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The Social, Cultural and Historical Context of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians



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OVERVIEW

To understand the contemporary life of Indigenous Australians, a historical and cultural background is essential. This chapter sets the context for further discussions about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and issues related to their social and emotional wellbeing and mental health. The history of colonisation is addressed, the subsequent devastation of Indigenous Australians, and their resilience and struggle to claim equality and cultural recognition, and to shape the present. Indigenous Australia is made up of two cultural groups who have shared the same struggle, yet often when using the term Indigenous, a Torres Strait Islander history is absent. In this chapter both cultures are equally presented. Brief overviews are given of pre-contact times, colonisation, resistance and adaptation, shifting government policies, and the struggle for recognition. Indigenous identity and meanings of belonging in country, community and family are also briefly covered. Contemporary issues confronting Indigenous people are included, with particular attention to racism.

ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER POPULATIONS

The Australian Bureau of Statistics estimated that in 2006 there were 517,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in Australia. Overall, Indigenous people make up 2.5% of the total Australian population. Among the Indigenous population in 2006, it is estimated that 463,700 (90%) were of Aboriginal origin, 33,300 (6%) were of Torres Strait Islander origin only, and 20,100 (4%) were of both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander origin (ABS, 2008b).

In 2006, 32% of Indigenous people lived in major cities, with 21% in inner regional areas and 22% in outer regional areas, while 9% lived in remote areas and 15% lived in very remote areas (ABS 2008a). While the majority of Indigenous people live in urban settings, the Indigenous population is much more widely dispersed across the country than the non-Indigenous population, constituting a much higher proportion of the population in Northern Australia and more remote areas (ABS, 2008a).

ABORIGINAL CULTURAL HISTORY

To appreciate the contemporary realities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, their cultural ways of life need to be understood. In the recent decades there has been a strong renaissance of Indigenous culture and forms of creative expression, and a reconnection and

reclaiming of cultural life. Aboriginal culture has roots deep in the past. Australia's Indigenous cultural traditions have a history and continuity unrivalled in the world.

Far from signifying the end of Indigenous Australian traditions, new forms of adaptation are bringing new vitality to older cultural themes and values that need to be addressed. Contemporary Indigenous Australia presents new challenges, issues and options for reconciliation. Aboriginal people have been in Australia for between 50,000 and 120,000 years. They were a hunter-gatherer people who had adapted well to the environment. There were approximately 300,000 Aboriginal people living in Australia when the British arrived in 1788 (Commonwealth of Australia, 1998).

At the time of colonisation there were approximately 260 distinct language groups and 500 dialects. Indigenous Australians lived in small family groups and were semi-nomadic, with each family group living in a defined territory, systematically moving across a defined area following seasonal changes. Groups had their own distinct history and culture. At certain times family groups would come together for social, ceremonial and trade purposes. It is estimated that up to 500 people gathered at the one time. Membership within each family or language group was based on birthright, shared language, and cultural obligations and responsibilities. Relationships within groups predetermined categories of responsibilities and obligations to the group and to family. Aboriginal people built semi-permanent dwellings; as a nomadic society emphasis was on relationships to family, group and country rather than the development of an agrarian society. Being semi-nomadic meant that Aboriginal people were also relatively non-materialistic. Greater emphasis was placed on the social, religious and spiritual activities. The environment was controlled by spiritual rather than physical means and religion was deeply tied to country (Berndt & Berndt, 1992; Broome, 1994).

According to Aboriginal beliefs, the physical environment of each local area was created and shaped by the actions of spiritual ancestors who travelled across the landscape. Living and non-living things existed as a consequence of the actions of the Dreaming ancestors. Helen Milroy (HREOC, 2008) speaks about the importance of land as part of the Dreaming:

We are part of the Dreaming. We have been in the Dreaming for a long time before we are born on this earth and we will return to this vast landscape at the end of our days. It provides for us during our time on earth, a place to heal, to restore purpose and hope, and to continue our destiny. (p. 414)

Land is fundamental to Indigenous people, both individually and collectively. Concepts of Indigenous land ownership were and are different from European legal systems. Boundaries were fixed and validated by the Dreaming creation stories. Each individual belonged to certain territories within the family group and had spiritual connections and obligations to particular country. Hence land was not owned; one belonged to the land. Aboriginal people experience the land as a richly symbolic and spiritual landscape rather than merely a physical environment. Religion was based on a philosophy of oneness with the natural environment. Both men and women were involved in the spiritual life of the group. While men have been acknowledged as having the overarching responsibilities for the spiritual activities of the groups, past scholars studying Aboriginal cultures have neglected women's roles. Women's roles in traditional contexts, how these were disrupted during colonisation, and the misrepresentation of these roles, have become important issues.

Complex and sophisticated kinship systems placed each person in relationship to every other person in the groups and determined the behaviour of an individual to each person. The kinship system also took into account people external to the group. This practice became important during colonisation, when Aboriginal people attempted to bring outsiders into their kinship systems, particularly through relationships with women. Kinship systems determined exactly how one should behave towards every other person according to their relationship, so there were codes of behaviour between each person outlining their responsibilities and obligations towards others. For instance, a man had responsibilities to his

nephews; he taught them hunting skills and led them through initiation. Kinship relations determined how food and gifts should be divided, who were one's teachers, who one could marry. In a sense, an individual was not alone; kinship systems placed each person securely in the group (Berndt & Berndt, 1992).

