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An Economy of Poverty? Power and the Domain of Aboriginality

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Abstract

In this essay I argue that the domain of Aboriginality is constituted by non Aboriginal/Aboriginal relations of power whereby the State operates as a proxy for these relations. The domain of Aboriginality is multifaceted, with intersecting and intertwined layers which work in tandem to contribute to the maintenance of Aboriginal poverty in Australia.

Introduction

Indigenous people in Australia are overwhelmingly and unremittingly poor. Using the term poverty to refer broadly to arenas of socio-economic disadvantage, Indigenous Australians might be conceptualised as operating within an economy of poverty. Regardless of family, cultural, country and colonising history or geographic location, Indigenous peoples' common position on the lowest rung of this society's socio-economic hierarchy is undisputed. This Indigenous specific location is irretrievably related to poverty and social exclusion. If a consistently shared socio-economic position constitutes a social class, then Indigenous Australians form their own class, firmly wedged at the bottom of Australian society (Walter and Sagers 2007).

The question explored here is how this shared status can be explained. Despite the regular description of Indigenous disadvantage in official statistics, theoretical explanations for Indigenous poverty are sparse. Indigenous poverty tends to be just accepted as a self-evident fact. In this essay the concept of the differential placement of Aboriginal people within Australia's social strata is theoretically developed. The terrain of Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relations is posited as the core of this positioning. A recognition of the lived reality of being an Indigenous person in contemporary Australia; and the manifestations of this terrain on the life options and outcomes of Indigenous people, what I term the domain of Aboriginality, provide a frame for understanding the insidious and pervasive nature of Indigenous poverty. This theoretical frame is then empirically assessed by identifying aspects of the domain of Aboriginality through an examination of the authoritative use of power by the state through the prism of Lukes' (1974; 2005) radical view of power. Lukes' thesis provides a useful theoretical tool for examining the use of such power, its alterations, its discourses, and its interactions with the life experiences and outcomes of Australian Indigenous peoples. In this discussion, the relationship between the Australian state and its Indigenous peoples operates as a proxy for broader relationship between Indigenous and settler Australian society.

Measuring and defining Aboriginal poverty

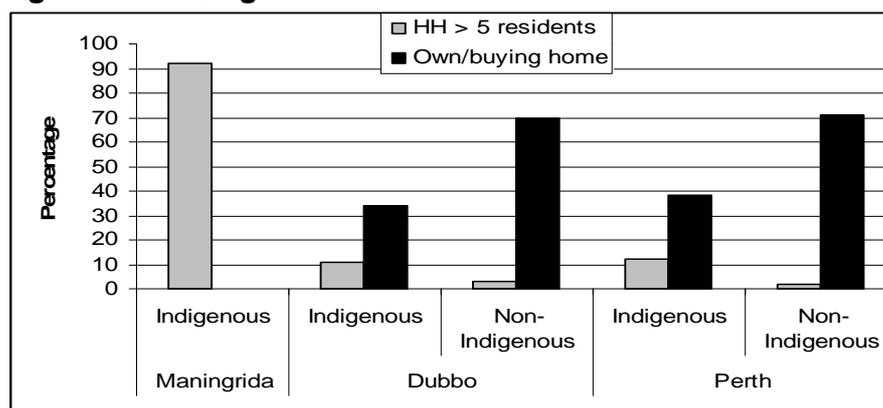
In Australian studies of poverty, definitions of what constitutes poverty and who is poor are contested. The poverty debates are more than semantics or pedantry. How poverty is measured and what is measured can, and does, make a huge difference to poverty estimates (Saunders 2005; Walter 2007). Underpinning the what and how debates are the ideological dimensions. Analysing poverty necessarily also involves judgements about Australian society and its social, economic and political arrangements. For example, the Centre for Independent Studies (CIS), strongly aligned with free market ideologies, rejects the notion of relative poverty and insists that poverty should only be examined in terms of absolutes: that is, not enough to meet the costs of the essentials of life (Hughes 2002).

Others more aligned with social justice perspectives, such as the Brotherhood of St Laurence, accept the reality of relative and absolute poverty and use poverty lines to denote the presence of poverty. The result is that poverty estimates from the CIS are only about a third those of the Brotherhood of St. Laurence (5% and 15% respectively) (Senate Poverty Report 2004).

