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The Politics of the Data: How the Australian Statistical Indigene is Constructed

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Abstract

The production, analysis and presentation of Indigenous data are not neutral interpretations of numerical counts. Institutionally positioned within a portrayal of Australian national social trends, the data's ubiquity belies their discursive power. By virtue of the racialised terrain in which they are conceived, collected, analysed and interpreted the data are politicised in ways mostly invisible to their producers and users. This racialised 'politics of the data' is the focus of this article. Three examples of how Australia's racial terrain permeates the field of Indigenous statistical analysis are outlined to demonstrate this phenomenon. The theoretical frame for explaining the politically tilted underpinnings of how Indigenous data are 'done' is Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) concept of *habitus*, extended to include race as a fourth dimension of social space. The final section challenges researchers to contemplate the possibility of the data conceptualised, analysed and interpreted from an Indigenous methodology.

Introduction

In 2006 I published an article in *Australian Aboriginal Studies* making the case for greater Indigenous engagement with quantitative research (Walter 2006). Five years on the topic is worth revisiting. Re-reading the article, its slightly apologetic tone emphasises the research distance travelled, although the key arguments around the promise of statistical research for an Indigenous research agenda remain salient. The current political landscape, particularly the Northern Territory Intervention and the Closing the Gaps policy direction confirm the continuing, if not growing, 'power of the data'.

Yet, the field is also an arena of hazard. As systematically collected numerical facts, statistics are much more than summarising numbers. Population statistics are foundational in defining a nation's self concept, affording the evidentiary base for the social/cultural envisioning of the land and entity that is, in this case, Australia. Statistics also provide an interpretative mechanism for societal understandings across social, cultural, economic and political dimensions. It is from this non Indigenous ontological framework that Indigenous statistics emerge and are constrained by an inherently political terrain. From colonisation onwards Indigenous data have paradoxically reflected the physical presence and symbolic lack of presence of the Indigene within the Australian nation state. Contemporaneously, the politics are most obvious in the statistical portrayal of Indigenous dysfunction, but also underpin everyday presentations. Institutionally positioned within a portrayal of Australian national social trends, the data's ubiquity belies their discursive power. Rather than neutral interpretations of numerical counts, by virtue of the racialised terrain in which they are conceived, collected, analysed and interpreted, the data are politicised in ways mostly invisible to their producers and users. This racialised 'politics of the data' is the focus of this article. The theoretical frame for explaining the politically tilted underpinnings of how Indigenous data are 'done' is Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) concept of *habitus*, extended to include race as a fourth dimension of social space. The final section challenges researchers to contemplate the possibility of the data conceptualised, analysed and interpreted from an Indigenous methodology.

The historical context of Indigenous data

The history of Australian Indigenous statistics, and their position in the national imagining, is fraught with contradictory exclusionary practices. Until amended by 1967 Referendum, Section 127 of the Australian Constitution specifically excluded the 'aboriginal race' from official population figures (Chesterman and Galligan 1997). Despite the pointed exclusion in national census counts, collecting and collating Indigenous population data was an active colonial and then national practice. Demographic data on Aboriginal populations was meticulously collected post the 1901 constitutional exclusion clause, but removed from the formal census counts. Based on the 'dying race' presumption, this uncounted counting surveilled, measured and reinforced Euro-Australian control of the country and its resources (Briscoe 2003). Formal removal of Indigenous figures also precluded states where larger numbers of Aboriginal people survived, by virtue of later colonisations, from claiming resource share from any base except their Euro-Australian citizenry (Attwood and Markus 1999).

Since the 1970s Indigenous data were collected at census and spasmodically in national collections. These data, still the predominant source of Indigenous statistics, are derivatives of collections designed for non-Indigenous aims; what Altman and Taylor (1996, 193) term a 'by-product of including an Indigenous identifier'. Formal Indigenous census inclusion, therefore, remediated the stark discrimination, but did little to remedy the underpinning racialised presumptions, or realities of resource access. Low Indigenous population proportionality limit inclusion in sample based datasets. Small numbers make analysis unreliable and not generalisable. For example, Wave 1 (2001) of Australia's premier longitudinal study, *Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia* (HILDA) (Melbourne Institute 2001), includes 259 Indigenous respondents from a sample of around 14,000. Indigenous specific data do exist, most notably in the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey* (NATSISS) (ABS 2008). First conducted in 1994 in response to a Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody recommendation for broader Indigenous data, additional collections were added in 2002 and 2008. Another Indigenous data collection, *The Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children* (LSIC) (Commonwealth of Australia 2009) was implemented in 2004, in part to overcome the low Indigenous presence in the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC).

