knowledge, no publication so far has refined the allocations procedures to the extent we have. As the Bosch-Capblanc algorithm [4] focused more on the actual handling of the data, a combination of his algorithm with our allocation procedure may yield excellent results, which remains to be tested.

However, the process shown here needs relevant manual preparations before an automated or semi-automated process can start, e.g. the manual definition of target-variable rules. This preparatory work is depending on the number of target variables, whereas the work saved by automating depends on the number of datasets processed. These benchmark data have to be weighted carefully to decide whether this approach is economic. Most likely, it will be economic when many datasets are processed, and few target variables are needed. If the rule definitions might be automated, too, this might facilitate the application considerably, improve reproducibility and reduce investigator bias.

Conclusions

With the current work we demonstrated that it is in principle possible to use logic regression models with the automated ‘simulated annealing’ algorithm for the task of allocating variables in large datasets to specific target variables. With the performance shown in the present example, however, it would be necessary to introduce precautions in the design of a computer program, to avoid missing the true matching source variable. Such precautions may include the program suggesting a list of candidate variables rather than a single matching variable, and the option of an exit path with manual allocation. In any case, the development effort for algorithm, optimal models and a computer program is very high, and may only amortize if several hundred datasets have to be handled.

Additional file

Additional file 1: Table S1. Rules for specific target variables and their best Boolean combination. Table S2. Program parameters. List of Members of the PROG-IMT study group. (DOC 744 kb)

Abbreviations

IMT: Intima media thickness; IPD: Individual participant data; NPV: Negative predictive value; PPV: Positive predictive value; PROG-IMT: The Individual progression of carotid intima media thickness as a surrogate for vascular risk project; RCT: Randomized controlled trial; ROC: Receiver operating characteristic
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formulated the single rules, and helped writing the paper. AP prepared the dataset for analysis and randomized them into construction and validations sample. In addition, she contributed ideas for the syntax of the rules and the design of a data management program discussed in this paper. She did the manual data management for some of the datasets used. AB did the manual data management for most datasets used, which was used as the gold standard of variable allocation. AC and SK delivered one of the datasets used. AC, SA, SK, MLB and ME contributed important intellectual content to the discussion of the paper. AO contributed to the design of the current study, supervised the programming, helped interpreting the results and contributed importantly to the discussion. All authors read and approved the final version of this manuscript.

Authors’ information

MWL, FS, AP, AB, AC, SA, and ME are all members of the PROG-IMT study group, an international collaboration of scientists with various expertise in neurology, cardiology, pharmacology and other medical fields, and in cardiovascular epidemiology and statistical methodology. Aim of the Study Group is to contribute to a number of unresolved questions in the investigation of cardiovascular and cerebrovascular risk, within the framework of the PROG-IMT project. Details on the project have been published earlier [2] and can be reviewed on the project website www.prog-imt.org. NA and AO are members of the Faculty of Computer Science and Engineering at the Frankfurt University of Applied Sciences, and contributed their skills in program design, programming and statistics.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Ethics approval and consent to participate

The present analysis has been performed in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. It is based on data of, and performed within the framework of the PROG-IMT project, which is an individual participant data meta-analysis on data from multiple clinical and epidemiological studies. All contributing studies collected informed consent of all participating individuals. The PROG-IMT project was approved by the Ethics committee of Medical Faculty of Frankfurt University under the reference number 304/13.

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