People had defined roles according to age and gender. For example, a man's role involved skills in hunting as well as cultural obligations that were important to the cohesion of the group. Likewise a woman also had an important role; she provided most of the food for the group, was responsible for early child rearing, and also had cultural obligations. Reciprocity and sharing were and still are important characteristics in Aboriginal society. Sharing along the lines of kinship and family remains an important cultural value (Berndt & Berndt, 1992).

TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER CULTURE AND HISTORY

The following section provides a brief overview of some features of Torres Strait Islander culture and history. Details are provided about an interesting history that is distinctive yet inseparable from the broader Indigenous story.

Origins and features of the Torres Strait

The Torres Strait is the seaway between the northernmost east coast of Australia and Papua New Guinea, between the Coral Sea and the Arafura Sea. There are approximately 100 islands in the Torres Strait. The Sahul Shelf was a land-bridge that linked the Australian mainland and Papua New Guinea between 80,000 and 90,000 years ago, and the Torres Strait islands are the result of this (Rowe, 2006).

Torres Strait Islanders live permanently in 18 communities on 17 of the 100 islands, as well as in locations in every Australian state. In 1879, the Torres Strait was annexed and as such was considered part of Queensland when the islands became crown land. Queensland has the highest population of people identifying as Torres Strait Islanders (20,902), followed by New South Wales (5,248) and Victoria (2,200) (ABS 2008a). People identifying as having both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage follow a similar population distribution among Australian states (Garvey, 2000).

History

The Torres Strait itself bears the name of the Spanish explorer Luis Vaez de Torres, who travelled through the area in 1606. Torres Strait Islander culture has a unique identity and associated territorial claim (Shnukal, 2001). Oral history and journals written by European seamen from the late 18th century have preserved knowledge about traditional pre-contact Torres Strait Islander culture and society. These stories point to the diversity of Islander people, which came about from the differing conditions in each island, and they are informed by the social and spiritual material incorporated by those Islanders. Torres Strait Islanders had close contact with both Papua New Guinean communities to the north and with mainland Aboriginal communities to the south in and around the Cape York Peninsula (Philp, 2001).

The economy of the Torres Strait was based on subsistence agriculture and fishing. An established communal and village life existed, revolving around hunting, fishing, gardening and trading. Inter-island trading was of food, weapons and artefacts and represented a key aspect of intergroup relationships (Mosby & Robinson, 1998). Some islands were better able to support gardening and crops, and for others fishing provided the main food source. Other islands, due to their size and vegetation, provided wildlife and game. Thus Islanders were gardeners, fishers and hunters, as well as warriors. They were also expert sailors and navigators (Philp, 2001). Reference to this traditional and contemporary skill and the use of stars for navigation is symbolised in the flag of the Torres Strait.

Much of the early recorded history between Europeans and Islanders was punctuated by accounts of attacks and reprisals (Mosby & Robinson, 1998). It should be noted that many resources aimed at facilitating good working relationships with Torres Strait Islanders today focus on the need for visitors to respect *Ilan Pasin* and Islander ways of working, rather than assume certain privileges or levels of access (Garvey, 2007; Mina mir lo ailan mun, n.d.; Mosby & Robinson, 1998).

Torres Strait history may be divided into two periods: *bepo time*—the ‘time before’, or pre-Christian time, and the ‘time after’, or Christian time (Mosby & Robinson, 1998). The Strait was seen as a strategic waterway but the population was also seen as valuable to the efforts of Christian missionaries, in particular, the London Missionary Society (Nakata, 2007).

There were many disadvantages of missionary influences, such as the destruction of traditional cultural religious practices (Lawrence, 2004). But the positive consequences were also numerous, particularly the hybridisation that was given to forms of religious and secular music. Christianity also provided a shared identity with the focus on unity that Christians reinforced through inter-island church meetings, religious festivals and church openings (Shnukal, 1988). Today, for many Torres Strait Islanders, ‘The Coming of the Light’ is commemorated on the first of July each year and is regarded as National Torres Strait Islander Day.

From the mid-19th century onwards, Torres Strait Islanders experienced momentous change from their increasing contact with Europeans. The emerging maritime industries of fishing, pearling and beche-de-mer (sea slug) collection were attractions. Islanders adjusted to the new lifestyle being introduced to the region through maritime industries, religion and government administration. McGrath (1995, p. 104) identified many historical events that affected Islander life over the ensuing years, including:

- the 1936 maritime strike, a turning point in collective Islander assertiveness in rejecting government repression
- the 1937 inaugural Island Councillors meeting, which resulted in the revised *Aboriginal Protection Act* of 1939 giving Islanders greater authority in their own affairs
- participation in the 1939–45 war
- from 1960, the beginning of large-scale southward migration to the Australian mainland because of the decline in the pearling industry
- the call for independence in the early 1980s as a result of Islander concerns about the slow pace of improvements to basic infrastructure in their communities
- the 1992 Mabo Case that confirmed Meriam ownership over their islands.

These events continue to influence Islander culture and identity.