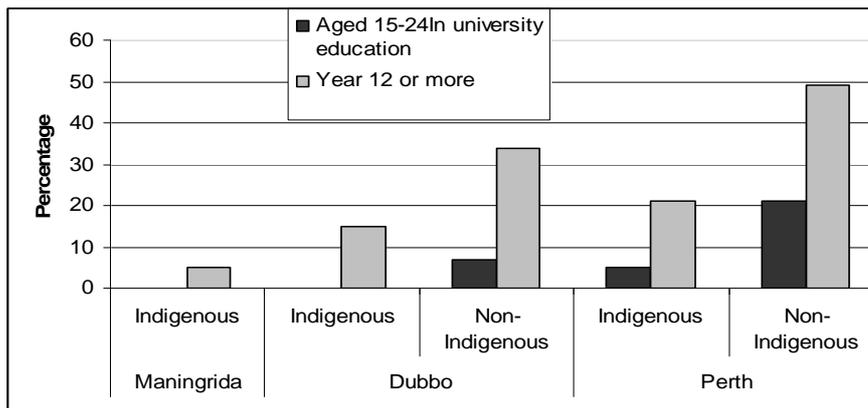
Although the poverty debates need to be acknowledged, what is remarkable is that neither of these groups (or any other involved in such contestations) specifically consider Indigenous poverty. Yet Aboriginal households and communities are indisputably the poorest in Australia, regardless of whether poverty is measured in relative or absolute terms; whether income poverty or broader measures are used; or choice of equivalence scale. The depressing and commonly cited comparative statistics of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians bear witness to such poverty. These include: the huge gap in life expectancy; the higher rates of suicide; the higher rates of infant mortality and low birth weights; the higher rates of household overcrowding; the lower education levels; the more than 50% of Aboriginal people reliant on Centrelink payments as their main source of income; or the Indigenous unemployment rate that remains more than triple the national average regardless of a decade of national prosperity and the dubious practice of counting Community Development Employment Program workers as employed (ABS 2004; ABS 2006; HREOC 2004). The lack of substantive change in any of these indicators is also well documented (Altman and Hunter 2003).

Also, despite the pervasiveness of Indigenous poverty, public and political discourse around Indigenous issues invariably concentrates on the circumstances of remote Australia. Yet, these stark disparities do not just, or even mostly, apply to those living in remote communities. Nearly three quarters of the Aboriginal population are urban with a full 30% residing in Australia's major cities. And urban Aboriginal lives are also predominantly lived in circumstances of all encompassing poverty (Walter 2007). Data from the 2006 Census confirm a pan Aboriginal poverty. The following four figures examine comparative Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal data from Maningrida, a remote predominantly Aboriginal town in the Northern Territory, where 92% of the 2068 population are Indigenous; the regional centre of Dubbo in New South Wales where Indigenous people make up 11% of the 37,843 population and the Western Australian capital city of Perth with an Indigenous population of 21,324 who form just 2% of the total (ABS 2007).

Figure 1: Housing Indicators



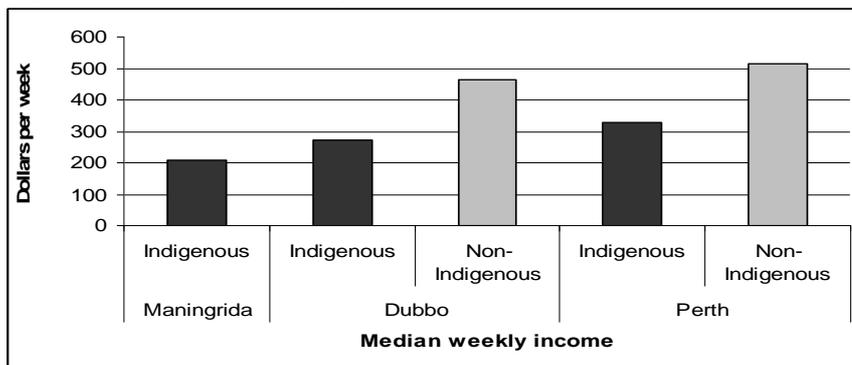
Derived from ABS 2006 Census of Population and Housing Data Tables

Figure 2: Education Indicators

Derived from ABS 2006 Census of Population and Housing Data Tables

As shown in the two figures above, the pattern of comparative disadvantage holds true regardless of geographical location. Indigenous people in these centres are only half as likely to own or be purchasing (and most are purchasing rather than owners) their own home and at least four times as likely to live in overcrowded conditions. In all centres Indigenous youth aged 15 – 24 years are at least four times less likely to be attending higher education than non-Indigenous youth. While these figures do not count those attending a university elsewhere, less than 1% of Indigenous youth in Dubbo are attending university (compared to 7% of non-Indigenous youth). The 5% attending university in Perth is more optimistic but still dramatically below the 21% figure for non-Indigenous youth in the area.

Median weekly income figures, detailed in Figure 3, also remain significantly lower for Indigenous people in all three centres. In Dubbo, Indigenous median weekly income is only 59% of that of the non-Indigenous population and in Perth, is around 64% of non-Indigenous median weekly income. The ratio of Indigenous to non-Indigenous income has not improved at all in the last decade.

