

## Book Review

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*Indigenous Health: Power, politics and citizenship*. By Dominic O’Sullivan. (2015). Melbourne, Australia: Australia Scholarly Press. ISBN: 9781925333046; 191 pp.

Indigenous rates of ill-health are disturbing, and, arguably, nowhere more so than in the extreme context of Australia from where O’Sullivan is writing. O’Sullivan takes these negative statistics and transforms them into compelling confirmation that “mainstream” health policy is failing indigenous people. He frames this policy failure as an issue of justice and human rights which in the case of Australia reduces Aboriginal life expectancy by nearly 20 years. As Aboriginal peoples make up only 2% of the Australian population this inconvenient truth remains significantly marginal in health policy. Across “the Ditch” (the Tasman Sea), whilst 15% of the New Zealand population identify as Māori, they, too, remain marginalized within health policy (Statistics New Zealand, 2015).

As a global community, we need to talk more about indigenous health and what can be done to address inequities, realign, and revitalize indigenous health. As an indigenous political scientist with a significant scholarly background in indigenous policy, O’Sullivan is well-positioned to lead such a conversation, albeit with an Antipodean focus. This book is his first solo authorship since *Beyond Biculturalism* (O’Sullivan, 2007), his critical text which fractured the widely held liberal notion that biculturalism was enabling Māori aspirations of self-determination. With whakapapa (genealogy) connecting him to Te Rarawa and Ngāti Kahu (two northern tribes in Aotearoa New Zealand), O’Sullivan is committed to exposing indigenous realities and advancing efforts of reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples.

Structurally the book comprises 10 chapters and an extensive contemporary reference list showcasing indigenous academics. The book begins by examining the ideological foundations and values of indigenous health policy and progresses into an exploration of the limits of democracy for indigenous peoples. O’Sullivan considers the power and politics of street-level bureaucrats in relation to health policy and then scrutinizes what this means in relation to human rights and citizenship, capability and freedom. He concludes by affirming the need for indigenous sovereignty and calling for a society in which in the Wiradjuri language, the state of yindyamarra winhanga-nha is achieved. That is the wisdom of respectfully knowing how to live well in a world worth living in.

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As was Kiro (2000) before him, O'Sullivan advocates that, for indigenous (and non-indigenous) people, history is a determinant of health. If this were embraced by the Western-dominated health system, this could have a profound impact on how policy is developed. It opens up possibilities to undertake long-term, intergenerational planning, beyond the parliamentary election cycle. Importantly, in the context of psychotherapy, it might influence how services are delivered to whānau (families) that have experienced intergenerational trauma (McKendrick & Thorpe, 1998).

Rather than re-litigate the substantial negative impacts of colonisation on indigenous health, O'Sullivan focuses on how reconstituted Western-dominated health policy and systems could be used to advance indigenous aspirations. Beyond the familiar health outcomes arguments, he asserts that a robust health system is an investment in citizens being able to continue to engage and contribute to the political, social, cultural and economic spheres of life, not just as an investment, but from a justice and fairness perspective, as the right thing to do.

O'Sullivan is concerned about the burdens of ill-health indigenous people bear but his focus is the injustice of the causes of this compromised health for indigenous people as citizens. He notes the pervasive discourses of personal responsibility coming from government agencies, but reframes this through an analysis of equity of opportunity. He takes a macro view, presenting the evidence of systemic racism against indigenous people in educational opportunities, the job market and the health system that leads to uneven access to the positive determinants of health. Health and education policies that fail indigenous peoples therefore become human rights issues.

Building on earlier arguments, O'Sullivan argues that accepting policy processes which marginalise indigenous perspectives and contribute to health inequities is accepting lesser rights and opportunities for indigenous versus non-indigenous citizens. Fundamentally, the imposition of Western-style democracy has been incongruent with traditional indigenous leadership and decision-making processes (Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2009). Indeed, in earlier work O'Sullivan (2003) has claimed that when indigenous people become a minority in their own country (through colonization and settlement), the imposition of majoritarian democracy becomes a culturally-specific manifestation of historic racism.

O'Sullivan's breadth of scholarship is impressive: he traverses from the implications of the Northern Territory invasion, critiques the "closing the gap" policies, and explores the application of the *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UN, 2007) to strengthen and unfold his argument. He tucks away his rage, and quietly reminds readers that in settler colonial states like Australia and New Zealand, governments need to do more to strengthen indigenous rights and health. Closer to home, this book implicitly poses deeper questions of how we as a community of practitioners and scholars respond to the crisis of indigenous health status? In whatever land we inhabit, to the non-indigenous amongst us, it queries how we can be authentic and useful allies to indigenous peoples. What will our contribution be to a process of global transformation in which reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples enriches the diversity, health, and well-being of all humanity?

From outside the health sector O'Sullivan provides clear justification to those of us that wish and work for a transformed health sector where indigenous people are central to the design, implementation and evaluation of health services. Indigenous experience should be ordinary and at the centre of health policy. This scholarly book deserves to be a textbook in health faculties and a copy issued to government policymakers before they put pen to paper, minimizing the risk of them doing further harm.

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