Racial capital and four-dimensional social space

Statistics are social and cultural artefacts that emerge from, and are translated into, meaning via the norms of their producing and using society. The theoretical work of Pierre Bourdieu provides an illuminating starting framework for exploring this process. Bourdieu (1984) posits that we live our lives within three-dimensional social space delineated by our social, cultural and economic capital positioning. Bourdieu's conceptual innovation is his expansion of 'capital' as a resource for acquiring social position and power beyond standard economic understandings. Social and cultural capital he argues, can, and are, similarly utilised to create and reproduce interpersonal power relations. Bourdieu (1998, 31) uses the notion of social space to demonstrate 'the principle of a *relational* (italics in the original) understanding of the social world (Bourdieu 1998, 31). Our overall social space position, our capital relationalities, shapes our life chances and while we act as individuals we share this position with those with similar capital levels.

Critically, our social space position also determines what Bourdieu refers to as tastes, or dispositions, which shape how we view the world and our own position in it. 'Taste is the practical operator of the transmutation of things into distinct and distinctive signs...it transforms objectively classified practices...by perceiving them in their mutual relations and in terms of social classificatory schemes (Bourdieu 1984, 174-175). This classificatory system is 'the product of the internalization of the structure of social space' (175). That is, what we regard as innate or natural individual leanings are in actuality unconscious transmitted standpoints derived from external social forces. The coalescence of our dispositions is the habitus. '[t]he habitus is the whole structure of the systems of conditions, as it presents itself in the experience of a life-condition occupying a particular place within that structure' (172). Encapsulating our deep social and cultural conditioning our habitus reproduces and legitimates our values, perspectives and worldviews. Similar life experiences, especially those deriving from family background, produce similar dispositions, giving the practices engendered by a particular habitus an aura of objectivity. They possess a 'synthetic unity' (173); they 'make sense' to us.

Bourdieu's focus was social class or more particularly the social spaces in which theoretical classes can be demarcated (1998, 32). As feminist scholars have argued, this focus tends to frame gender, sexuality, and, the topic of this article, race, as secondary to social class (see Lovell 2000). Yet race also delineates structural and structuring position, theoretically independent of cultural, economic and social dimensions. We exist in four-, not three-, dimensional social space¹. As Lareau and McNamara Horvat (1999) explain, in their examination of race capital within American school settings, race demonstrates an independent power to shape key social relationships. Race, across their study schools operated as a medium of social inclusion for white children/parents and social exclusion (mostly) for non-white children/parents. The power of race, shaped, mostly invisibly to those assisted or disadvantaged or judging, the way participants 'played their hands' (48) within social interactions. Whiteness as the norm of those with power facilitated white parents' seemingly natural compliance with interactions deemed both standard and appropriate. As this empirical example demonstrates, while genetics nullify old notions of racial inferiority/superiority, race remains a powerful *social* category (Krieger 2004). Societally produced and reproduced race is still a potent explanatory of why one group, distinguished by skin colour, culture, or place of origin, differ in life chances to others. Race as a social relation of power is underpinned by a society's system, usually entrenched, of racial stratification. Population differentiation into hierarchically superposed racial groups (Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva 2008,15) establishes the capital power of a particular race position. Thus race capital, like other capitals, is distributed unequally prefigured as a sphere of relational societal resource: both a predictor and determinant of our social positioning.

A society's race capital continuum is a product of its racial profile and configurations of race relationships. These systems are not binary, rather marked by patterned gradations in their bestowal of racial capital, varying by place, time and history. The unique racial stratification systems of coloniser nations such as Australia reinforce the place of race as a superordinate dimension of social space. Australia's racial hierarchy and pattern of race capital conference emerge from distinct race infused histories and interaction practices. These reflected, and reflect, colonisation and its processes of possession/dispossession, privilege/disadvantage and entitlement/marginalisation. Those currently and historically at the top, Anglo-Australians, vary widely in their allotted social, cultural and economic capital, but share race capital position. Positionings across the lower gradations, mostly migrants from non-English speaking countries, change over time. For example, older groups from Southern Europe and Asia have experienced a rise in race capital as newer groups, such as peoples from Africa and the Middle East, take up positions further down the race status ladder. The Indigenous place at the bottom remains, as does the shared level of low and embodied race capital.

