Neoliberal Political Agenda Affecting Indigenous Australian Health Outcomes

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**Introduction**

Indigenous Australian people which includes people of Torres Strait and Aboriginal typically have a high mortality rate when compared to other non-Indigenous Australians. They are experiencing disability as well as life reduced quality due to ill health. An important contributor is their health services access for their wellbeing and healthy lifestyle. Through community clinics, the Australian government and other government of territory and state of Australia are providing fund for services related to Indigenous specific program. Some of the services are provided by Indigenous specific public Australian hospitals and others through (ACCHOs) which is a health organization controlled by the Aboriginal community(Sanders et al., 2011).

While health care access is a human basic right, according to WHO, healthcare access is a concept of multifaceted which among others can refer to service utilization, availability of services, service relevancy, and equity. The essence of neoliberalism is to cut the government expenditure on services provision and maximizing the effect on private sectors. Private enterprises built on neoliberalism acts more on people as commodities rather than serving them their rights. Indigenous Australian is people with having higher rates of mortality and poverty struck background that makes the victim of this whole political debate of neoliberalism. Sociology theories act to define the well-being of societies if all the members are equitable in their reach for health needs as it is a basic human right.

**Discussion**

**Neoliberalism**

Neoliberalism is a phenomenon of transferring control of factors related to the economy from the public sector to the private sector. It emphasizes more on the capitalism of free market and minimizing government control, spending, public ownership and regulation. It is mostly encompassed by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan era. One way to better understand the concept of neoliberalism is to understand its differences with other economic and political concepts. It is mostly associated with the economic concept of laissez-faire, the policy prescribing government minimal amount of interference in issues related to the economy of society and individuals. According to this theory, human progress can be achieved through economic growth continuity. This can be possible if free markets are encouraged and state interference is emphasized to be limited.

**The structural theory of Functionalism**

This theory was suggested by Talcott Parson. According to him, functionalism percepts society as a system; interconnected parts set that forms together as a whole. All the parts and socialization agents have a relationship and maintenance of society is contributed as a whole. The key belief of this system are order, social consensus and integration as the progression of society and its continuity is allowed because of shared values and norms. That means common goals and vested interest are taken by individuals in conforming and as a result minimizing the conflict.

According to Talcott Parson Society is a system. According to him, there are four bases of functional prerequisites which are goal attainment, adaptation, pattern maintenance and integration. These problems need to be sorted out for society to survive.

1. **Adaptation**

It refers to the phenomenon of relationship that exists between system and environment. Control of some degree should be exercised by the social system on the environment in order for survival. Members must be provided with shelter and food to meet their needs. The economy is the prime institution concerned to fulfil this function.

1. **Goal attainment**

This phenomenon refers to the set goal by the whole society towards the directed social activity. The political system sets the procedure for goal establishment and priority decision between institutions and goals. It is the duty of the government to allocate resources and set goals for the society to act. Laws passed by the government even in free markets are set to direct and regulate those markets.

1. **Integration**

Integration primarily refers to conflict adjustment. This is concerned with setting the mutual adjustment and the coordination of parts of the social system. Conflict potential can be reduced by standardizing the relationship between institutions and individuals by setting legal norms.

1. **Pattern Maintenance**

Basic pattern maintenance of values, society institutionalization is defined by Pattern Maintenance. Religion, family and educational system are the institutions that perform this job.

**Conflict Theory**

Conflict theory is suggested by Karl Marx which suggests that competition for limited resources is the main cause of perpetual conflict. It suggests that order of the society is maintained by power and domination, rather than conformity and consensus. Individuals and free markets in a society work for their benefits maximization. Conflict arises when the distribution of resources between rich and poor increases and it does increase in neoliberalism where things are mere commodities.

**Neoliberalism in the Australian context**

Neoliberalism is affecting many reforms that were undertaken in Australia. It emphasizes minimum welfare work done by the government and encourages unregulated markets. It seriously limits government attempt of intervention to compensate for negative market forces effect on social welfare and health. Consequently this reformation of neoliberalism results in healthcare cost cutting which decentralize to regional or local levels instead of national level setting healthcare as sale and private good rather than paid public good for tax dollars. Neoliberal philosophy is shown by prevailing terminology nowadays in Australian healthcare discussion which involves: dismantling, spending cuts, downsizing, deficit cutting, declining welfare state, competitiveness, inevitability, chopping services, de-insured, for healthcare profit, escalating cost, user pay fees, being obligated to make policy choices of difficult nature, justifiable sacrifices and unfortunate necessities.

Neoliberalism is seen as a philosophy that undermines the idea of a welfare state. It emerges in 1980 in Australia and gradually started to form a political debate about basic assumption regarding this ideology, mainly its concept related to the free market and its constraint-free idea imposed by the state. It is seen as most ethical and an alternative which is honest in a neoliberal circle in Australia which fails to differentiate between trivial goods and healthcare which is termed as a public good. Keynesian welfare concept is consequently been condemned as unjust and inefficient within the neoliberal circle.

Neoliberals see the citizens as public good rational consumers with health being one of these goods. We can say in another way that neoliberal philosophy places importance on mutual responsibilities and individuals rather than rights and is, therefore, fails to differentiate between our part as citizens and consumers.