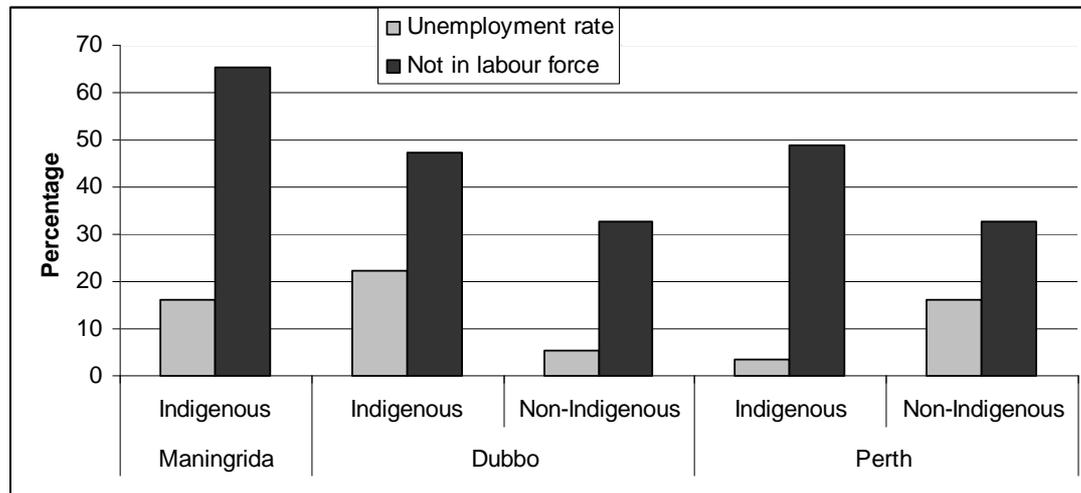
Figure 3: Median weekly income

Derived from ABS 2006 Census of Population and Housing Data Tables

Finally, in Figure 4 below, even after recent dramatic falls in the unemployment rate Australia wide Indigenous unemployment rates remain high. In all three centres the rate is more than quadruple that of the non-Indigenous populations. These figures are actually worse than they seem for two reasons. First, Indigenous people employed on CDEP programs are counted as 'employed' even though these jobs are part-time, casual and linked to welfare payments and second, the proportion of Indigenous people aged 15 years and over classified as 'not in the labour force' is much higher in the Indigenous populations. For example, while the official unemployment rate in Maningrida is 16%, the proportion of the population 'not in the labour force' is more than 65%. And if CDEP workers were not counted the unemployment rate would be more than 75%. Similarly for Dubbo, while unemployment runs at 5% and 33% of those older than 15 years are not in the labour force, for Indigenous residents, 22% are unemployed but more than 47% are not in the labour force. Additionally, while many of the

non-Indigenous 'not in the labour force' population are likely retirement age, and the proportions of the Indigenous population aged 65 years or more (less than 2% in Dubbo) is small, most of this group are of working age. The unemployment rate of the Indigenous population, therefore, despite being already disproportionately high, is kept lower by high rates of non-participation among working age adults.

Figure 4: Labour market indicators



Derived from ABS 2006 Census of Population and Housing Data Tables

Interpreting Indigenous inequality

The overall message from these analyses is that Indigenous poverty and disadvantage are phenomena in their own right. While interpretation of the data above, in common with all Indigenous statistical data, is limited by factors such as age structure differentials, significant differences in household structure and size and collection issues such as the western base of questions asked, population coverage and representativeness of samples, the endemic and different nature of Indigenous poverty remains clear. Such a contention is supported by the very sparse analysis of Indigenous poverty, which shows that Indigenous poverty intersects differently with conventional social stratification and social class related hierarchies. Hunter (1999) for example shows that household overcrowding, poor health and negative interactions with the criminal justice systems are an issue for Indigenous households at all income levels. Data from the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) (ACER 2000) also finds that, while the mean score of Indigenous students is lower in all categories, unlike non-Indigenous students, there is no clear association between Indigenous parental socio-economic position and student results (Walter 2007). It is a reasonable interpretation that higher income does not translate into better life chances and outcomes for Indigenous people in the way it does for non-Indigenous Australians (Hunter 1999; Walter and Saggars 2007). Indigenous poverty appears to operate outside the usual theoretical understandings of poverty or social stratification.