In four-dimensional social space, life trajectories are determined by intertwined economic, racial, cultural and social capital interactions. What is distinctive about this four way interweaving, as opposed to Bourdieu's three way weave is the recognition of the raced nature of social and cultural capital. Unlike class there is a fixivity to race; an individual's habitus is permeated with racially aligned levels of social and cultural capital, irrespective of its overall operation. Somewhat paradoxically, individual position on the racial hierarchy simultaneously *and* independently of social, cultural and economic capital, affects social reproduction and access to social power. As Bourdieu is at pains to emphasise, dispositions and social, cultural and economic resources are, societally, not ranked equally but, as per racial stratifications systems, graded along a continuum with those capitals possessed by the most powerful accorded the highest value. In this continuum high cultural capital can dilute the negative repercussions of low economic capital and vice versa. The central question, then, is what is the theoretical impact of including race?

The inter-linking and association between capitals is central to Bourdieu's (1984) argument that individuals use the value inherent in the capitals of their habitus to competitively garner resources circulating in what he terms 'fields'. Fields include institutions such as education, labour market and politics but also encompass less concrete social spaces such as public status and power. Field, therefore, is a spatial metaphor for socially constructed locations where societal goods, knowledge, status and services are produced and circulated and the relentless competition for acquisition of these goods played out. Fields are social realms, observably real but changing and transforming across time and place. The value of a specific capital depends heavily on the social setting of the field.

¹ This terminology, used by Jagtenberg and D'Alton (1989; 1992) to conceptualise the interaction of class, gender, ethnicity and nature, has a different and specific meaning in this paper.

In the deployment of race capital for facilitating or inhibiting acquisition of resources across and within various fields, Anglo-Australian whiteness commands the highest value, with access constrained only by cultural, social and economic capital. For example, in Australia, the fields of sports and entertainment are places where the raced body is the least negatively limited. In other fields, however, race capital position can render an individual an invalid or illegitimate participant. In the latter part of this paper I suggest that academia and statistical spaces are such fields. In the field of sports, however, the high social capital of being a champion sportsperson can imbue an Indigenous body with a veneer of the capital of whiteness: The assumption of this faux white race capital is a bestowed status, not a resource an individual can purposefully attain. For instance, Cathy Freeman at the peak of her career at the Sydney Olympics was regaled in the public discourse as an Australian hero who happened to be Aboriginal. The potency of race capital position is exposed, however, by the rapidity with which her 'Australian' status was withdrawn once her active social capital currency was depleted, as demonstrated in the following anecdote. Reading a newspaper reporting Freeman's retirement during a hair cut, my hairdresser remarked, uninvited, that Cathy only achieved because she was unfairly favoured with extra training and support because she was Aboriginal. How many non-Aboriginal kids could have done as well with all that extra support she wondered? The point is not to pillory my (ex)hairdresser but to demonstrate that race is embodied and embedded in an individual's capital resource garnering capacity in a way that class is not. In contrast to post-modernist assertions, the markers of identity and subjective dispositions cannot be donned or removed at will (Lovell 2000 makes this point in regard to gender). In Freeman's case, race neutrality was temporary with the pejorativeness of non-whiteness quickly reasserting dominance. In contemporary Australia the negative capital power of Indigeneity trumps social, cultural and possibly even economic capital.

Therefore, while fields are multidimensional and intersectoral, neither the separate dimensions nor their sum operate independently or meritocratically. Rather, they reflect and reinforce patterned relations of power within which agents/institutions utilise their capitals to control and possess the resources at stake in the field. Social space relationalities within the field reflect patterns of domination and subordination without it. Yet, as Bourdieu argues (1998, 34), domination in a field is not a direct simple action but rather 'the indirect effect of a complex set of actions engendered within the network of intersecting constraints'. A society's system of racial stratification is a powerful constraint. Its systemic nature shapes the deployment of race capital within fields. With race capital bestowed via a continuum to the various racial groups strung along its gradations, its effect, especially for those occupying the static top and bottom positions, Euro and Indigenous Australians respectively, is intensified, not diluted, by the many and intersecting fields it operates within and across. Empirically, even the most cursory glance at the nation's historical and contemporaneous socio-economic profile manifestly supports this claim. All evidence indicates Euro-Australians deploy their racial capital across fields from the top of the stratification ladder with Indigenous peoples firmly welded to the bottom.

