

# Race, Culture, Indigeneity and the Politics of Public Health ...



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Short Course in Darwin

*Kristy Schubert reports ...*

*IN LATE August, I went to the Menzies School of Health Research's three-day course on "Race, Culture, Indigeneity and the Politics of Public Health." For the course, we had a folder of reading that should carry a sign that says, 'Use caution when lifting.' It is huge! Contained in the folder is reading about many of the different ways that people have been thinking about the complexities of providing health services across cultures.*

During the course, we were put together into small groups with people from a wide range of backgrounds: doctors, nurses, educators, social workers, policy makers, researchers, community development workers and health promoters. In these groups, we did exercises, trying to apply the concepts represented in these readings to actual public health situations. These situations were based on real life circumstances, so they generated a good deal of discussion and got the mental engines firing.

It was good to find language for the complexities of this process of attempting to provide cross-cultural health services. It was also good to foreground the ways that different understandings, beliefs and values affect the provision of these services. And it was important to discuss the gaps between "language & practice" and "intention and outcome", why these gaps might occur—privileging some people and disadvantaging others—and to talk about some ways of trying to make sure that these gaps don't become too big or damaging. In doing this, it is important to analyse:

- What do different groups mean by health?
- How do different groups explain wellbeing or the lack of it?
- How do different groups generate knowledge about maintaining wellbeing or remedying the lack of it?
- How do different groups support and value this knowledge?
- How do different groups communicate or store this knowledge?
- What systems do different groups use to put knowledge into practice?

Spending time with other people who are thinking seriously about these complex dilemmas was very worthwhile. Many people are trying to find good ways for

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the experience of wellbeing to be more evenly distributed. This can be very challenging, not least because it involves acknowledging that some of us benefit from the very systems that operate to the detriment of others, and the practices and understandings we employ to try and correct the imbalances will often play into the very power systems that we were hoping to challenge.

But, we fumble forward. We continue to believe that there are ways of 'being in the world' that can benefit a greater portion of people, so that—regardless of their race or culture—they can experience wellbeing and, in the fullest sense of health, they can flourish. This is a tricky process, and it involves continual readjustments, and we'll probably never get it exactly right: but that doesn't mean we shouldn't try.

And, in the face of the overwhelming magnitude of injustices in this world and the baffling complexity of the processes that inflict and perpetuate them, we are grateful for every last person out there, who, with genuine hard work and sincere compassion, tries to make the world a little bit better for everyone else who lives in it. After all our attempts to understand how it all works, at the end of the day, it is still those people who are making the difference. ✕

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