

Debunking the Cultural Theory Myth

Evidently ‘traditional’ culture is the problem. This has become a very dominant idea in Indigenous affairs in the past few years, promulgated by some influential Aboriginal reformers, black and white academics, right-wing think tanks and conservative media commentators. Their voices provide the public profile, intellectual grunt, and moral authority for an idea that is at the heart of current Indigenous affairs policy thinking.

In short, culture is the problem and it needs to change. The argument runs in two ways: either Indigenous culture is too traditional and has too many vestiges of pre-colonial forms for modernity; or else tradition has been too transformed by the prolonged colonial encounter to be of any use to anyone today.

This two-way logic informs much policy thinking and political discourse. And so behind the state project of ‘Closing the Gap’ there is a strong evolutionary message that Indigenous norms need to be replaced by western norms if mainstream futures and equality are to be both achieved and achievable.

This is explicit in the Council of Australian Government’s National Indigenous Reform Agreement endorsed by the Commonwealth, and all States and Territories, in 2009.

Culture is neither easy to define, nor to measure. It generally refers to the shared values and beliefs of a group or community that inform their social relations and everyday practices. Or, culture is about distinct shared ways of being, doing, thinking, identifying and acting.

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Social Survey (NATSISS) is a special study undertaken every six years by the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

In 2008–09, NATSISS asked nearly 8,000 Indigenous adults Australia-wide about their ‘cultural attachments’ in a number of questions about participation in cultural events and activities, their identity, Indigenous languages use, and participation in customary economic activities.

Last month I participated in the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research Conference ‘Social Sciences Perspectives on the 2008 NATSISS’ at the Australian National University.

Two presentations, in particular, placed on the one hand the statistical evidence on the relationship between Indigenous culture, and on the other violence, socioeconomic outcomes and wellbeing, under the microscope.

The Director of the New South Wales Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, Don Weatherburn, and Senior Research Officer, Lucy Snowball, looked to test

the proposition that Aboriginal culture could explain the high levels of violence among Indigenous Australians.

This ‘cultural theory’ has been heavily promoted, most notably by Peter Sutton in his award winning book, *The Politics of Suffering*, but also by influential Aboriginal public intellectuals, including Noel Pearson and Marcia Langton.

After sophisticated statistical testing, their findings indicate there is little support for the hypothesis that Indigenous violence is linked to Indigenous cultural life. Indeed they suggest those with low cultural attachments have a higher risk of experiencing violence.

Instead, they found strong support for the hypothesis that violence is strongly linked to marginalisation. They suggest that deep poverty and social exclusion result in a heavy drinking lifestyle and associated higher rates of violent victimisation.

Such associations are not linked to culture.

Mike Dockery from the Centre for Labour Market Research at Curtin University has explored the relationship between the concept of cultural attachment and mainstream socioeconomic indicators and subjective measures of wellbeing. The mainstream outcomes he examined are self-assessed health, education, employment, whether one has ever been charged by the police and risky alcohol consumption. Dockery has found that cultural attachment has a positive effect on mainstream socioeconomic indicators, something he has already highlighted in earlier publications using 2002 NATSISS information.

He has been careful to note, though, that there may be ‘reverse causality’ here; strong culture is associated with better socioeconomic outcomes and better socioeconomic outcomes are associated with strong culture.

Measures of wellbeing, including self-assessed happiness, mental health and psychological stress have been collected in the 2008 NATSISS for the first time. Dockery has shown unambiguously that Indigenous Australians who identify strongly with their culture are happier and experience better mental health—strong cultural identity enhances subjective assessments of wellbeing.

At the same time, he has found that maintaining a strong sense of cultural identity has a high price: Indigenous people, in non-remote Australia, report higher levels of psychological stress brought about by feelings of discrimination. Such a cost is not reported in remote Australia.

This suggests that it is Indigenous people who live as a tiny minority encapsulated in mainly non-Indigenous neighbourhoods in regional and urban settings who subjectively experience the most discrimination.

It is noteworthy that these findings are based on rigorous analysis of official statistics collected by the Australian state's data collection agency.

And the authors, two criminologists and a labour market economist, cannot be dismissed as 'the usual suspects'. All have published similar findings in peer reviewed journals using information from the 2002 NATSISS.

However, their published research has failed to make an impact on public debates or policy reform. Their findings represent a fundamental challenge to current dominant thinking which I label 'neoliberal assimilation'.

The findings clearly indicate strong cultural attachment might well be a part of the solution to the Indigenous development problem rather than a central part of the problem.

These findings should generate deep anxiety for politicians and bureaucrats driving a reform agenda that aims to replace Indigenous social norms with western, individualistic, market-focused ones.

What is it about the politics of knowledge production in late liberal Australian society that sees a continuing need for the powerful to continue to traduce Indigenous culture irrespective of the evidence?

One possibility is that the policy architecture is too predicated on an ideology of western superiority to countenance change. Such ideas of 'cultural superiority' have been prominent since 1788 and have been incorporated since the early 20th century into policies of assimilation and mainstreaming, now called normalisation and 'Closing the Gap'.

Another possibility is that mainstream Australian society is far more comfortable seeing Indigenous culture as the problem rather than long-term neglect and discrimination.

Politicians exploit this so if policy fails to close gaps culture can be blamed—it did not change fast enough. It is always easier to blame and punish the different, rather than make the massive investments to ameliorate disparity.

Increasingly we see a dangerous national consensus that Indigenous people are to blame for their own circumstances and that draconian state measures are needed to get them off welfare and into late capitalist nirvana—Aboriginal problem solved, gaps closed, nation reconciled.

Evidently, we are in an era of evidence-based policy making with official statistics the gold standard. That is, unless the findings unacceptably challenge powerful vested positions. Indigenous Australians are being told that there is

only one way to address their problems: abandon your culture and embrace that of the dominant mainstream. The research findings by Dockery, Weatherburn and Snowball are invaluable because they highlight that such a high-risk monopolistic approach should not be countenanced.

Let's look at the evidence on the positive role that culture makes and see what alternate forms of development might be possible.

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