Critics of this conceptualisation could argue that racial capital is not definitively separate, but subsumed within the concept of cultural capital. My response is that this argument can be construed itself as a deployment of racial capital. As an integrated aspect of our habitus, race is a conditioning source reproducing and legitimating our interpretation of reality, our society and our own social place. More critically, such perspectives emerge with an aura of objectivity; effectively obscuring the external social origins of 'what makes sense'. This argument correlates with broad and repeated demonstrations from the Whiteness studies field (see for example Moreton-Robinson 2004) of the oft invisibility of high race capital to its possessors. That is, dispositions inherent in a high race capital position can insulate against the lived impact of race. Those without the luxury of normed privilege are acutely aware that race is far more than an identity category. Another critique might be, if race as capital, why not gender and sexual identity? Indeed, as already noted, this case has been argued by feminist scholars. As is evident in social data, men are better resourced to deploy their capitals across a wider range of fields than women. Yet, also, in Australia, men and women are spread across the class continuum, as capital accumulating subjects, in a pattern not duplicated by the top (Anglo) and bottom (Indigenous) position holders of the race hierarchy. Race stratification uniquely shapes the deployment of race capital and by virtue of colonisation, race is woven inextricably into the nation's fabric. For Anglo, non-Anglo and Indigenous Australians alike, race permeates all levels and fields, from everyday social interactions through to the self-concept of the nation. Race encapsulates our social system; it does not sit alongside and, as this paper now argues, the social artefacts of statistics are also interconnected to the deployment of race capital in social space.

The politics of the data framed three ways

Our unit of evaluation in exploring the racialised politics of Indigenous data is the social space positioning of Euro-Australians, especially those of Anglo descent. The concepts of racial ideology and White habitus are interlinked into this framework. Consciously resonating with Bourdieu's ideas, Bonilla-Silva, Lewis and Embrick (2004, 556) define racial ideology as 'the broad racial frameworks or 'grids' that racial groups use to make sense of the world, to decide what is right or wrong, true or false, important and unimportant'. White habitus, employed mostly in relation to urban segregation and race attitudes in the United States is a broader construct and defined as 'a racialised uninterrupted socialization process that conditions and creates Whites' racial taste, perceptions, feelings, emotions, and views on racial matters' (Bonilla-Silva, Goar and Embrick 2006, 325).

While Indigenous peoples are increasingly the object of data collections, commissioning, analysis, interpretation and dissemination of these data remain a largely Indigenous-free zone. In 2010, the prioritising of research questions, decisions about how data collection is carried out, what data are collected, how data are analysed, interpreted and disseminated are still primarily designed and controlled by non-Indigenous researchers and agencies. Yes, data collection agencies are increasingly engaging with Indigenous stakeholders. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS 2007), for example, has the Advisory Group on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Statistics (AGATSIS) with membership drawn from Commonwealth, State and Territory agencies, Indigenous peak bodies and data working groups. But 'input' and 'engagement' are selective activities of variable impact on the purposive commissioning, analysis, interpretation and use of the data. Indigenous presence within the action part remains limited and beholden. This circumscription is not neutral. The demarcation lines of Indigenous appropriate space reveal the guarded social space position from which Indigenous data emanates.

My central argument is that race capital is a shared constitutive element of the habitus of those who control the commissioning, analysis and use of Indigenous data. Predominantly Anglo-Australian and middle class, this group shares a similar four-dimensional social space position. Within the field of Indigenous statistical production, this shared habitus shapes, subconsciously (mostly), Indigenous statistical portrayals, confining and/or prescribing how Indigenous data are conceived. The four-dimensional social space position of the object of the data, Indigenous peoples, reinforces the uncontested 'synthetic unity' of dominant perspectives. Therefore, while overtly benign, these data are in actuality racially politicised; the field of social statistics contains implicit 'rules of the game' and in which different participants are imbued, by their race capital position, with different and graded knowledge of those rules. To show how racialised social space intersects with the current standard ways of 'doing' Australian Indigenous statistics, the political realities in which Indigenous statistics reside are categorised, here, into three distinct areas.

Pejorative evidence

The crudest political and racial statistical visage is that presented as 'evidence' in ideological attacks. It is the trail of deployment rather than the data themselves that exposes the discursive logic of the user. Mostly, this area of racial and political Indigenous terrain is marked by the selective usage and selective interpretation of what these data mean; data 'misspeak'. Two examples, both from the free market think tank, the Centre of Independent Studies, demonstrate. First, a 2009 article (Lane) argues recent statistics show that middle class urban Aboriginal families are increasingly sending their children to university. This claim, unsubstantiated by actual data, is parlayed to support the mainstreaming of education for Indigenous children. The 'evidence' leads the author to conclude that what is holding back those from, in Lane's terminology, 'welfare-dependent urban ghettos, country towns and remote settlements' is the Indigenous content and alignment of the education these children receive. Yet claims of increased tertiary participation by middle class Indigenous youth are at odds with data on Indigenous participation. Between 2001 and 2006 (the latest available data years) Indigenous tertiary participation rose two percent overall and commencements fell by nearly seven percent (DEEWR 2008). Most recently, Helen and Mark Hughes (2009) claimed NAPLAN (2008) figures support their argument that Indigenous education in the Northern Territory needs strict mainstream criteria. These data show, they claim, that 'Indigenous students in mainstream schools in Victoria, Tasmania and the Australian Capital Territory perform at the same literacy and numeracy levels as non-Indigenous students'. NAPLAN figures show no such thing. Indigenous results, across states and levels, are consistently below non-Indigenous figures (National Assessment Program 2008).

