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Why Culture matters for planetary health

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Why "Culture" matters for planetary health

The future health of human civilisation depends on the careful management of the planet's natural resources. This formidable challenge demands holistic, interdisciplinary problem-solving. Yet some research Cultures (distinguished, with a capital "C", from typical designations of culture that are associated with values, religion, ritual practices, and so on) have gained more influence (such as through funding) than other research cultures in developing knowledge about and solutions for planetary health.

When included in planetary health research, culture is represented as an externality that can be isolated as one factor among many within, for instance, ecosystems, infrastructure, markets, or policies.[1] This narrow interpretation of culture is further constrained by difficulties associated with measuring qualitative factors and outcomes.[2] Invariably, more emphasis is placed on economic and social measurements of basic needs than qualitative interpretations of need and related concepts (such as cultural rights),[3,4] which are also important for a positive experience of life and the future health of human civilisation. Projects that improve physical capital (such as in infrastructure and technology) that stimulate so-called green growth—ie, economic development that enables the preservation of natural resources[5]—or secure basic human needs through scientific or compatible social science approaches (such as environmental economics, behavioural psychology, management, or business studies)[6] are typically prioritised for funding and investment relative to approaches such as ethnographic research. Complex cultural needs might not be taken into account in studies that use quantitative approaches to analyses, perhaps for reasons of model parsimony or perceived objectivity.

This prioritisation of certain research Cultures over others reflects the inadequate inclusion of social science and humanities disciplines in the wider planetary health research community. The absence of these influences reinforces particular understandings, norms, and practices (for instance, of so-called cultures) that could affect the successful implementation of planetary health policies.

To our knowledge, researchers, policymakers, industry partners, and practitioners in the planetary health literature never acknowledge the tacit influence of their own research Cultures on processes of knowledge creation. The role of different types of Cultures and cultures as drivers of change in planetary health is poorly researched. Thus, it is not well understood how our own ideas and practices reinforce certain planetary health values (what is worth protecting), means (how we quantify and protect these allegedly positive values), and ends (what makes for a positive experience of life).[1] Indeed, there is a hidden Culture at work within our own professional networks that creeps into our evaluative frameworks and intervention designs and that shapes how we as researchers ask questions, identify problems, measure outcomes, and devise solutions. Although increasing attention has been given to stakeholder inclusion in research design, in practice, many projects have already been framed in advance by the investigators' Cultural influences.

Broader, transdisciplinary approaches to planetary health are needed not only to improve understanding of linkages between cultural practices or resource use and socioeconomic outcomes, but also to increase awareness of our own disciplinary and policy Cultures that reinforce certain values, means, and ends scenarios over others. Ethnographic research provides a wealth of evidence for these lines of enquiry. A classic ethnographic study of the difference between local cultures and expert Cultures is Ferguson's study[7] of a rural development project in Lesotho. In this case, the good intentions of external experts—to increase livestock productivity and foster sustainable development—were met with resistance and violence. The policy makers, scientists, and development practitioners viewed the land and its products as a way to foster sustainable growth and increase incomes, whereas the Basotho people saw the land and their animals as forms of prestige that were tied to collective forms of redistribution and that were largely incommensurable with money. Interventions that start with the Cultural assumption that land is (or should be) a productive asset could face local resistance.[8] At best, these projects will increase awareness of more sustainable and lucrative methods for production. At worst, these projects could create or recreate inequalities between people favoured by past and present forms of socioeconomic development and those whose assets (such as land) are often appropriated for such development.

Ethnographic research[9] broadens the knowledge base needed to create so-called healthy publics (ie, dynamic collectives of people, ideas, and the environment) that draw on diverse experiences to challenge and improve human and environmental health. More provocatively, this research highlights the need to recognise that both stakeholders and experts uphold disparate values, means, and ends.[6] As planetary health researchers, we need to have a better understanding of the role of power, status, legitimacy, and cultural norms within and between stakeholders, scholars, policy makers, and practitioners. High stocks of social[10] and cultural[11] capital in planetary health research make it possible to sustain collaboration, collective action, and improvement in the delivery of equitable and sustainable solutions, but these factors can also create power asymmetries that shape which Cultures are prioritised and whether these Cultures are favourable or detrimental to human and environmental wellbeing. If planetary health is to remain a relevant term around which scholars can continue to coalesce, we must make sure that our disciplinary and grant call-directed Cultures align with (or at least do not conflict with) local peoples' understanding of the problem, its solutions, and the practical and practicable steps that we all need to take to get there.

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