The main languages of the Torres Strait are identified as Kala Lagaw Ya, Meriam Mir and Torres Strait Kriol (ABS, 2008b). Comparatively, Torres Strait Island languages are some of the most widely spoken Indigenous languages in Australia today, second only to the Arnhem Land and Daly River Region language groups (ABS, 2008b). Torres Strait English, a regional version of Standard Australian English, is also spoken by Islanders in the Strait and on the mainland (Shnukal, 2001).

There are mixed opinions about the various influences brought to the Torres Strait and opportunities available to Torres Strait Islanders on the Australian mainland. Introduced religion can be acknowledged as both replacing traditional spirituality and as serving a cohesive function. The anthropological and other research conducted on Islanders and the collections of artefacts that took place are both examples of Western colonisation and appropriation, but served as a means by which traditional culture is now being reclaimed by Islanders. Access to opportunities beyond the Straits has brought both prosperity and disappointment as individuals and groups contend with the reality of living away from home, staying connected to home or wanting to return home.

There are numerous examples of Torres Strait Islander people's endeavours and achievements (Shnukal, 2001), as well as symbols of solidarity and unity. Some of these have had repercussions that extend beyond the Islanders involved, such as the case of Mabo. This has affected the very foundations of the nation's story. The historical significance of the High Court decision in the case of *Mabo and Others v the State of Queensland* lay in the recognition, for the first time, of the common law rights and interests of Indigenous people in their lands according to their traditions, law and customs. This in effect exposed the legal fiction of *terra nullius*—that Australia did not belong to anyone and therefore could be 'settled'. Thus, while Torres Strait Islander history and culture is characterised in many ways by cultural adaptation and migration (Shnukal, 2001), the essence and origins of Islander identity—the psychological and the geographical—are still fought for, defended and celebrated today. Into the future, it is likely that the label of 'voiceless minority' will become a less accurate description for Torres Strait Islanders (Garvey, 2007; Nakata, 2007; Wilson, 1988).

COLONISATION: RESISTANCE AND ADAPTATION

European settlement moved from Botany Bay outwards, as settlers claimed land for economic purposes. The pastoral industry escalated the expansion, bringing increases in British immigrants. Broome (1994) calls the rapidly moving frontier of the mid-1800s the most 'fantastic land grab which was never again to be equaled' (p. 37). Many Aboriginal groups took livestock from European flocks. Reprisals followed, which escalated to full war over land because Europeans saw this as stealing. Aborigines fought with guerrilla tactics, destroying livestock, raiding shepherds and their flocks and homesteads. Small pitched battles were common. European retribution followed, mainly by the military but also by civilians, with massacres not only of warriors but also of women and children (Reynolds, 1987). In some parts of the country, the objective of the colonisation was to clear the lands of Aboriginal people to enable development of the land. Poisoned flour was distributed to Aboriginal people, and introduced diseases (sometimes deliberate) such as measles, chicken pox and influenza had dramatic effects on people who did not have the immunity to such viruses common to Europeans. Smallpox was particularly devastating (Campbell, 2002); entire tribes were wiped out. Aboriginal fighting and warfare skills were small in scale because there had never been the need to engage in large-scale military tactics. The Europeans had guns, horses and organised military forces, and with this superior advantage they won the war for the land. Historical accounts of Aboriginal resistance to colonisation have only emerged in recent years (Broome, 1994; Reynolds, 1999). There has been a recent proliferation of significant texts that include detailed accounts of Aboriginal resistances and warfare (Lowe, 1994). Military analyses of frontier warfare between Aboriginal people and the British (Conner, 2002) have been complemented by local histories with an Aboriginal perspective such as the work of Howard Pedersen and Banjo Woorunmurra (1995), *Jandamarra and the Bunuba Resistance*.

As their lands became increasingly occupied, Aboriginal people gravitated towards European settlements because their own food supplies were disrupted and because of the convenience of European foods, tobacco and implements. They attempted to use their own kinship systems to exchange labour for goods. However, the settlers perceived the exchanges differently. They saw labour as an individual exchange rather than a gift to be reciprocated by providing food for the whole group. Extremely high death rates and low birth rates led to an estimated Aboriginal population of just 75,000 people at the turn of the 20th century (Broome, 1994). Disruptions to traditional life led to many groups of Aboriginal people becoming fringe dwellers to white society. They were perceived by the dominant society as hopeless remnants, clinging to what was left of their cultures and merely surviving. In some states relatively high proportions of Aboriginal people survived the violence of initial colonial contact (McGrath, 1995), and there are many examples of Aboriginal groups across the country successfully adapting to colonisation and making new independent lives amid this immense change (see *Rebellion at Coranderrk* [Barwick, 1998],

and *Cumeroogunga* [Broome, 1994]). However, Aboriginal people were then subjected to government policies that attempted over time to displace, 'protect', disperse, convert and eventually assimilate them.