The logical next step is to ask why. This question is glaringly absent from the dominant discourse on Australian studies of poverty. The essential link between poverty across all socio-economic positions and being Aboriginal, are largely ignored (for exceptions see Tyler 1990 and Hunter 1999). That Aboriginal people are poor is essentially taken as a given. But social givens have social origins, they do not just exist. Data relating to Aboriginal poverty must be placed and analysed within their present and past social-structural context; one which is uniquely Aboriginal. Aboriginality is at the crux of Indigenous poverty. The term Aboriginality is used here to denote the lived experience of being Aboriginal in Australia and the broader impact of that lived experience on individual and group life chances and life options. This rather complicated but obvious concept of past and present socio-structural reality can be termed the domain of Aboriginality.

Components of the domain of Aboriginality

The domain of Aboriginality is multifaceted with intersecting and intertwined layers which contribute to poverty and are not easy to untangle. But specific components can be identified. While such a list is still incomplete, these facets go some way towards illustrating the complexity of the depth and the breadth of the domain of Aboriginality. These individual aspects can be further grouped into clusters. These are presented below in Figure 5.

Cluster 1: Socio-economic position

Cluster 1, made up of four related facets, is the most directly aligned, but not necessarily the most influential, component group related to Indigenous poverty. It is clear from the previous discussion that Indigenous people have been and remain largely excluded from accessing anywhere near a relative share of Australian society's resources and opportunities. Importantly, however, rather than just a continuing 'at this point in time' poverty as measured by statistical data, analyses must include a recognition of inherited, population wide socio-economic deprivation. Just like socio-economic privilege, socio-economic deprivation accrues and accumulates across and into the life chances of Indigenous individuals, families and communities. As importantly, Indigenous people are explicitly and implicitly excluded from social privilege. Non-Aboriginal Australia expects Aboriginal people to be poor. And while giving lip service to the idea of equality of opportunity, any suggestion of a lack of appropriate poverty by Indigenous people is met with deep and immediate resentment. The article published by the *Weekend Australian* (Sexton and Kane, 2005) physically juxtaposed against a critique by Aboriginal activist Mick Dodson of government plans to privatise Indigenous communal lands, provides an example of such resentment. The article included a photograph of Dodson's Canberra home, speculated on its value, and was followed by the statement that 'Mick Dodson does not advocate private property ownership on communal Aboriginal land, but in suburban Canberra he holds his own wise investment in bricks and mortar' (Mediawatch 2006). In this article a perceived lack of dire poverty was used to challenge the Aboriginal authenticity of the individual, and their right to advocate on Indigenous issues. Poverty, as an attribute, is not demanded of the spokespeople of any other group in Australia.

Cluster 2: Absences

A cluster of absences marks the Indigenous invisibility in both Australia's view of itself and from the arenas of importance and influence. Most pivotal is the lack of Indigenous power demonstrated in the absence both physically and figuratively of Indigenous Australia/ns from the political scene and spheres of influence at all levels. Second, Indigenous people are both spatially and socially absent and separated from non-Indigenous Australia. While over two thirds of Aboriginal people live in regional and metropolitan urban areas, Indigenous lives are separated in almost all spheres from those of non-Indigenous people residing in the same geographic location. The reasons for these separations are predominantly found in the social distance between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia. The vast majority of Australians live in an Indigenous free zone. They do not know any Aboriginal people and do not interact with any Aboriginal people on a day to day basis. Indigenous people are invisible, as people, in conceptions of everyday Australian life except as stereotypes.

This invisibility extends to the nation state's concept of itself and the business of state. For example, although the first Council of Australian Governments (COAG) meeting, post the Rudd Government's election, included an Indigenous agenda item, it is unlikely that Indigenous issues were raised in other agenda items in any of the inter-governmental exchanges. This absence from Australia society, physically and symbolically, is more than just marginalisation. Such a sustained absence requires a dedicated and practised commitment to ignorance.

Cluster 3: Disregard

The physical and social separation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia is exacerbated by the need and wish, for reasons of belongingness but also of safety, both cultural and physical, for Indigenous people to live in close proximity to family and friends. This aspect fits into the next cluster; the facets which Sheehan (2007) refers to as the burden of disregard. There is within the interaction of Indigenous/non-Indigenous relations a normalisation of disrespect which underpins the climate of everyday racism that is the lived experience of Aboriginal people in Australian society. This piece of graffiti from a women's amenities at the University of Tasmania, which proclaims in large letters: *'Aborigines don't suffer from discrimination – they profit from it'*, typifies the undercurrent of disregard towards Aboriginal people. Supported by other statements in a similar vein, this example gives currency to the notion of Aboriginal over-entitlement which prevails in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. As Morris (1997) claims, this cognitive dissonance allows racist rhetoric and practices to coexist with a discourse of Australia as a non-racist and egalitarian nation.