The politics of these examples are easy to recognise. Data is played as evidence in an assimilationist discourse driven by hard neo-liberalism. The purveyors explicitly deploy the power of their four-dimensional social space positioning. Their discourse brooks no 'different' treatment or cultural imperatives (other than its own) in its ideological determination of how Indigenous education should be. The focus is pejoratively on Indigenous people and culture, epistemologically situated as 'the object problem'. The manifest purpose is to prove that both must be reshaped to remediate their lack of fit, axiologically and ontologically, into an idealised Australian free market economy.

Simple presentations, undemanding interpretations

The vast majority of producers and users of Indigenous statistics are not right wing think tanks but state and federal government departments and authorities. For these entities, the criticality of Indigenous data has risen with the climate of 'evidence base' prerequisites for determining policy directions. The 'Closing the Gap' centrepiece of the current strategic approach to Indigenous affairs is built on statistics, with the need for, and the efficacy of, policy action, data driven. The increasing imperative for the data to not only indicate demographic and socio-economic patterning, but a (positive) change in that patterning underscores this arena. This is not because statistics and/or measurement techniques are deliberately manipulated. Rather, I suggest, a politically shaded reluctance for data to find an even direr picture (in Howard years) or indicate no progress (in Labor years). The result is a tendency for data dissemination via a constrained undemanding approach to presentation and interpretation.

The dominance of the neo-liberal project, with its individual responsibility approach to overcoming the Indigenous problem is also evident here. While some revision of the discourse has occurred since the election of the Rudd/Gillard Government, the Indigenous policy frame remains focussed on applying market solutions to Indigenous social and economic arenas. Implicit in this is the individual as the focus of enquiry. Yet, within the individualized focus, a racial demarcation remains undisturbed. The Indigene is a raced individual and the statistical evidence on the position of these raced individuals is politically fraught territory for Departments and agencies tasked, especially post-ATSIC, with the job of 'fixing' the Indigenous problem. On-going statistical monitoring provides a yardstick by which success, or lack of, is publicly measured. As an example, for data from the biennial *The Health and Welfare of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people* (2008) Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW]) the default interpretation is absolute change. The 2008 publication reports the Indigenous unemployment rate decreased (20% -16%) between 2001 and 2006, an absolute positive change, adding that the ratio of decline is similar to that of the non-Indigenous population. What the term 'similar ratio' does not make clear is that the relative proportional change is negative; the gap increased. The non-Indigenous unemployment rate declined by around 29 percent but the Indigenous rate, off a much higher base, declined by only 20 percent.

Simple frequency counts also occlude vital aspects such as the dramatically different demographic composition of the aggregate Indigenous population. The AIHW (2008) reports an increase, from 20 to 23 percent between 2001 and 2006, in the proportion of Indigenous people aged 15 years and over who had completed year 12; a positive absolute change. Incorporating the very youthful profile of the Indigenous population into the analysis, given the vast majority of Year 12 completers are aged 17 to 19 years provides a different interpretation. The higher proportion of the Indigenous population (more than double) in this age range, means Indigenous Year 12 achievement rates should be rising faster than in the older non-Indigenous population (Jackson 2008). This is not so. In relative terms the ratio of non-Indigenous to Indigenous year 12 education achievement also rose (Walter 2008).

The politics of the data, aligned with their four-dimensional social space position, also have salience here, but at a different level of explicit consciousness. The simplicity of interpretations belies their active existence as racially politicised objects. This is not a claim of ideological subjectivity. Instead the purpose is to highlight the context in which data are produced and presented. More specifically, these data, in their regular production, comparative year by year, inherit, undeservedly, some sort of responsibility for the seeming intransigence of the Indigenous 'problem'. The picture that emerges has not been up till now at least, the hoped for, or expected, improvement. A simple presentation, therefore, may be the safest option for those charged with being the bearers of this bad news. The incentive, I imagine, to apply a more intensive analytical gaze to these data is low. For similar reasons, the disincentive to move beyond a simple purely descriptive interpretation is likely high. Thus observation is not meant as a disparagement of these data centres or those employed within them.