OPPRESSIVE LEGISLATION

At federation, Australian states and territories had control and responsibility for Indigenous Australians. Each state of the newly formed federation framed and enacted suites of legislations and policies that were punitive and restrictive towards Indigenous peoples. New South Wales established the Aboriginal Protection Board in 1883, granting legal power to the Board with the introduction of the *Aborigines Protection Act 1909* (NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs, 2001). Other states passed similar legislation in an attempt to control Indigenous people (McGrath, 1995): in South Australia the 1911 *Aboriginal Protection Act* (Brock, 1993); the *Cape Barren Island Act 1912* in Tasmania (AIATSIS, 2008); the Queensland *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897* (AIATSIS, 2008); and the *Northern Territory Aboriginal Ordinance of 1911* and the *Welfare Ordinance 1953* (AIATSIS, 2008). Victoria introduced the *Aborigines Act 1869*, before Federation in 1901 (AIATSIS, 2008). The intention underlying these punitive and restrictive laws was clear, for under the pretense of *for their own good* (Haebich, 1988), the effects were a form of cultural genocide of Indigenous Australians, through the loss of language, family dispersion and the cessation of cultural practices.

The Western Australian *Aborigines Act 1905* (AIATSIS, 2008) has special connotations today because of its gross erosion of rights, resulting in forcible removal of children and internment of Aboriginal people in bleak reserves, to live in servitude and despair. Nineteen hundred and five marked the start of a period of formidable surveillance and oppression of Aboriginal people. While the *Native Administration Act 1936* consolidated the absolute rights of the State over Aboriginal people, the 1905 Act is symbolic of Indigenous oppression, just as the 1967 National Referendum, when Aboriginal rights were won back, is symbolic of emancipation.

The WA *Aborigines Act 1905* made the Chief Protector of Aborigines the legal guardian of every Aboriginal person and of 'half-caste' children. At the local level, police constables or pastoralists were delegated powers as Protectors of Aborigines. 'Half-caste' children were to be removed from their families so that they could have 'opportunities for a better life', away from the contaminating influence of Aboriginal environments. Missions and reserves were established. The Chief Protector also had the power to remove any Aboriginal person from one reserve or district to another and to be kept there. Aboriginal people were forbidden from entering towns without permission and the co-habitation of Aboriginal women with non-Aboriginal men was prohibited. Local Protectors implemented these new regulations.

This history demonstrates how racist beliefs became legislation. Aboriginal people were believed to be less than human, and legislation was used to control them and confine them away from 'the public'. According to Milnes, 'The pauperisation of Aboriginal peoples was sealed by legislation. The *Aborigines Act 1905* was not a protection for Aboriginal peoples, but allowed for an instrument of ruthless control' (Milnes, 2001, p. 32). Such legislation was finally repealed in 1967, but by then the damage was done. Very few Aboriginal people escaped the direct and indirect effects of the legislation that controlled and governed their lives (HREOC, 1997; McCorquodale, 1987).

State control of and intervention in the lives of Aboriginal people was extreme. Not one Aboriginal person could be said to have been untouched by the legislation that was implemented across the country. Such legislation reflected the dominant society's perceptions of Aboriginal people and how they ought to be treated. These perceptions were underpinned by the influences of social Darwinism, where cultural groups or 'races' were seen to be at different stages of evolution, and within which Aboriginal people were thought to be primitive and childish. This period of colonisation profoundly affected the lives and self-perceptions of Aboriginal people. It should be noted, however, that Indigenous people and white supporters have continued to resist and struggle for justice since colonisation. The movement

for Indigenous rights began in the 1920s, with the establishment of Aboriginal political organisations, in particular the Australian Aborigines League led by William Cooper and the Aborigines Progressive Association led by William Ferguson (Bullimore, 2001). Over time, various Indigenous political and support groups were established across the country.

THE 1967 COMMONWEALTH REFERENDUM

In Australia, the 1967 Commonwealth Referendum symbolises the granting of full citizenship rights to Australian Aboriginal peoples. But problems continued for Aboriginal people after 1967. According to Stokes (1997), who surveyed Aboriginal political commentary after this period, as well as striving towards political equality and self-determination, the quest for a cultural identity became central, gaining a new significance. Continual difficulties with racism and disadvantage have persisted. Since then, many Aboriginal people have written of the need to recover, regain and reconstruct identities, and to reject negative white stereotypes. Although the conception of Aboriginal rights had changed significantly from the late 1960s, the formal Commonwealth and state restrictions that had denied Aboriginal people meaningful status as citizens had started to dismantle before the 1967 referendum. Legal changes from that time reflected changing government attitudes towards Indigenous peoples. This period also saw a change from an emphasis on civil rights to one on Indigenous rights, acknowledging that Aboriginal people possessed certain rights that did not pertain to other Australians. These changes could be captured under three stages or events: the prohibition on racial discrimination, land rights and the facilitation of self-determination (Chesterman & Galligan, 1997).

Around this time key events such as the Gurindji people's walk-off from the Wave Hill cattle station in 1966 heralded the fight for land rights. Indigenous activists gained national attention, leading public protests, rallies and political agitation (Foley, 2001). The 1960s and 1970s saw significant achievements that have now become historical moments in the struggle for Aboriginal rights. These include the establishment of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in Canberra, the creation of the Aboriginal flag by Harold Thomas in 1971, and the beginning of civil rights and land rights legislation.