There is also a broad acceptability of the denigration of Indigenous culture. The 'deficits' and 'inadequacies' of Indigenous culture provide an infinitely variable circular rationale for Indigenous disadvantage. Indigenous people are seen as first having a culture of poverty, which maintains and regenerates poverty by self sustaining practices such as welfare dependency. Second, a perception of a poverty of Indigenous culture characterises cultural practices as both creating and sustaining Indigenous disadvantage. For example, Sutton (2005) argues that the hugely inequitable health circumstances of Aboriginal people can be linked to Aboriginal culture. By labelling health inequalities as the outcomes of a very mixed and empirically suspect bag of so called Indigenous cultural practices, responsibility for the dire Indigenous health outcomes can be targeted at Indigenous people themselves (Walter and Mooney 2007). The exception to this denigration is when such culture can be usurped, commodified and used by non-Indigenous groups: think here of the Qantas ads, or the opening of the Sydney Olympics.

Finally, within this cluster, is the intense, intrusive, judgemental but emotionally remote media and public gaze within which Indigenous people live their lives. Despite the absence of a legitimate Indigenous place in Australian society, within this gaze Indigenous people fall outside common Australian citizenship. Instead, Indigenous lives and communities become caricatures, which are an ongoing source of remote and safely distanced voyeurism that turns the tragedy in many Indigenous communities into televised current affairs fodder and regular news features.

Cluster 4: Dispossession

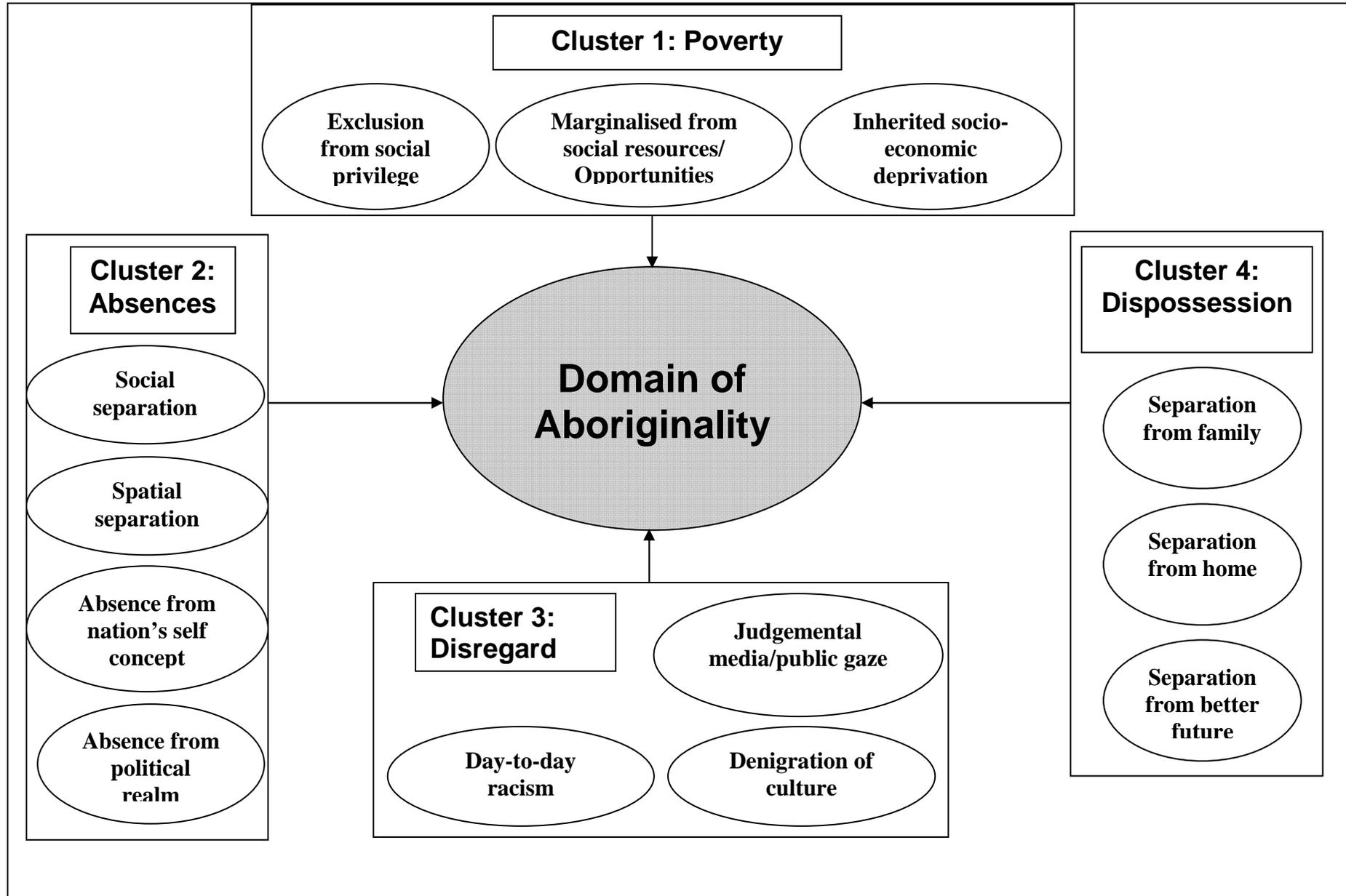
The fourth component set of the Domain of Aboriginality is grouped here into a cluster of dispossessions: they are essentially about loss. The effects of colonisation have resulted in most Australian Indigenous people being separated from country. Claims to country are either non-existent or tenuous and remain perpetually subservient to the entitlement demands of non-Indigenous Australia. The recent appeal by the Western Australian Government against the land rights granted to the Noongar people of Perth provides an example here. For a significant proportion of Indigenous people the on-going legacy of colonisation also means being separated in some shape or form from family.

