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# SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF INDIGENOUS HEALTH

Bronwyn Carson, Terry Dunbar, Richard D. Chenhall & Ross Bailie (Eds.)

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The link between social factors and health status is well-documented (Marmot, 2006) and so the editors of *Social determinants of Indigenous health* are to be commended on being able to present such a well-written and comprehensive overview of Indigenous health in Australia. The contributing authors have systematically, comprehensively and critically analysed key social determinants of health including policy, history, racism, poverty and social class, social capital, education, employment, country, housing and human rights.

The book is valuable for readers from a range of disciplines. This is demonstrated by how well the key terms have been defined and discussed. This is not just limited to the first chapter by Siggers and Gray but instead continues throughout the text. For example, the dedication of a chapter (by Paradies) to the exploration of the link between health and racism justifies the fact that racism is not included in the early set of key definitions. In contrast to other explorations of racism, racism is simply, but powerfully, presented in terms of privilege or oppression and as an issue about consequence and not intent.

For those not familiar with the many theories and frameworks currently used in public health, clear and succinct explanations that include several renowned and relevant sociological theories are included throughout the text. For those who already have broad public health knowledge, the discussion and justification of these frameworks is well-supported by key international and national research reports.

One of the challenges for the reader is always to be mindful of the legacy of oppressive policies and the subsequent definitions that have developed from a Western cultural perspective. The deconstruction of European cultural views and definitions provide very useful introductions to several topics in the text. For example, the application of the neo-classical view of employment to all Indigenous settings is problematic and so it is instead discussed using the term "workfulness". This is used as "a term to cover not just market employment, but also the carrying out of tasks that are seen as positive for community and/or cultural development" (p. 157). Similarly, the

chapter on education by Dunbar and Scrimgeour acknowledges that historical debates about education have implied that education refers only to "Western education" (p. 136). This raises the question of the cultural perspectives of the existing research and how the power of colonisation has influenced research methods and subsequent results. For example, Baum's chapter on social capital highlights the tensions when using concepts that have underlying cultural underpinnings. Baum duly acknowledges these and provides some very useful points for discussion.

One of the many strengths of the text is the use of models and their critique in relation to Indigenous health. For example, Anderson's description and clear critique of the key theories in social epidemiology are particularly useful as they provide insights into the limitations of this work with regard to Indigenous health. For example, Wilkinson and Marmot's (2003) invaluable work has clear applications in some areas (e.g., employment, social support, food, stress) of the social determinants of Indigenous health status. However, the limitations of the model are clearly identified and justified (e.g., intergenerational factors). Like many other chapters in the text, the inclusion of diagrammatic models and frameworks is very useful in "unravelling" some of the complexities of social models of health (see pp. 25, 28-29).

Of course, similar to many other useful discussions about Indigenous health, a chapter on history (by Mitchell) is included. It could be argued that this is nothing new and whilst there are common threads with some other accounts of Indigenous history, one of the unique features of this account is the emphasis on the role of Indigenous people as active participants in their lives in terms of beliefs, resistance and self-advocacy. There are threads of history throughout the text (e.g., education, federalism, welfare) which are necessary, and the overlap has been kept to a minimum.

One of the consistent themes throughout the text is that there is a distinct lack of research about relationships between social factors and Indigenous health status, particularly in the Australian context. While contributors have generally highlighted this, there is an element of generalisations and speculations. The discussion around education provides some convincing statements; however, the critical appraisal of some of the existing literature may be lacking.

Several of the authors (e.g., Paradies, Walter and Mooney, Baum and Gray) provide very useful comparisons with Indigenous populations who live as minorities in other developed countries. For example, the chapter on racism by Paradies includes some excellent data from the United States about self-reported health and racism. Similarly, Walter and Mooney's discussion about sustainable employment policies for minority groups in the European Union gives the reader some very useful "food for thought". However, as highlighted by Dunbar and Scrimgeour,

we need to be mindful of the methodological complexities in comparisons of this nature. Despite this, data from research overseas can provide the reader with a "broader" understanding of the complexity of the issues.

