

Topic 3: Social and cultural determinants of health

The social determinants of health

Evidence on the close relationship between living and working conditions and health outcomes shows how human health is sensitive to social and economic factors. Factors such as income, education, conditions of employment, power and social support act to strengthen or undermine the health of individuals and communities (Liamputtong, Fanany & Verrinder 2012; Wilkinson & Marmot 2003). Because of their potent and underlying effects, these health-determining factors are known as the 'social determinants of health' (Wilkinson & Marmot 2003). According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the social determinants of health are the conditions in which we are born, grow, work, live and age, and the wider set of forces and systems shaping the conditions of daily life (World Health Organization 2012).

If you examine the origins of health or ill-health systematically, you will see that these social determinants are the 'causes of the causes' of illness (or health) (Braveman & Gottlieb 2014; Krech 2012). These causes of the causes, or 'upstream' social determinants, set in motion causal pathways leading to health effects through the downstream factors – factors which are temporally and spatially close to health effects (Braveman, Egerter & Williams 2011). To illustrate this pathway, consider people living near a river who become ill from drinking the water, which has been contaminated by chemicals dumped by a factory located upstream. The solution downstream might be to filter the water before drinking it. This may work in the short term; however, ultimately we need to deal with the upstream problem – the factory – which is impacting the health of the community.

In any given society, not only are there social factors that impact health and wellbeing, but there are also inequalities in these social factors (Marmot et al. 2008). What we find is those with higher incomes, usually due to higher education attainment, experience better health and wellbeing than those with low incomes and little education. The inequalities in health between the socially advantaged and the disadvantaged have been observed across time and place and referred to as the social gradient (Braveman & Gottlieb 2014). As an example, we see a significant health inequality between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. An exploration of the social determinants of health provides clues as to why the Indigenous community experience poorer health and lower life expectancy comparatively to non-Indigenous Australians. Issues such as colonialism, social exclusion, availability and affordability of healthy foods, access to health care and education opportunities, housing conditions, employment opportunities and so on are important considerations when aiming to address this gap in health outcomes (Davidson 2015).

Social determinants of health – an introduction [6:28 mins]

Watch this video from Let's Learn Public Health to hear more about the role of the social determinants of health.

What Makes Us Healthy? Understanding the Social Determinants of Health



Recommended reading



The World Health Organization (WHO) published a seminal piece written by Wilkinson & Marmot on the evidence linking the social determinants to health outcomes. To learn more about the relationship between various social determinants and health outcomes read this article from the WHO.

- Wilkinson, R & Marmot, M 2003, [Social determinants of health – The solid facts](#), World Health Organization, viewed 1 March 2021

This article from Braveman & Gottlieb (2014) provides a recent view on considering the 'causes of the causes' when it comes to examining health outcomes.

- Braveman, P & Gottlieb, L 2014, 'The social determinants of health: it's time to consider the causes of the causes', [Public Health Reports \(Washington, D.C.: 1974\)](#), vol. 129, suppl 2, pp. 19–31



Recommended reflection

Spend some time thinking about your social determinants and how they might be influencing your health.

Consider your income, education, early life, environments (consider your engagement with the virtual environment) and your access to health services. What other social determinants are impacting your health?

Document your reflection on the following padlet.

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2023 PHE5PUH T2 Week 4, Topic 3: Social determinants and impacts on your health

Reflect on what social determinants are impacting your health.

Reflection: my determinants of health

MADISON HOUGH 4d
Reflection: my determinants of health

Upon reflecting on my social determinants of health I would be remise if I didn't acknowledge my privilege. I come from a working-class family, we did not have money spare, I am the youngest of three girls, so I always have hand-me-downs – seldom

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Cultural influences on health



A significant social force that impacts the way in which we view health is the culture we are immersed in. People's cultural background and the languages they speak are singularly important in forming their understanding of health and illness. Culture affects health in many ways. What is seen as health or illness in one location or by the members of one culture is not always seen the same way in another (Fanany 2012). Culture may affect perceptions of health, illness and death, beliefs about causes of disease, approaches to public health action, how illness and pain are experienced and expressed, where individuals and communities seek help, and treatment preferences.

Cultural understandings of health and illness operate as an important aspect in determining health and illness of people, communities and populations. While health is well understood by most people in mainstream Australian society, within the Indigenous Australian culture there is no one single word which stands for health (Fleming & Parker 2006). Within the Indigenous context, the concept of wellbeing has a broader meaning than health, because it embraces the wider relationships and connection to people with their traditional land and community (Fanany 2012). Thus, the lack of recognition of culture as a determinant of health and the lack of access to culturally competent care results in an alienating and disheartening experience for some Indigenous people, therefore decreasing health status and life expectancy.

Culture is an important consideration in the context of health. One's culture not only determines how the person views health and illness, but also the practices, customs and health beliefs engrained within that culture. Thus, the culture influences the way people experience health and illness and, importantly, how they interact with health professionals. For example, views on the signs of illness or recovery vary across cultures. This subsequently may determine when medical advice should be sought, the kind of health advice that is acceptable and the types of treatment one might engage in (Fanany 2012). It may also determine how a medically sick person should behave and be treated by others. In the Australian Indigenous community, for example, recovering from an illness may require consultation with the wider community and participation in a number of traditional health practices (King, Smith & Gracey 2009). Looking at post-surgery recovery, evidence indicates that walking around soon after hip surgery is important for recovery (Oldmeadow et al. 2006). However, in many cultures it is understood that during post-surgery recovery it is important for the patient to sit still, especially if they are in pain (Fanany 2012).

Social and cultural influences on health are explored in greater depth in PHE5SCP.



Recommended reading

Liamputtong and Suwankhong (2019 pp. 51-82) discuss the complexity of culture as a determinant of health and outline concepts such as culture-bound syndrome, cultural idiom of distress, religion, health and healing and cultural competence.

- Liamputtong, P & Suwankhong, D 2019, 'Culture as a social determinant of health', in P Liamputtong (ed.), [Social determinants of health](#), Oxford University Press, Docklands, Victoria. Available as an ebook from La Trobe University Library.

To learn more about the cultural barriers to health care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, read this article that focuses on the Mount Isa Aboriginal community.

- McBain-Rigg, K & Veitch, C 2011, 'Cultural barriers to health care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in Mount Isa', [Australian Journal of Rural Health](#), vol. 19, pp. 70–74.

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