The final facet refers to a loss of optimism about life options and chances; almost a fatalism towards a poor deal. Based on the lived experience of both this generation of Aboriginal people in Australia and the ones that came before, outcomes such as ill-health, substance abuse, early and pointless deaths of family members, and traumatised children are a common personal, family and broader social group level experience. The result is that dramatically circumscribed life chances and a hard daily reality have become a normalised aspect of Indigenous life. As a colleague noted, Indigenous children often have two sets of shoes, one for school and one for funerals. For non-Indigenous Australia the result is a desensitisation towards Indigenous poverty and dire life circumstances. For Indigenous Australians the result

is a lack of energy towards the future, weighted down by the difficulties of today. I have labelled this concept the separation from conceptions of a different future.

The domain of Aboriginality is, therefore, a structural component in itself that is predominant in its impacts on an individual's life chances. In understanding Indigenous poverty, other factors, especially the commonly cited inequalities related to low education or low employment levels, must be understood within this framework of Aboriginality. Crucially, these also must be understood as indicators, not causes or cures, of Indigenous poverty and Aboriginality is not just an additional component to be considered. Rather, the domain of Aboriginality is the central core, with other aspects of poverty intimately interwoven and interpreted through that Aboriginality.

Figure 5: Domain of Aboriginality



Power and the domain of Aboriginality

As a concept and as a lived reality, the domain of Aboriginality is a social relation. It underpins the terrain of Indigenous/non-Indigenous relations in Australia and is implicit in the dominant discourses underpinning the relationship between the state and its Indigenous people. As such, the politics of representation is a crucial element in its constitution. And in contemporary Australia, Indigenous issues are, by definition, inevitably infiltrated by political, moral and racial evaluations. The social reality of the domain of Aboriginality is most evident in the way in which the state now utilises its authoritative power in relation to Indigenous Australians.

Lukes' (1974; 2005) three 'faces' of power represents both a useful systematisation of (previous) frameworks for understanding power and a method for understanding the explicit and explicit processes of power (Lukes, 2005, 28). While Weber defined power as 'the chance of a man or a number of men to realise their own will in a communal action even against the resistance of others who are participating in the action' (Gerth and Mills 1948, 180), the use of power, especially the use of power and authority by the state, is more complex. In the 1970s Steven Lukes developed a more radical theoretical framework for understanding how power is used within contemporary social and political realms. Initially argued as a counter to Dahl's pluralist theory of power, under Lukes' thesis, power operates at different dimensional levels. Lukes reprised his original framework in 2005.

Lukes' one dimensional view of power (1974, 2005) is similar to that of Weber and refers to situations where there is an observable conflict of interests. It refers to how power is directly used as an express behaviour to enforce the preferences or decisions of one group over those of another or others. In Lukes' (1974) second view, power is used more subtly, but more effectively. The two dimensional view of power refers to the ability not only to make and enforce certain decisions but also to control the political agenda and keep potential issues out of the political process. Power, from this perspective is the ability to prevent decisions being taken on issues over which there is an observable conflict of interest, either as express policy preferences or, as Lukes refers to them, as sub-political grievances.

Lukes' third dimension of power is the power to shape, influence and determine the wants of others. In his three dimensional view of power, the most effective and insidious use of power is to prevent an observable conflict arising in the first place. Latent conflict may still exist, but is not expressed as those harmed by the use of power are unable to recognise their grievance. As Lukes (1974, 24) argues, 'To assume that the absence of grievance equals genuine consensus is simply to rule out the possibility of false or manipulated consensus by definitional fiat'.