Indigenous people in Australia are still grappling with the effects of colonisation. Kevin Gilbert (1977), in *Living Black*, stated that as invasion occurred, Aborigines began to sicken physically and psychologically:

[T]hey were hit by the full blight of an alien way of thinking. They were hit by the intolerance and uncomprehending barbarism of a people intent only on progress in material terms, a people who never credited that there could be cathedrals of the spirit as well as stone. Their view of Aborigines as the most miserable people on earth was seared into Aboriginal thinking because they now controlled the provisions that allowed blacks to continue to exist at all. Independence from them was not possible ... It is my thesis that Aboriginal Australia underwent a rape of the soul so profound that the blight continues in the minds of most blacks today. It is this psychological blight, more than anything else, that causes the conditions that we see on the reserves and missions. And it is repeated down the generations. (pp. 2–3)

The next section focuses on some of the significant contemporary issues in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander society. Among the myriad issues facing Australian Indigenous peoples, the following are highlighted to give greater understanding of issues that are of key significance in this moment of Indigenous history.

SIGNIFICANT CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

The Stolen Generations

Colonisation has had many negative consequences. One of the most profound has been the removal of Aboriginal children from their families. Most Indigenous families have experienced

removal of children or displacement of entire families into missions, reserves or other institutions. There was a period of history when children, who were usually ‘part white’, were taken from their families so that they could be ‘civilised’. They were placed into institutions for educating and training to live and work in white society as menials. This was a widespread phenomenon across the nation. As many as one in ten Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families and communities in the first half of the 20th century. Various reports such as *Bringing Them Home* (HREOC, 1997) have shown that in certain regions at different times the figure may have been much more. In that time, not many Indigenous families escaped the effects of forcible removal, and most families have been affected over one or more generations. Drawing on her research in the Northern Territory, McGrath (1987) described these policies for the removal of children as ‘the ultimate racist act’. Her statement can be generalised to the rest of Australia.

Haebich’s (2000) comprehensive analysis of the removal of Indigenous Australian children across the country describes the removal of children as not a single event but a process stretching from colonisation to the present. This process and its consequences are part of Indigenous identity. It has been only in recent times that the practice has been officially recognised, with the former Prime Minister Paul Keating’s historic Redfern Park Speech in 1992, followed by Prime Minister Rudd’s momentous National Apology to the Stolen Generations on 13 February 2008. Mellor and Haebich’s edited volume (2002) offers comprehensive accounts of the removal of Indigenous people across Australia, by those who were affected by the policy as well as by the carers and officials involved. The legacy of that practice remains today, in terms of alienation and colonial identity.

Forcible removals of children and their subsequent effects have been and still are a profound part of the Indigenous Australian story. The removal of children of part-Aboriginal descent from families and communities to give them an opportunity to assimilate into the white world, and later for reasons that included welfare of the children, was common practice from the beginning of the 20th century even until the 1980s. As well as interning children, in many instances they were housed in various institutions according to the predominance of white blood they were thought to have. Sister Kate’s Home in Perth is an example of children being referred to a home on the basis of being light-coloured (Morgan, 2002). This practice was widespread in the global colonisation project. Sissons (2005) states that in settler nations such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the USA, the practice of removing Indigenous children from families and communities was not only driven by an aim of assimilation, but also aimed to achieve the disintegration of Indigenous communities, and to transform the relationship between Indigenous people and their environment.

The transgenerational effects of the policies of forced removal of Indigenous children on Indigenous emotional and social wellbeing are profound and enduring, and will be further discussed in other chapters.

Descent, country and kinship

There is agreement that Aboriginal identity is predicated upon descent and country of origin, about knowing and being a part of an Indigenous community and perceiving oneself as Indigenous. Descent does not necessarily pertain ‘to genetics as inherited essential characteristics but to the historical connection that leads back to the land and which claims a particular history’ (Morrissey, 2003, p. 59).

Descent is about belonging to a people and a place. This involves kinship; that is, relationships and obligations to other people and place or ‘country’. A notion of ‘country’ is fundamental to Aboriginal identity. With the advent of Native Title and Land Rights, the notion of country has had a more urgent imperative, but it has always been of utmost importance from traditional times, throughout the processes of colonisation and in contemporary times. Where one is from and the people one belongs to have always been and will always remain important. In Oxenham et al. (1999), the Indigenous authors position themselves in the introduction by locating themselves on a map of Australia, indicating where they came from and what tribal

groupings they belong to. Demonstrating where one is from, what 'country' and group/people they belong to, is critical to any Indigenous person in their self-identity and when introducing oneself to other Indigenous people.

The relationship Aboriginal people have to their country is a deep spiritual connection that is different from the relationship held by other Australians (Choo, 2001). Several texts articulate the spiritual feeling of country for Aboriginal people: for example, Paddy Roe in *Reading the country* (Benterrak et al., 1996), Sunfly Tjuperla in *Two men dreaming* (Cowan, 1995), David Mowaljarlai in *Yorro Yorro: Everything standing up alive* (Mowaljarlai & Malnic, 1993) and Bill Neidjie in *Story about feeling* (Neidjie, 1989). These texts attempt to capture the feeling of relationship with country in different ways. This could be described as a spiritual, bodily connectedness, as Neidjie (1989, p. 182) puts it:

Listen carefully, careful and this spirit e [he] come in your feeling and you
Will feel it ... anyone that, I feel it ... my body same as you. I am telling
you this because the land for us never change round. Places for us,
Earth for us, star, moon, tree, animal. No-matter what sort of animal,
Bird snake ... all that animal like us. Our friend that.