The statistical intention is usually benign, perceived primarily as disseminating a neutral reflection of Australian social reality. But such perceptions fail to acknowledge that it is a particular view of reality, one imbued with hidden dimensions of the deployment of race capital, which is being reflected.

The orthodoxy of the dichotomy

The final arena concerns analytical tradition. The default analytical norm of Indigenous data is its comparison with data from the non-Indigenous population. This research practice, so entrenched in the statistical pictures that pervade our lives, operates to place the Indigene as 'the Other' before data are even examined. The ordinariness of this dichotomised portrait obscures its racialised genesis in the dominant social, cultural, political and economic milieu. It also masks its inherent potential to underpin pejorative discourses of Indigenous lived reality. Despite the frequently positive intentions of producers and users, the tendency to an automatic rating of the problematic Indigenous 'other' alongside that of the 'normal' Australian by socio-economic and demographic indicators pervades the analytical frame with a subtle depreciatory tone.

The dichotomising pejorative effect is magnified by the comparatively small Indigenous population. This statistical imbalance leads to the analytical and interpretive tendency to aggregate, via the bland, broad category of the 'Indigenous population'. State or geographical remote or urban disaggregation do occur, but usually only for selected, limited variables. The outcome, a dichotomised aggregate comparative norm, while supporting statistical function, is an essentialist positioning. Even a cursory understanding of Indigenous Australia makes evident that aggregation is a statistical convenience, not a reflective picture. Indigenous people share a diversified identity. It is Indigenous peoples such as Walpiri, Noongar, Yorta Yorta, Yolgnu, Quandamooka, each with a unique history, affiliation to country and cultural identity, who make up the Australian Indigenous population (Walter 2008).

Hegemonic dichotomising practice norms not only tend to negative interpretations, they also preclude other ways of using the power of the data. An example can be found in the Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children (LSIC) (Wave 1 2009; Wave 2, 2010). As a long term member of the LSIC steering committee, I am all too familiar with the compromises made to ensure viability. Schooled in the value of probability theory, one of the most personally difficult was to reduce the study's scale from a generalisable random population sample to a study of a large sample of families over 11 sites. Now, as Wave 2 is released, I have had a change of heart. The non-generalisability of the data to 'the Indigenous population' means the automatic analytical dichotomic response cannot be invoked. Instead, data users need look beyond comparison to the unique emerging picture of the lives of Indigenous families across different places, spaces and contexts. Anecdotally, potential users have expressed disappointment at the data's low usability as a direct comparative measure. My question is comparison for what purpose? We already know the children, parents and wider members of Indigenous families are poorer, have lower education levels and live in worse housing. Yet another comparative analysis or publication highlighting what is, and has long been, manifestly and distressingly obvious is not a worthwhile use of the power of the data.

The obvious retort is that of course there is comparison, because comparative measurement sits at the heart of quantitative analysis. This is correct; but it is the what and how of what is compared plus the methodological presumptions used to shape how these comparisons are conceived and interpreted that are the issue. Simple comparisons are not race neutral statistical displays. Dichotomising and framing Indigenous data across Euro-Australian defined studies, variables, priorities and interpretations is not the only, or the best, way to use Indigenous data. More crucially, the norm of the dichotomous analysis, in its apparently benign presentation, still reflects the differential social space positioning of the object and subject.

This is not an argument against comparative analysis. Obviously such practice is valid and necessary. Rather, such simple presentation and default aggregate dichotomising illustrate a particular statistical portrait. The politics of the data, therefore, lie in the assumptions buried within their mantle of objectivity. The acquired and subjective natures of established approaches are shielded by the ordinariness of Indigenous data traditions.

In homogenous groupings, and we stretch the classification to include data producers, Bourdieu (1977, 17) notes, rules or reflections are unnecessary, because the ‘...orchestrated improvisation of common dispositions[and]...collective enterprise of inculcation tending to produce habitus that is capable of generating action practices without express regulation or any institutionalised call to order’. That is, in established practices Indigenous data the analysis and interpretation are so normalised they belie a foundational methodology.