**Australian Indigenous and Neoliberalism**

Australian Indigenous are Torres Strait Island and Aboriginal peoples of Australia, who were descendants of the groups that exist before Australia was a part of the British colony. It has been noted that Indigenous Australians person experiences high rates of poverty and unemployment. Report Close the Gap in 2018 indicates that the employment rates of Australian Indigenous decreased in 2016 to 46.6% from 48% that was noted in 2006. Non-Indigenous people employment has noted to be around 72% which is 25.4% higher than the Indigenous Australians(Baum et al., 2016). This data of low employment rate indicates that significant hurdles are paved in way of Indigenous Australians as compared to other Australians which includes, employer discrimination, job location, and lack of education among other factors.

As far as health is concerned, Indigenous Australians are more likely twice to report ill health issues and are more prone to long term illness or disability by 1.5 times. Statistics have shown that as far as heart diseases are concerned, 5-10 fold hypertensive disease and rheumatic heart disease increase, 2 fold other heart issue increases, circulatory system issues increases by 3 fold and 24% deaths are accounted by diseases in the circulatory system. As far as renal failure is concerned, transplant and dialysis registry are seen to be increased by 2-3 folds, renal disease end-stage increases up to 30 folds, the renal failure death rate increased by 8 folds, and total deaths account for due to renal failure is 2.5%. Numerous other diseases are seen in the Indigenous Australians which are more likely to attack them.

**Neoliberal Political Agenda and its Effect on Indigenous Australians**

Reforms by neoliberal lead to making its impact on the current system of the healthcare system in Australia and it puts its free-market emphasis rather than health right for the people(Horton, 2007). Although all the people would be on disadvantage for neoliberal reform in the health sector Indigenous Australians particularly would be most affected by such reform, due to their lower status of socio-economy and increased need for health care. It has been seen in Chile and Greece which had made some reforms in its health sector pertaining to the neoliberal agenda, which results in healthcare quality deterioration. As discussed in stats that Indigenous Australians are more exposed to diseases and disabilities, so they are more likely to face several hurdles in their healthcare access to services and healthcare needs the high report as compared to other Australians. Extensive research has been done on the neoliberalism impact on healthcare access for the general population(Sakellariou & Rotarou, 2017). However, very less research is done on the effect of these policies on people with poverty and disability. These studies have confirmed and illustrated that there is inequality in receiving healthcare between general population and poverty have driven, ill health people.

As suggested by the data that most of the Indigenous people are not only more immune to health issues but also lives a poverty based life. In such an environment, they would be in most disadvantaged to pay for their own healthcare related needs. In the recent wake of the austerity drive in Australia, Indigenous people who rely on the state benefits are particularly at a disadvantage. In the discourse of neoliberalism, ordinary Australians and Indigenous Australians are all evaluated on the same criteria of success and failure, which would cause the society to move on the basis of survival of fittest.

As not only the healthcare department would go to private ownership that would charge the individuals but also neoliberal demands no government check and balance on the healthcare department. This would result in costly healthcare treatments with less effective treatment.

According to Talcott Parson Structural theory of Functionalism, society acts as a system and move towards its combine goal. When this does not happens, their remains always a chance of conflict. This suggests that whenever it is felt by Indigenous Australians that they belong to the suppressed part of the society, it would lead them to build their voices against the system which would eventually lead into a conflict situation. For a country and a society to progress, there should always be a possible way to avoid that outcome. It also states that if a free market is set, laws must be passed by the political government to exercise control for some of the possible measures. As far as health is concerned, the functional theory emphasizes that for a society to be able to perform, effective health care and good health is necessary for it to function. Society cannot function if ill health impairs its way. If too many people in society are unhealthy, the stability of society suffers. Therefore it is a role of government to take its weak alongside so that the society can function as a whole.

In Conflict approach, inequality is emphasized in health quality and delivery of health care. Society inequity along with race, social class, and gender are the cause of ill society. People with poor socio-economic background have more chances to get ill and when they get ill, inadequate care in the health sector make it hard for them to get well.

**Conclusion**

Neoliberalism has taken the individualization to a path where health right and reconceptualization of healthcare can be seen as a sale of private good rather than paid public good with tax. This relocation of healthcare from welfare to the free market state has posed very detrimental effects on services related to healthcare for Indigenous Australians who are already in difficulty. Neoliberalism have produced negative and long-lasting negative effects on the service of health, which affects the vulnerable Indigenous Australian population. Overall increased need for healthcare services due to disability presence, combined with deteriorating effects of neoliberalism and the disadvantages structural people with disability face often can lead to obstacles in access of healthcare for Indigenous Australians.

Since inequalities in health are usually seen due to neoliberal policies, public understanding with political commitment is necessary in order to meet the needs of Indigenous people but also to handle determinants of health-related issues. It is always an important measure to carry out an assessment about the impact of health equity so that evaluation can proceed to investigate the effectiveness of any initiation of policy(McGregor, 2001).

Evidence is suggested by international studies in health that reduction in inequality in health can be attained by targeting people with low socioeconomic stature as in the case of Indigenous Australians by increasing opportunities of employment, education improvement etc. Overall, it is evident that in time of austerity measures, attention and special care should be paid to people in need having ill-health and socioeconomic issues especially health regard issues. It is necessary to promote socioeconomic inclusion of Indigenous people to safeguard their rights as a human being.

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