The need to be able to describe relationships to land in different ways has been taken up by Moreton-Robinson (2003). Here Indigenous relationships with land are described as forming an 'ontological belonging'. Indigenous people's spiritual beliefs are based on systems that tie one into the land, to other members of the group, and to all things of nature. This relationship with the country means that there is an incommensurable difference between sense of self, home and belonging to place. 'Our ontological relationship to land, the ways that country is constitutive of us, and therefore the inalienable nature of our relation to land, marks a radical, indeed incommensurable, difference between us and the non-Indigenous' (p. 31). Most Aboriginal people living away from their homelands, towns or cities express a desire to be buried in their country of origin. Serious legal disputes can erupt over where a deceased person is to be buried, should different 'country' groups feel that they have connections and claims to the person.

Being Indigenous

Being part of an Aboriginal community is another facet of Aboriginal identity. Other Indigenous people know who you are and what family you belong to. Dudgeon et al. (2002) provided a comprehensive overview of what community means for Aboriginal people. They acknowledge that the concept of a community has a political agenda for the state, whereby Indigenous people were moved into sites such as reserves, missions and fringe camps as part of the processes of colonisation, dispossession and dispersal, and later for bureaucratic convenience. However, there still is a strong Aboriginal sense of what it means to belong to a community. Overall, Aboriginal society is structured around the community. Within or forming the community are strong kinship and family ties and networks.

For some Aboriginal people, the cultural and political dimensions of the concept are inextricably enmeshed. Nyungar spokesperson and academic Ted Wilkes stated:

The Aboriginal community can be interpreted as geographical, social and political. It places Aboriginal people as part of, but different from the rest of Australian society. Aboriginal people identify themselves with the idea of being part of 'community'; it gives us a sense of unity and strength. Sometimes issues based groups are perceived as a community—but that is not the case, it is a re-configuration of some parts of the existing community. I think of all of us together, as a political and cultural group. It includes everyone, no matter what 'faction' or local group they are affiliated with, or which part of our diversity they live in. It is [also] a national concept. (Dudgeon et al., 2002, p. 248)

Indigenous people have created communities of significance and meaning for themselves, and membership still includes Indigenous descent. It should be noted that Western and Indigenous notions of community differ in that the Aboriginal notion includes the criterion that to be a member of the community one has to be Aboriginal, identify as such and be known to the group. For Indigenous people there are various obligations and commitments that one has as a member in the community. Being part of the community may have various responsibilities and obligations that confirm and reinforce membership. These include obligations to (extended) family, responsibilities to be seen to be involved and active in various community functions and initiatives, and representation in various political issues.

While there are contestations about the definitions of Indigenous identity, it is generally accepted that an Aboriginal person is one who is a descendant of an Indigenous inhabitant of Australia, who identifies as an Aboriginal person, and who is recognised as Aboriginal by members of the community where they live. Indigenous identity is not about the colour of a person's skin or the percentage of 'blood' they have. Many Aboriginal people have both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal ancestry but this does not make them any less Aboriginal. Aboriginality is about descent, culture, upbringing and life experiences.

There has been considerable discussion about how Indigenous identity has been constructed and imposed, manipulated and used in the creation of assimilationist policies and other destructive practices such as the removal of so-called 'half-caste' children. Part of the decolonising project for Indigenous peoples is to challenge previously held assumptions about them and work towards creating new constructions of identity.

Many Indigenous authors (e.g. Oxenham et al., 1999; Paradies, 2006) have written about Indigenous identity and discussed the lived experience of being an Indigenous person. Taylor (2001) described it in these words:

This lived experience is the essential, perennial, excruciating, exhilarating, burdensome, volatile, dramatic source of prejudice and pride that sets us apart. It refers to that specialness in identity, the experiential existence of Aboriginal people accrued through the living of our daily lives, from 'womb to tombs' as it were, in which our individual and shared feelings, fears, desires, initiatives, hostilities, learning, actions, reactions, behaviours and relationships exist in a unique and specific attachment to us, individually and collectively, because and only because, we are Aboriginal people(s). (p. 139)

CONTEMPORARY SITUATIONS: INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIA

The national *Overcoming Indigenous disadvantage report: Key indicators 2005/2007/2009 Reports* (SCRGSP, 2005, 2007, 2009) show that Indigenous people are the most disadvantaged group in Australia.

- The life expectancy of Indigenous people is around 9.7 to 11.5 years lower than that of other Australians.
- Indigenous students are half as likely to continue into Year 12.
- The average Indigenous income is lower.
- A much lower proportion of Indigenous people own their homes.
- Suicide death rates are much higher.
- The rate of child protection notifications are rising faster than for others.
- Homicide death rates are six times higher.
- Indigenous people are 12 times more likely to be hospitalised for assault than other people.
- Both men and women experience more than double the victimisation rates of others.
- Indigenous women's imprisonment rates have increased.
- Juveniles are 20 times more likely to be detained.

- Hospital admission rates for children are twice that of others.
- Infant mortality rates are two to three times higher.
- Sixty-five per cent of Indigenous homicides involve both the victim and offender having consumed alcohol at the time, which is three times more than the occurrence for others.
- Indigenous people, both men and women, are over four times more likely than other people to be in hospital for alcohol-related mental and behavioural disorders.

