

R. L. Kirk, *Aboriginal Man Adapting: The Human Biology of Australian Aborigines*. (Research Memographs on Human Population Biology) Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981. \$57.00.

Aboriginal Man Adapting is an impressive and comprehensive survey and synthesis of the very diverse and often difficult-of-access literature dealing with the human biology and ecology of Australian Aborigines. In this respect Professor Kirk's book is a remarkable and particularly welcome achievement and could well serve as an excellent text for courses covering a broader environmental, anthropological, or human geographical approach to Australia. The book very lucidly treats oftentimes complex and disciplinary-specific topics, with current and well-informed discussion of varying perspectives and a judicious use of easy-to-follow maps, graphs and tables. The temporal perspective necessary for such an adaptive consideration of human biological history in Australia is, of course, encompassing. The author manages to render the past 100,000 years of environmental change in Australia, and consequent human adaptive implications, both interesting and informative to professional and layman alike.

Some of the more interesting and provocative issues addressed include the effect of human subsistence activity in altering the floral and faunal balance in Pleistocene Australia, the extent to which Aborigines became physically and genetically diversified across the continent, the consequences of culture contact and change on traditional adaptive strategies, traditional and contemporary health, diet and nutrition, alcohol metabolism, and the interface between biological and cultural adaptations. These often controversial subjects are treated in an objective and even-handed manner, with the discussion substantially promoting synthesis and an enlightened understanding of the issues. Material relating to recent research in the Arnhem Land region of the Northern Territory is particularly well represented and affords the reader a genuine and de-

tailed appreciation of the nature and circumstances of traditionally oriented communities living in this region.

There is an inevitable problem in so encompassing a review; certain areas must receive cursory and less knowledgeable treatment. Given that the principal focus of the book and the disciplinary orientation of the author is human biology, it is neither surprising nor particularly damning to note that those areas receiving relative, albeit for the most part benign, neglect are social and cultural context and psychological considerations relating to developmental comparisons, perceptual and cognitive processes and contemporary adaptation demands. The fact that social and cultural context not only mediate and reflect adaptive response but themselves constitute environmental adaptive pressures, is unfortunately not pursued.

Those areas where this too-brief coverage is particularly problematic include a three-page discussion of mental and cognitive abilities in the chapter dealing with growth and development, an equally brief discussion of Aboriginal mental health in the chapter dealing with changing patterns of health, the summary description and analysis of contemporary settlement life, and transition circumstances faced by traditionally oriented communities today. With respect to Aboriginal "mental and cognitive abilities," for example, there is a very inadequate discussion of measurement problems, to say nothing of equally problematic issues of sampling and administration. Since there may be questionable construct validity of such tests and the many problems of interpretation of such cross-cultural findings, it would have been better to have at least more fully discussed the complexity of these issues. It is noteworthy that the references cited to the relevant Australian literature are drawn with one exception from two edited volumes, and no reference is made to a very substantial, current and particularly relevant cross-cultural literature in this area. There now appear to exist many significant cross-cultural differences relating to cognitive processing and "style." The Australian research is particularly noteworthy in this respect; the specific role of cultural context and the ultimate meaning of these differences, however, is far from clear.

The brief summary of the mental health of Aboriginal communities, while qualified, leaves an impression of a very high incidence of psychiatric disorder, with insufficient discussion of causal context, within-culture perspective, and problems of cross-cultural diagnosis. Comments relating to the possible confusion between sorcery and schizophrenic symptoms underscore the inadequacy of general understanding in this area and perhaps the inapplicability of some western diagnostic models and assumptions. A more meaningful consideration of mental health would require some basic distinctions between individual adjustment

problems, conflicts and competence, and collective community competence and adjustment. These in turn would need to be considered in the context of traditional institutional breakdown, majority culture interventions and dependencies, and cumulative adaptation demands. The “learned helplessness” which results from chronic frustration, communication breakdown and intransigent other-culture assumptions and settings, for example, can be too readily diagnosed as individual and cultural disorder rather than on a situationally prescribed and institutionally mandated adaptive stance. The nature of health, human settlements and culture contact are so intertwined as to require a fuller treatment of the adaptation demands and dilemmas faced by traditionally oriented Aboriginals living in contemporary settlement and fringe circumstances. Considerable controversy surrounds issues of general and mental health in Aboriginal communities today; this is not made clear in the too brief coverage of these topics in the book, nor are the issues themselves addressed.

Other areas of omission which one could argue are of particular relevance to the stated scope and objectives, include the nature and role of traditional versus contemporary built environments in mediating environmental and cultural adaptation demands and the overriding importance of land rights and tenure for traditionally oriented Aboriginal communities. There is a growing and noteworthy literature addressing issues of housing, mining, road construction, land rights and general social and cultural environmental impact assessment which bears a necessary and important relationship to larger issues of human ecology and adaptive wisdom. It is, however, difficult to find too much fault with such a well written and documented synthesis of an already unmanageable and vast literature.

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