

## **Global community psychology in the Northern Territory**

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### **Focus**

Rapid socio-technical changes associated with globalisation of economies, telecommunications, international migration, and Westernisation, have had serious consequences for traditional cultures throughout the world. In many cases, traditional cultures have experienced dislocation and disintegration. Nowhere have these consequences been more profound in their impact upon people's health than among the citizens of Pacific Island nations. In February 2000, health, social welfare, and academic professionals from ten Pacific Island nations gathered in Honolulu, Hawaii, to establish a collaborative research training and service delivery program. These nations included American Samoa, Australia (Aboriginal Populations in the Northern Territory), Commonwealth of Northern Mariana Islands, Federated States of Micronesia (e.g., Chuuk, Pohnpei) Fiji, Guam, Papua New Guinea, Republic of the Marshall Islands, and the Solomon Islands.

### **Methods**

In the course of this meeting - sponsored in part by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) of the National Institutes of Health - participants agreed to develop an epidemiological monitoring system to assess the distribution of alcoholism, substance abuse, tobacco, suicide, and

violence, to the socio-cultural contexts of daily life.

While the participants agreed to use standardised questions and data indices, they also resolved that efforts would be made to contextualise both the process of data gathering and the interpretation of the data within each location's historical and cultural contexts. The participants openly acknowledged that any effort to develop service delivery and prevention programs required data for policy development and implementation. They also agreed that the autonomy of each site would be respected, and that the meaning of the topics and data would be understood locally.

### **Possible outcomes**

While it is still too soon to determine if the goals of this gathering will be met, and if the project will be considered a success, there are a number of elements of the meeting that reflect direct and indirect support for a new approach - a global-community psychology - to the problems including the following.

1. Respect for cultural diversity
2. Preservation of cultural diversity
3. Awareness of the bias and ethnocentricity inherent in Western concepts methods
4. Collaboration across disciplines, sectors, and nations
5. Empowerment of local cultures through active participation and decision making
6. Recognition of the role of culture as a determinant of health and illness

7. Commitment to a systems orientation in which social conditions related to cultural dislocation and abuse are considered in the cause, treatment, and prevention of individual and collective disorders
8. A willingness to work together as a region rather than as separate nations in resolving health and social problems

In these ways, the participants of the Pacific Island Epidemiological Monitoring and Psychosocial Research Training Project typify new approaches to mental health problems and services - approaches that address the challenges of the times in which we live through the use of global community psychology.

### **North Australia**

Indigenous Australia will be represented in this project through the participation of a variety of communities within North Australia. These will be drawn from the Northern Territory, which contains the highest proportion of indigenous peoples within any State or Territory across the nation, and which is also the site of a number of community-driven initiatives to combat the socially destructive influences of alcohol and other drugs. Chief among these initiatives is the Living with Alcohol Program, with which the current project will interface closely. This collaboration will be facilitated through the participation of a multi-disciplinary team of researchers and consultants from the Northern Territory University.