While Torres Strait Islander people have their own distinctive culture, they share many of the same disadvantages as Aboriginal people (ABS, 2006). The *Ways Forward* report (1995) highlighted Torres Strait Islander issues and reported that Torres Strait Islander people suffered the same disadvantages and racism as Aboriginal people; however, there were specific issues such as lack of recognition of Torres Strait Islanders as belonging to a separate and unique cultural group, lack of appropriate representation, exclusion and hostility from Aboriginal groups when attempting to access services, and ignorance about Torres Strait Islander people and culture from mainstream Australia. The report recommended that there was a need for research into Torres Strait Islander mental health, that there should be a recognition of Torres Strait Islanders as a distinct cultural group, and a need to recognise Torres Strait Islander healing methods and healers.

This litany of impoverishment and disadvantage in an otherwise wealthy nation is shameful. The situation has many causes and no easy solutions, but it is clear that decades of colonial exploitation and a prolonged systematic attempt to destroy Indigenous people and culture lie at the core of the causes. As noted in the *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage Report* (SCRGSP, 2009), racism at individual and institutional levels continues to reproduce the impoverishment and disadvantage experienced by most Indigenous Australians.

RACISM

Like many former colonial countries, Australia has a long legacy of racism. Everyone is affected by this, although obviously in different ways. In this section, we provide a brief overview of social scientific understanding of racism, discuss its prevalence in Australia and how it has changed over the years, and finally touch on some of its consequences for mental health.

Popular understandings of racism portray it as an overt rejection of other groups and their members, as hostile and malevolent, as underpinned by a belief in the superiority of one's own group over others, and as a feature of individuals. These aspects do characterise racism, to be sure, but there is much more to racism that is omitted from this popular view.

Jones (1997) proposed that contemporary racism should be considered at three different levels: the individual, institutional and cultural. These are distinguished by the interactions among psychological, behavioural, institutional, structural and cultural dynamics in the processes of racialised beliefs and practices. While these occur interactively and simultaneously, they may manifest differently as society changes.

Although 'race' has been largely discredited as a scientific concept, the term continues to be used as a way of organising our thinking about people and the groups they belong to (McCann-Mortimer et al., 2004). Thus, race can be seen to be socially defined, sometimes on the basis of physical criteria. Race as a social and cultural construction has been used to separate groups that have been defined by physical and cultural difference and by the supposed superiority and inferiority of members of those groups. Power and control were the modes by which racial definitions have been imposed to maintain and enforce the view that whites were inherently superior and correct and that blacks were inherently inferior and wrong. Even though in contemporary times most scientists agree that there is no biological basis to race, the general population still uses pseudo-scientific explanations for cultural differences. However, the use of the idea of race persists because it 'has meaning for us in everyday life because it provides a good way to value our own group over others; to encapsulate social conflicts, and rationalise our way of handling it; and to talk about group differences, values, and social hierarchy' (Jones, 1997, p. 364).

While individual people are, rightly, seen as the agents of racism, it is important to appreciate how racism operates at a cultural and an institutional level (Jones, 1997). Cultural racism is a part of the atmosphere of a society; it is just part of the tacit, assumed way of doing things. Culture comprises all the ideas, values, beliefs and shared understandings that together allow members of a culture to interact with one another without having to explain and reinvent them all the time. It refers to what is taken for granted. Accordingly, cultural racism:

comprises the cumulative effects of a racialized worldview, based on belief in essential racial differences that favor the dominant racial group over others. These effects are suffused throughout the culture via institutional structures, ideological beliefs, and personal everyday actions of people in the culture, and these effects are passed on from generation to generation. (Jones, 1997, p. 472)

One does not have to look far in contemporary Australia to find evidence of cultural racism. The public chatter in taxicabs, pubs, football matches and barbecues is replete with evidence of assumed essential racial differences, and of victim-blaming attributions for poor health, educational and employment outcomes.

Whereas cultural racism refers to the established 'common sense' that is shared by most or all members of a society, institutional racism refers more specifically to the practices and structures of a society's institutions. According to Jones they are:

those established laws, customs, and practices which systematically reflect and produce racial inequities in American society. If racist consequences accrue to institutional laws, customs, or practices, the institution is racist whether or not the individuals maintaining those practices have racist intentions. Institutional racism can be either overt or covert ... and either intentional or unintentional. (1997, p. 438)

An institution can engage in racist practices without any of its members being individually racist. This is an important point to comprehend if we are to understand the damaging health and educational outcomes affecting Indigenous people. The *de jure* and *de facto* rules of an institution, the aggregation of individual behaviours, and institutional culture can all achieve racist outcomes in the absence of a deliberate intention to do so by any individual within the institution.

Individual racism is the form of racism most easily recognised by members of Western culture. A racist individual is:

one who considers that black people as a group (or other human groups defined by essential racial characteristics) are inferior to whites because of physical (i.e., genotypical and phenotypical) traits. He or she further believes that these physical traits are determinants of social behaviour and of moral or intellectual qualities, and ultimately presumes that this inferiority is a legitimate basis for that group's inferior social treatment. An important consideration is that all judgments of superiority are based on the corresponding traits of white people as norms of comparison. (Jones, 1997, p. 417)

Often people think that individual racism must be overt and blatant; that if it's not obvious then it's not racism. If only that were the case! Individual racism is more often than not subtle and covert, dressed in a veneer of tolerance and acceptance, but no less invidious in its consequences. Australian research has supported the conclusion from research in North America and Europe that in the last 50 years or so racism has progressively become less blatant and overt, and more subtle and covert (Pedersen & Walker, 1997; Pedersen et al. 2004; Walker, 2001). Subtle racism can be just as damaging as blatant racism for people who are the targets of racism—and conceivably it could be more damaging in that it is harder for such people to attribute negative outcomes to racism, and harder to avoid attributing such outcomes to qualities about themselves. Subtle racism is also much harder to change, as it is rarely recognised as racism, by the perpetrator and/or by the wider community.

