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Neoliberal subjectivity in indigenous oral health

Neoliberalism was established in the post-Cold War period as a set of dominating ideologies, practices and policies that underpinned the globalisation movement. Neoliberalism champions competitive private markets, deregulation in the name of freedom, personal autonomy and individual responsibility for health. A decade after the initial rise of neoliberalism, health inequities became concerns on the global stage. Oral health inequities aptly reflect social injustices due to the unique relation between material circumstances, access to health services and structural inequities. In Australia, Indigenous children experience early childhood caries at alarmingly higher rates than non-Indigenous children. Recently, neoliberalism has been suggested as an overwhelming contributor to Indigenous oral health disparities. This research is an extension of a single-blind parallel-arm randomised control trial that aimed to identify factors related to the increased occurrence of dental caries in Indigenous children. The objective of this qualitative analysis was to generate an understanding of how neoliberal subjectivity exists for Indigenous peoples in the context of oral health in Australia. Experiences of shame, judgment, ownership, embarrassment, and guilt were commonly expressed during motivational interviews with parents establishing oral health routines for Indigenous children. We argue that neoliberalism, as a function of modern health systems, is an extension of colonisation, benefitting the privileged and further oppressing the disadvantaged. As academics, and a crucial part of the neoliberal system, we are ethically compelled to challenge the inequity of power and health in our society and help navigate a way forward.

Biography

Brianna Poirier completed her MSc in Applied Human Nutrition at the University of Guelph in Canada in 2020 where her research focused on community-based Indigenous food sovereignty. Presently, Brianna is a PhD candidate and research officer in the Indigenous Oral Health Unit at the University of Adelaide in Australia where she is researching the impact of neoliberalism on oral health inequities experienced by Indigenous peoples in Australia as well as facilitators and barriers (sugar consumption, nutrition knowledge) to establishing oral health routines for Indigenous children.