Bourdieu had the insight to reflect that: ‘It is because subjects do not, strictly speaking, know what they are doing that what they do has more meaning than they know’ (1977, 79). Here this reflection has resonance in how the four-dimensional social space positioning of data ‘owners’ flows into Indigenous data interpretation without conscious intent, but with a substantive outcome. The creators and users of these statistics tend to come from the same place, socially, culturally and racially; a White middle class habitus and this positioning is manifest in the way Indigenous data is imagined and the picture it is deemed to ‘show’. As Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva (2008, 7) note, data do not tell a story in themselves. Rather ‘we use data to craft a story that comports with our understanding of the world’. Rooted in the hermetic boundedness and power asymmetries inherent in the shared habitus of their producers, Indigenous data ‘stories’ are unlikely to deviate from well-worn themes of disadvantage and deviation from the norm (Atkinson, Taylor and Walter 2010).

Pushing the statistical envelope: Indigenising statistical analysis

The key argument, from all three examples, is that the politics of the data emerge not from conscious, deliberative actions; but emerge with real life ramifications just the same. The similarity of worldview and perspectives, albeit mostly veiled to their purveyors, is on display. Nor do I suggest non-Indigenous researchers vacate the field. Robust Indigenous statistics require a variety of inputs and examples of nuanced and alternative to standard analysis by non-Indigenous researchers abound. The Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) at the Australian National University, for example, have used Indigenous data to demonstrate arguments of Aboriginal poverty (Hunter 1999), or the non-delivery of ‘practical reconciliation’ (Altman and Hunter 2003), or chronic education under spending on children in Wadeye (Taylor 2004). What I do advocate is an increased Indigenous perspective presence in Indigenous data production because race does matter.

Bourdieu (1991) notes that it is always open to excluded groups to develop heretical discourses. This, as quantitative Indigenous researchers, is our job. This statement brings this article to its start point: revisiting the requisite for Indigenous researchers within quantitative research practice. Quantitative research retains an image problem. Indigenous researchers’ resistance to, or lack of interest in, statistical work is rooted in its historical associations and its relative foreignness as a research process. Most damning is the association made between quantitative and scientific research models (Walter 2006). This association is not in error. The unstated epistemological, ontological and axiological certainties of scientific frameworks have long been used by anthropologists, historians and others to bolster white possession and nullify Indigenous humanity under a carapace of objectivity. Yet progress is made with the work of established and emerging Australian Indigenous researchers (see Guthrie, Dore, McDonald, and Kaldor 2000; Paradies and Cunningham 2009; Cripps 2008; Walter 2008 for example), the CRC Aboriginal Health and professional groups such as the Australian Indigenous Doctors Association and the Australian Indigenous Psychologists Association reinforcing the place of Indigenous scholarship in the quantitative field. We still do not have, however, a critical mass of qualified Indigenous quantitative researchers.

Construction of the statistical Indigene differs when drawn from a different place in four-dimensional social space. The politics of the data reframed to reflect an Indigenous perspective, purpose and reality portrays a subtly, but powerfully, different portrait of Indigenous societal positioning. The first imperative is to decouple and segregate, intellectually as well as practically, the research method (statistics) from methodology. It is research methodology, not method, that contains the explicit and the implicit, cultural, social and consequently political, meanings of research process and practice. It is within methodology that the authorisation of Indigenous people as the Other occurs and Indigenous scholarship, nationally and internationally, successfully contests the Eurocentric constructs embodied within standard research methodologies (in Australia see Rigney 1997; Nakata 1998; Martin 2008; Moreton-Robinson 2004; Moreton-Robinson and Walter 2009).

It is also necessary to move beyond esoteric definitions of methodology. Moreton-Robinson and Walter's (2009) pragmatic definition provides a functional ideation. Composed of three, in practice entwined, elements: standpoint; theoretical conceptual framework; and method, the triad provides an immanent base to revisualise the data.

Standpoint, as conceptualised by Moreton-Robinson and Walter (2009), is the critical aspect in differentiating Indigenous from other quantitative methodologies. Standpoint encapsulates our position, who we are and how we see ourselves in relation to others and to society. Within this, our perceptions and world views are not neutral, objective understandings but moulded by the filters of our experiences and circumstances and our social, cultural, economic and personal identity location. Standpoint, therefore, to a certain degree, is analogous to Bourdieu's concept of the habitus. It is the epistemological, axiological and ontological frameworks of the researcher that shape how data are approached. From an Indigenous position in four-dimensional social space these frameworks will, almost inevitably, vary from those of non-Indigenous researchers. This is not an essentialist statement. Indigenous researchers will have diverse and divergent standpoints, but their underpinning epistemological, axiological and ontological frameworks will also reflect their similar position in social space.

