Reviewer's report

Title: Socio-demographic factors and psychological distress in Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian adults aged 18-64 years: analysis of national survey data

Version: 1 Date: 16 September 2011

Reviewer: Saffron Karlsen

Reviewer's report:

The paper examines the relationships between sociodemographic factors and psychological distress in samples of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian adults. Unfortunately, I don't feel it makes the most of its potential.

Significantly, the investigation which might prove most fruitful (and which the authors draw attention to in the Abstract and Conclusions) is not possible as the questions on racist victimisation are not available in the combined dataset. Also, the analyses repeatedly compare Indigenous people living in remote and non-remote areas and non-Indigenous people, without properly discussing the value of doing this, or what might be driving these differences. It seems that 'remote' areas are predominantly inhabited by Indigenous people - suggesting comparability with other work exploring the protective effects of same-ethnic density on health generally and specifically the health impact of racist victimisation (following the work of Bécares et al). It also seems that these areas are more economically deprived, and I wonder whether a lack of variation in these measures might explain their apparent lack of impact of psychological health in these (but not other) areas. Without thorough investigation of these various issues (which I believe is not possible with these data), the analyses seem unsophisticated and I do not believe the paper can make an adequate addition to the existing literature.

There were several other, fairly sizeable, issues with the paper which I feel should be addressed before resubmission:

The 'Background' section contains extensive discussion of the data used in the analysis (which should perhaps be in the Methods), but little discussion of existing evidence of the variations in psychological distress between Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups and the drivers of these, nor of findings from other investigations of ethnic inequalities in mental and physical health which might shed light on these. Therefore, we have insufficient evidence to understand why certain indicators are included in these analyses, and others are not.

In several places, the authors state that 'racism and discrimination occur across the SES spectrum'. While that is, of course, true to an extent (for certain forms of racist victimisation) this is not universally the case. The authors should give more consideration to the implications for this study of work which considers socioeconomic variations between different ethnic groups to be evidence of
institutional and other forms of racism, how (and why) exposure and reactions to (different forms of) racism varies by socioeconomic group and how racialisation might combine with socioeconomic disadvantage both to exaggerate and produce specific forms of health risk.

The Results could use some restructuring. At present, the findings, and their significance, is difficult to decipher. The reader would be better supported by the inclusion of a description of the analytical process adopted, and greater guidance through the different stages of the analysis. The amount of detail given in the text in the findings is very limited. Clearly, this should be something of a summary, but at present the reader is expected to refer back to tables constantly for any detail on an association. The first paragraph of the Discussion would also benefit from the inclusion of additional detail on the findings.

Concluding the Results section, or beginning the Discussion, with a summary explaining the significance of the findings would be useful. More importantly, the paper would benefit from a section describing what this paper adds. In particular, what value is an analysis of self-reported mental health over the existing work described in the first paragraph on page 17, or in the other work produced using these data (which seem quite considerable)? Here, the authors refer to the importance of ‘racism, trauma and grief’. Unfortunately, these are not issues they are able to shed light on. The paper would also benefit from some discussion of potential explanations for the associations and variations identified.

At present, I do not believe that the investigation contains sufficient depth to support the first sentence of the Conclusions, nor do I believe the results speak so clearly to the policy and practice recommendations described.

And a few smaller ones:

How generalisable are these results?

What are the issues associated with combining the two studies? Are there really none (such that it is appropriate to consider it one study, as the authors do in places)?

'Main language’ is included in the analyses but the reason for this, nor the coding of this variable, is not discussed.

Please describe the ‘dynamic nature of Indigenous households’. What implications does this have for this work.

I found the figures unhelpful, and feel these data should be incorporated into Table 1. In general, the tables are a little difficult to interpret.

**Level of interest:** An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** Yes, and I have assessed the statistics in my report.