Applying a radical view of power to the domain of Aboriginality

Lukes' exposition allows us to realise that the use of power is much more than direct coercion. Power can, and is, utilised across a range of dimensions and in a range of different ways, not all of which are immediately apparent to those involved, especially those whose interests are being harmed or overridden. With particular relevance to the interaction of the Australian state and Indigenous people is Lukes' specific rejection of the idea that one group can exercise power over another and that that exercise of power can operate in the subordinated group's true interests. Rather, as Lukes (1974, 33) puts it, the identification of B's real interests are not up to A, but to B, 'exercising choice under conditions of relative autonomy and, in particular, independently of A's power'.

In applying this framework to the domain of Aboriginality, the use of power by the state in relation to Indigenous peoples can be clearly observed across Lukes' three dimensions. While authoritative power is being used to override Indigenous interests across a gamut of areas, such as land rights, its intersective practice with the social relation reality of the domain of Aboriginality is most amply illustrated in the current policy discourse and practice around Aboriginal welfare. Under policies such as Shared Responsibility Agreements (McCausland 2005) and those associated with the 2007 Northern Territory (NT) intervention by the Federal Government, Aboriginal people alone, and on the basis of being Aboriginal, are subject to penalising obligations and measures not applied to other citizens. Indigenous people are now the only group in Australia who have behavioural conditions placed on their access to welfare. Under Shared Responsibility Agreements, behavioural change has become a prerequisite to the delivery of some programs and services across the country. Within the NT intervention, Aboriginal

people are now subject to the quarantining of up to half of their benefit entitlements, regardless of their financial competence. This measure is unlikely to change under the new Federal Government and indeed it may be rolled out across Australia.

Lukes' first dimension of power can be easily observed in the coercive unilateral nature of current Indigenous welfare policies. The state's ability to use its power in such policies can be directly attributed to that facet of the domain of Aboriginality: the Indigenous absence from the political realm: from the decision-making process and decision-making positions. Overt decisions on Indigenous issues are made almost entirely by non-Indigenous people: National Indigenous Council or not. The totality of the state's ability to directly and coercively impose its own will and agenda on Indigenous peoples is absolute in light of the unilateral initiation of the NT intervention despite expressed Indigenous preferences to the contrary. And while the Australian Federal Government has recently changed, the nature of the state/Indigenous relationship will not automatically also change – regardless of a formal apology to the stolen generation or more empathetic language. The socio-economic position of Indigenous people and economic and social marginalisation aspects of the domain of Aboriginality also provide both a rationale for such coercion as well as ensuring that political and social resistance is muted.

Lukes' second dimension of power can also be observed in relation to this absence. Indigenous Australian peoples have always experienced difficulty in getting issues on the political agenda, but this difficulty has been exacerbated, and deliberately so, by the abolition of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) in 2005. There is no legitimate Indigenous voice: Indigenous people in Australia have been effectively silenced. The spatial and social separation of Indigenous people from non-Indigenous Australians, as well as the absence from the nation's self concept from the domain of Aboriginality can also be linked in here. Because most non-Indigenous Australians live in a spatially and socially Indigenous-free zone, Indigenous people are not present either physically or remembered or regarded as a legitimate stakeholder when political issues are raised or prioritised except, and then only sometimes, when they are specifically about 'Indigenous issues'. The ability of the state to frame the NT intervention as a 'national emergency', with Indigenous communities presented in the discourse and policy as social dystopias, underscores this aspect. The 'burden of disregard' is also relevant. The racialised rhetoric found on talk back radio (Morris 1997), in graffiti (Walter and Siggers 2007), in current affairs programs, in political statements such as Minister Abbott's 2006 call for a new paternalism, as well as in newspaper opinion pieces (see articles by Johns 2006 and Howson 2004 for example), form the undercurrent of everyday race relations in which Indigenous people live their lives. The disregard in which Aboriginal people are held, the Indigenous otherness, both reflects and reinforces the broad exclusion of Indigenous people from Australian society and from any effective ability to access the political agenda.