Epistemologically, the value ranking of 'knowledge' is culturally and socially situated. As discussed, the social space positioning of knowers have epistemic consequences. These are embedded in dominant ways of knowing and hierarchies of knowledges and knower which are in turn reflected in mainstream methodological frames and practices. In contrast to silent, presumptive objectivity, Indigenous quantitative methodology places race at the centre of its approach. Indigenous voices and knowledges are explicitly foregrounded. Relationality, rather than subject and object positions, is central (see Moreton-Robinson 2004; Martin 2008; Wilson 2008). Again, this is not an essentialist position. The Indigenous voices and knowledges prioritised will vary by topic, research question, context and (acknowledged) researcher position. Epistemologically, the data do not need dichotomous comparisons to invoke a white habitus frame to allow interpretation or to give the data 'substance'. Indigenous statistics can portray a unique, compelling picture of contemporary Indigenous peoples within this society; of value and validity in their own right.

Value systems also operate, extrinsically and intrinsically, within all research practice. Separating social phenomena from their moral, political and cultural social landscape is not possible: objectivity or value-neutral knowledge is a research disingenuity. Acknowledging an axiological position dictates that we recognise, as researchers, the values and judgements, embedded in our particular milieus and that of the research topic. As argued, Australian Indigenous statistics tend to promulgation and use without acknowledgement of their axiological frame. Yet their value system is clear in their genesis, practice and interpretation. Current questions are focussed around probing comparative descriptions of the problematic Indigenous positioning. From an Indigenous perspective, the more important question is not what, but why. In reversing the lens, for the 'why' of the Indigenous problematic positioning, probing mainstream society to identify how it can be changed to become less problematic for Indigenous peoples has greater axiological validity.

Reality, through Euro-Australian or Indigenous research eyes, also differs and a researcher's ontological base directly influences interpretations of data. The hard numerical form of statistics can support the illusion that they, and the research results they provide, are 'real' in ways that are objective, permanent and incontrovertible. This is patently not so. Data are data, but their political and social reality is framed by how they are garnered and interpreted, by whom, and for what purpose. Statistics do not lie, but neither do they always tell the same truth. The statistical story gathered and analysed from an Indigenous ontological perspective will differ in both the questions the data ask and the questions the researcher asks of the data. For example, the central question of the LSIC study, a question formulated via strong Indigenous researcher input, is '*how do Indigenous children grow up strong?*' This question has a different ontological frame than a question such as: *how poorly are Indigenous children doing compared to non-Indigenous children?* The answers to the former are found in the stories and responses of Indigenous families on data items relating to the capacities and circumstances that operate to best support their raising of strong, healthy and happy children. The answer to the latter would pejoratively draw from an examination of Indigenous children across a comparative set of measurable indicators.

Theoretical frameworks are a separate, but standpoint shaped, component of methodology in that we choose those that make sense to us. The field of theory developed by Indigenous scholars is rapidly expanding, building past, and tangentially from, western boundaries.

As shown here with the adaptation of Bourdieu's work, the insights and theoretical understandings of the western canon can be, and are, reshaped to serve Indigenous needs. For example, Moreton-Robinson utilises the work of Michel Foucault on regimes of truth and surveillance to demonstrate white possession. But like 'the data', theory is not neutral. Most emerge from the metropole (Connell 2007); a white, European and North American upper middle class male habitus, and it shows. Analysis of the logic of theoretical frames is beyond the current province, but for Bourdieu's work it is worth noting that the adaption of Bourdieu's work within this article is a critique as well as a utilisation. Bourdieu, a white, male, European, schooled initially in the discipline of philosophy, rose to occupy the Chair of Sociology at the College de France. His family were lower middle class (his father was a postal worker) and his academic career, while eventually stellar, was not a linear rise to the top. Bourdieu's own theoretical work, therefore, can potentially explain his conceptual emphasis on class. Without the normed privilege of high status family background, his own social positioning stimulated insights into how class shapes how we see and experience the world at the same time as it shapes our life trajectories. As such, while powerful and insightful, Bourdieu's work, as for of us all, is both influenced and limited by the theorist's own social space positioning.

Conclusion

Indigenous statistics are not impartial territory. They lie not just within the fraught terrain of race relations as they exist in the Australian nation state but also within the normalising social power relations associated with capacity to utilise race capital resources. Unmasking the unspoken methodological approach to Indigenous data production allows their usual 'straightforward' comparative presentation in national data to be seen within the political and racial terrain of their origins. Indigenous quantitative methodologies provide a different insight into the statistical Indigene.

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