Common myths and racist portrayals of Indigenous Australians are challenged throughout the text using relevant and appropriate evidence. Walter and Mooney support their statement that "Indigenous welfare ... as a vehicle in which contemporary Indigenous-non-Indigenous relations are manifest" (p. 167) with examples regarding "welfare dependency" (p. 171) and the all too often heard "government help for Aborigines has gone too far" (p. 165). These and other examples throughout the book highlight the "no win situation" for Indigenous people; they are expected to take responsibility and find all the solutions for the situation. Gray's chapter on human rights successfully dispels some of the myths around the use of the "human right to health" discourse and the legislative and policy reasons for why this has not been embraced by Australian governments. As an alternative, Gray supports the argument that human rights and health coexist in a "complex and interdependent relationship" (p. 261) and that this gives rise to a framework for analysing the health impacts of health policy. This gives substance to the stand that "human rights" could be incorporated into policy statements and are a powerful tool in the public health advocacy role. Gray argues that international evidence demonstrates that once highlighted in the public arena, it is difficult for governments to ignore the relationship between structural inequities and health.

It is wonderful to see a text that includes a section on country by Burgess and Morrison. A clear understanding of the definition of place from both an Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspective is provided and provides an important baseline for the ensuing discussion about the impact of homelands on health status. This also incorporates historical and international perspectives and links to social capital. It is these useful and practical perspectives that will engage people from a range of backgrounds.

An understanding of Indigenous health and disadvantage is not complete without exploring the historical and current policy context of Indigenous health. In a very concise and easy to read chapter, Anderson provides a clear description of how policy marginalised Indigenous health as a government priority and ultimately lead to the failed implementation of the National Aboriginal Health Strategy (1989). The Framework Agreements in Indigenous Health are clearly explained and details of subsequent programmes are also given. In this the 40th year since the 1967 Referendum, success of the importance of the referendum in terms of health is clearly outlined.

The chapter on "Interventions and sustainable programs" by Clapham, O'Dea and Chenhall is very

important to all readers. Unlike many simplistic analyses of Indigenous policy that have been portrayed in the public domains (e.g., media stories of "welfare fails") this chapter provides the reader with some key ingredients for "moving forward". This is also well-documented in the chapter on housing by Bailie, Clapham, O'Dea and Chenhall which outlines four key areas that need to be considered when addressing the health status of Indigenous populations. Firstly, that many of the determinants of health are outside what is commonly recognised as the domain of health and as a result, interventions need to arise from areas other than health. Secondly, that whilst there is a multitude of information about the "failures" in Indigenous communities, there is a relative paucity of evidence about successes; particularly those from a community-driven perspective. Thirdly, that public health professionals often have "competing interests" when applying interventions. Irrespective of whether these have a biomedical or social framework, care must be taken to ensure that interventions are considered in the context and applied appropriately and not just used because there are considered to be "best practice" without consideration to the underlying social factors cultural and social appropriateness of such programmes. Lastly, the editors reinforce the theme of the contributing authors that there is a paucity of research about the effectiveness of interventions and that the issue of sustainability of interventions needs to be considered. The chapter then provides descriptions of very successful interventions and highlights some of the key factors in each that contributed to their success.

This book was developed following the delivery of short courses on the "Social determinants of Indigenous health". Consequently, each of the chapters can stand alone and are accompanied by a summary and thought-provoking questions for discussion that would enhance student learning. The references provided at the end of each chapter provide excellent resource lists for further reading. A glossary of terms would enhance the ease of use for both undergraduate and postgraduate students in a range of settings including sociology, public health, behavioural science and clinical disciplines. I regard this text as essential reading to anyone working in the area of Indigenous health.

## ■ References

- Marmot, M. (2006). Health in an unequal world (Harveian Oration). *The Lancet*, 368, 2081-2094.
- Wilkinson, R. and Marmot, M. (Eds.). (2003). *Social determinants of health: The solid facts* (2nd ed.). Copenhagen: World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe.