Understanding People, Reducing Disparities

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This book is dedicated to my family for their support and tolerance, to all those at The George Washington University and at Jones & Bartlett Learning who are behind the Essential Public Health series and related volumes, and, importantly, to all those already working or planning to work on the front lines to help improve the lives and health of so many people in the United States and around the world. Your work is a testament to humanity at its best.

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The term *culture* has increasingly been used in the discourse of public health, for example, with respect to issues of health disparities in the United States, and the development and implementation of culturally competent or culturally appropriate programs to name a few. What exactly *is* culture, however? The term is easily applied to all kinds of phenomena, without a critical look at the nature of and role of culture as an aspect of human behavior. This book will examine what is meant by culture, the ways in which culture intersects with health issues, how public health efforts—especially efforts to reduce health disparities in both domestic and global settings—can benefit by understanding and working with cultural processes, and a selection of conceptual tools and research methods that are useful in identifying relationships between culture and health. The book also includes practical guidelines for incorporating cultural understanding in public health settings, and examples of programs where that has occurred.

A focus on culture and its relationship to health fills an important gap for undergraduate programs in public health and will provide an important part of the foundation necessary for understanding the field. There are few current (undergraduate) texts that (1) provide a broad introduction to the concept of culture; (2) reframe the general concept of culture as a set of tools or lenses through which health knowledge, health behavior, social institutions and practices related to health, and the nature of health risk can be understood; and (3) apply these cultural tools to a range of public health issues, both domestic and global, including practical, program-related applications. This book does all three.

It is almost axiomatic that current and future students of public health need to have a better understanding of the role of culture. Not only is the U.S. population becoming more diverse, but the separation between domestic and global public health applications has become less meaningful. Diversity, including cultural diversity, is the norm. Thus, in this evolving environment, students and others planning to work in public health should have more than a cursory understanding of the important cultural dimension of the human societies and groups with whom they will be partners.

*Health, Culture, and Diversity* is designed to:

1. Introduce the concept of culture as one framework for understanding human behavior. Based on that concept, to introduce the general relationship between culture and health.
2. Provide an overview of specific domains where culture and health intersect, using a range of conceptual tools. These include: varying definitions of health/
well-being; understandings of health risk; illness causation and treatment theories (ethnomedical and ethnopsychiatric systems); healing/curing traditions; culture, illness, and morality (the roots of stigma); the relationship between health risk (vulnerability) and sociocultural structures; gender and health; and the meaning of cultural competency.

3. Provide a brief overview of research methods that focus on obtaining cultural data.

4. Briefly review a range of cases and examples, across several health issues, where health problems, as well as health interventions, were impacted by cultural factors.

5. Focus on three current public health issues where culture and health intersect: HIV/AIDS, obesity, and youth violence.

6. Generally explore some of the ways in which an awareness of the culture–health relationship can inform public health work, both domestically and internationally.

7. Expand the reader’s understanding of cultural competency so that it encompasses a broad spectrum of relationships between culture, health, and well-being.

The first section introduces the concept of culture, not only through the analysis of definitions and specific features, but by presenting the idea in a broad sense—as a key aspect of what makes us human. Culture will be connected to the way all humans interpret and make sense of life, to the way we are socially organized and carry out our daily tasks, and as a key source of motivation for behavior—including health-related behavior. In the second section, the connections between culture and health will be clarified through the use of several conceptual tools and approaches—the idea of systems of health belief and practice known as ethnomedical (and ethnopsychiatric) systems; the connections between such systems and types of health treatments, as well as types of healers; the moral dimension of illness; the idea that vulnerability to disease is shaped by sociocultural structures that include class, gender, economics, and other social divisions; and the idea that perceptions of health risk are filtered through cultural lenses that offer different answers to the question what is a health risk?

In the third section, the book takes an in-depth look at several examples of health issues that are significantly impacted by cultural factors: HIV/AIDS, obesity (and its consequences), and youth violence. It then provides an overview of practical strategies and approaches for identifying cultural factors that affect health conditions, and working with these factors to develop and implement public health interventions that make sense in context and are more likely to be effective. Finally, this section reviews the concept and practice of cultural competence and its role in reducing health disparities. Throughout, the book includes real-life examples and profiles, as well as suggested exercises and activities to help in understanding concepts and their application.

Mark Edberg, PhD
Prologue

Eliminating health disparities has been a national goal since Healthy People announced its importance at the dawn of the 21st century. Yet as each year passes, the issue of health disparities takes on new importance and gains new attention as public health recognizes the central role played by social and cultural determinants of health.

Understanding health disparities requires that we go back to basics and ask fundamental questions about what we mean by health, what we mean by culture, and what we mean by diversity. That is exactly what Mark Edberg does in his new book, Essentials of Health, Culture, and Diversity: Understanding People, Reducing Disparities. This new book for the Essential Public Health series is written in the same engaging and thought-provoking style that has made Dr. Edberg's other book, Essentials of Health Behavior, a widely acclaimed text that is well on its way to becoming a classic.

Dr. Edberg's education as an anthropologist provides the grounding for him to venture forth into territory that needs to be addressed by public health or healthcare education. Cultural competence takes on new and expanded meaning as he explores the ways that culture affects the health risks we take, the ways we respond to illness, and the strategies we use to address public health issues.

Essentials of Health, Culture, and Diversity: Understanding People, Reducing Disparities is structured as a textbook, ideal for a one-semester or one-quarter course. Both undergraduate and graduate students will benefit. Dr. Edberg applies his extensive experience teaching in this new text, using a wide range of classroom-tested teaching methods. The book stands on its own with all the theoretical and practical background needed to address the issues and teach a course.

Dr. Edberg is able to bring behavioral theories to life by providing relevant examples and extended case studies. To illustrate his approach, Dr. Edberg focuses on HIV/AIDS, obesity, and youth violence to provide in-depth understanding of these key public health issues.

As editor of the Essential Public Health series, I am delighted that Mark Edberg has again applied his talents to a subject central to the way we look at public health and health care. I'm confident that Essentials of Health, Culture, and Diversity: Understanding People, Reducing Disparities will give you new perspectives and new understandings that you can use every day.

Richard Riegelman, MD, PhD
Editor, Essential Public Health series
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