

# Everything you need to know about social determinants of health you can learn from IKEA

September 2 2015, by Atif Kukaswadia, Phd.

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Darwin the monkey was very confused when he got lost in IKEA. Credit: Instagram

It's that time of year again. Summer is ending, undergrads are flooding university campuses, and people are moving. When people move, a few things become mandatory, for example, pizza or some other reward for those who help you move.

But one of the most important things anyone will do though is the annual trek to IKEA.

Every parent knows what I'm talking about. You pile into a car (generally a minivan or Subaru station wagon), already stuffed to the brim with things, and go to a store that actively advocates for you to acquire more things. And their things are practical! And useful! I mean, this year they introduced a mirror with hooks on the back to hang up tomorrow's outfit! It's genius!

Here's where it gets interesting though. Have you ever gone into IKEA for just one thing? It's impossible. You have to go through the whole store to get what you need, and while shortcuts exist, it's often difficult to figure out where they go, and if you're not careful, you'll end up back where you started. And some sections are unavoidable – the children's section and the section at the end with random knick knacks especially. And inevitably you pick up something for your apartment. A small potted plant. A bamboo tablet stand. An 8-bit model deer. Something.

This is all easy to wrap your head around. Everyone has lived this

struggle. However, once you extend this idea to how the built environment and how it might shape our [health](#), people shut down. We know it can and does.

Now, I've given the example of IKEA above, but this is true of many shops. Items placed at eye level are more likely to be sold. Somewhat creepily, characters on the front of children's cereal look down – that way they're looking at kids. The whole environment has been crafted to make you act a certain way, and, in the "best" cases, created so you experience it the way the designer wanted you to. This is a whole science, with the layouts referred to as "planograms." For those interested in this in a practical retail context, [this document](#) details how this applies to an alcohol retailer in Ontario. You can see exactly where products are placed in order to make it easy to get what you want, and to therefore encourage you to purchase products.

However, the idea that the environment is making you subconsciously act a certain way extends beyond the retail sector. The neighbourhoods we live, work and play in all impact our health, all impact our health:

*... our health is shaped by how income and wealth is distributed, whether or not we are employed and if so, the working conditions we experience. Our health is also determined by the health and social services we receive, and our ability to obtain quality education, food and housing, among other factors. And contrary to the assumption that Canadians have personal control over these factors, in most cases these living conditions are – for better or worse – **imposed upon us by the quality of the communities, housing situations, work settings, health and social service agencies, and educational institutions with which we interact.** (Source: The Canadian Facts, emphasis mine)*

At a higher level, the political context, [social norms](#) and social policies [all influence our health as well](#). These differences can impact our ability

to make decisions and choices, and disproportionately impact some communities.

So next time someone questions the idea that the environment doesn't impact their health and behaviours, and believes that we're totally into control of everything around us, give them one simple task:

Take them to an IKEA, leave them in the middle, and say "escape."

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