More profoundly, the domain of Aboriginality contains structures and processes which naturalise Indigenous difference and inequality, part of Lukes' third dimension of power. The absence of Indigenous people from the nation's self-identity contributes to their third-dimensional powerlessness. Because non-Indigenous Australia considers Australia white, Indigenous issues appear external to 'Australian' concerns. The denigration of Indigenous culture trivialises culturally distinctive ways of life such that non-Indigenous culture is positioned as both superior and preferable. The predominant culture of poverty discourse surrounding Indigenous issues also helps to naturalise Aboriginal inequality. Those aspects of the domain of Aboriginality relating to poverty fit here. Indigenous people, by their welfare dependences, are positioned as morally and deliberately complicit in their own poverty. This Indigenous specific accountability also plays into the burden of disregard whereby under a poverty of culture type thesis, Indigenous poverty is seen as being sustained by the socialisation of Indigenous children into destructive lifestyles, habits, beliefs and value systems. But unlike the culture of poverty which Lewis ascribed to poor people in general (Lewis in Lister 2004, 106), such lifestyles are also Indigenous. For example, Sutton (2005), an anthropologist, arguing against what he terms the 'politicisation of disease' states that 'culturally transmitted behaviours and attitudes lie at the centre of the huge differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal health outcomes'. For instance Sutton links overcrowded housing and unhygienic sleeping conditions with previous camping patterns of semi-nomadic Aboriginal residential groups: effectively locating Indigenous health inequalities as culturally inspired choice, rather than the ongoing legacy of decades of state and public disregard for Indigenous peoples, manifested by chronic under-spending on infrastructure and lack of choice. The disregard in which Indigenous people and culture are held, which allows such confused conflation of cultural practices, structural conditions and the

social, cultural, political and economic environments in which Aboriginal people live their lives, is being increasingly given voice in Indigenous policy directions. Additionally, by separately holding Indigenous culture as a barrier to improved life circumstances, this discourse attributes a particular causality which privileges solutions based upon cultural change. In a neo-liberal policy context, it is of little surprise that solutions to Indigenous issues – when they reach the political agenda – are now framed in terms of replacing an ‘unproductive’ and dysfunctional Indigenous culture with a marketised one.

The state’s third-dimensional use of power is also directly demonstrated in its approach to the NT intervention. The ‘national emergency’ rhetoric provided a justification for unilateral action and, as Melinda Hinkson (2007) argues, grounds the crisis in the present, thereby precluding examination of past governmental mistakes. Attempts to question the discourse or the policy are labelled as either supporting child abuse or a regime of ‘failed’ policy. The intervention in the Northern Territory, which took place in the context of comparable child sexual abuse elsewhere, also represents an implicit ideological statement that Indigenous Australians are different to non-Indigenous Australians. This discourse of difference plays out in a wide range of arenas, and seldom to Indigenous advantage. Aboriginal people are very clearly the Indigenous ‘Other’. The Aboriginal ‘problem’ is defined by the Australian nation state within an ideology of the other. Non-Indigenous Australians, including senior academics and policy makers, almost invariably discuss Aboriginal people and Aboriginal problems in terms of ‘they’, never ‘us’. Also, despite the complexity of the Indigenous position in Australia, as demonstrated theoretically through the domain of Aboriginality, understanding of this position tends to be rolled up into the one ‘issue’. Such difference and ‘othering’ justifies previously radical actions such as the suspension of the Racial Discrimination Act to allow the NT Intervention.

2008: A new era or just another ‘beginning’?

In late 2007 a Federal Labor Government was elected and 11 years of Coalition Government came to an end. The relationship between Australian Indigenous peoples and the Howard Government was, to put it mildly, never easy and many now hope for a renewed dialogue and a new era in Indigenous/non-Indigenous relations, led by the Rudd Government. Past relations, however, are littered with ‘new beginnings’ and ‘from this point on’ commitment to improvements that tend to fizzle into continued inaction after just a few years. While the plethora of ‘new beginnings’ might be cynically labelled as just being seen to be doing something while doing nothing, there is obviously also some political will to enact real change, a will that appears to be frequently frustrated and blunted by the seeming intractability of Indigenous poverty, marginalisation and disadvantage: it is too hard.

The domain of Aboriginality provides a framework for understanding both Aboriginal poverty, its intractability and why it remains so hard. It encompasses at its core the unequal power dynamics embedded in Indigenous/settler relations in Australia. These lived social relations create and sustain the discourses that divide Aboriginal people in a racially specific and stigmatizing way as explicitly ‘other’ and responsible for their own disadvantage, as well as ensuring that the choices available to individuals and communities to envisage and enact a different future remain circumscribed. The state’s authoritative use of power in its relationship with its Indigenous people provides an assessable example of how domain of Aboriginality operates. Not only does the state/Indigenous peoples’ relationship emphasise Indigenous difference, it also obscures the complex and multi-dimensional nature of Aboriginal disadvantage and its own complicity in the maintenance of such poverty and disadvantage.

As for future directions, of course, improving Indigenous health education and employment outcomes are vitally important. But as noted, these must be understood as indicators, not causes or cures of the invidious Indigenous position in Australia’s social and economic hierarchy. Rather, the domain of Aboriginality is the central core, with other aspects intimately interwoven and interpreted through that Aboriginality. The social, cultural, economic and political contexts in which that position is embedded, that is, the domain of Aboriginality, is an essential element in understanding and implicit in any action to remediate such positioning.

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