Institutionalised racism is different from the repressive laws of the past that served overtly to oppress marginalised peoples. For Indigenous people in Australia there is ample evidence of active oppression manifested in past government legislation and practices that controlled people's lives. In contemporary times, however, institutionalised racism persists in the institutions and systems that exclude and discriminate against Indigenous people.

In contemporary times, society's institutions have the power to develop, sustain and enforce specific racialised views of people. The way that a society's economic, justice, educational and health care systems are applied can disadvantage certain groups of people when these systems do not cater for or consider the cultural values or marginalisation of members of those groups, and thereby become forms of institutionalised racism. Institutionalised racism is embedded in these systems. In the Australian context, the high rates of unemployment, lower average income, high rates of arrest and imprisonment, of poor health, low education and low life expectancy are indicators of the consequences of entrenched institutionalised racism (Dudgeon et al., 2000).

Jones stated that 'culture is to society as personality is to the individual' (1997, p. 471), and culture is integral to discussions of racism. For Jones, cultural racism comprises the cumulative effects of a racialised worldview, based on a belief in essential racial differences, that favour the dominant racial group over others. The effects of these are suffused throughout the culture via institutionalised structures, ideological beliefs and personal everyday actions of people in the culture, and these effects are passed on from generation to generation.

The effects of racism on oppressed groups led to the development of an array of responses and mechanisms such as low self-esteem, mistrust of the dominant culture, internalised racism, and denial. However, members of minority groups with strong ethnic identity often, but not always, have more positive self-conceptions (Jones, 1997; Pedersen & Walker, 2000). Jones proposed that whether one is conscious of racism or not, most black people, particularly those working in mixed-group or white settings, have to cope with everyday racism. He cited three propositions within which people of colour describe the effects of lived racism that are relevant to Indigenous Australians. First, modern racism is a lived experience; it is real and happens in many ways. Second, racism not only hurts at the time it happens but has a cumulative effect. It becomes part of the narrative of the community in an 'us and them' perspective. Racism at different levels is seen as a natural part of life. Third, repeated experiences of racism affect a person's behaviour and understanding of life; one's life expectations, perspectives of oneself and one's groups and the dominant group and many ways of coping with racism contribute to the psychological reality of people of colour. Living with racism becomes a central and defining element in the psychology of marginalised people and/or people of colour. In many ways, life is a struggle for people of colour. Even for those who have 'made it' and have overcome obstacles, different forms of racism emerge that need to be confronted. Racism is inescapable.

We need to consider the different and interacting elements of how people are oppressed because of their racial background, in the past and in contemporary times. European ethnocentrism was inextricably a part of the colonising project; the belief that all things Western were superior and all things Indigenous were inferior was initially imposed by military might and enshrined in laws specifically legislated to control the lives of Indigenous people. In turn, it has had a central influence on Indigenous Australians' self-perceptions, and, in one sense, a cultural renaissance is absolutely necessary for oppressed people to reclaim a sense of pride, dignity and self-worth as well as validating their own cultural histories and values.

Despite the considerable changes in Australian society, racism is still a reality for members of marginalised groups. Racism is invasive, pervasive and unrelenting. Racism imposes itself on daily living for people of colour. The effects of racism cannot be underestimated. 'Race is about *everything*—historical, political, personal—and race is about nothing—a construct, an invention that has changed dramatically over time and historical circumstance ... race has been and continues to be, encoded in all our lives' (Thompson & Tyagi, 1996, p. ix).

RACISM IN AUSTRALIA

The small body of research on racism against Indigenous peoples in Australia conveys a mixed, but alarming, picture of its extent and nature. Most of this research has focused on the prevalence of self-reported interpersonal racism, with some studies of systemic racism and virtually no studies examining the extent of internalised racism.

In Australia, national surveys suggest that between half and three-quarters of respondents give racist responses to key self-report questions assessing racist attitudes and beliefs (Forrest et al., 2007; Gallaher et al., 2009; Larson et al., 2007; Paradies & Cunningham, 2009; Paradies et al., 2008). Historical reviews of research trends (Walker, 2001) suggest that prevalence rates of overtly racist views have steadily declined, but research at any time over the last six decades, including today, shows community views that could at best be described as strongly ambivalent.

About 16% of the 5757 Indigenous adults in the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey (NATSIHS) who were asked about their experiences of racism reported that, in the last 12 months, they felt treated badly because they were Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander (Paradies et al., 2008). Of the 9400 Indigenous respondents in the 2002–03 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS), 18% reported experiencing discrimination as a personal stressor in the last 12 months (ABS, 2004). Similarly, 22% of the 1073 children aged 12–17 years in the 2001–02 Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey (WAACHS) reported experiencing racism (defined as being treated badly or refused service due to being Aboriginal) in the past six months (Zubrick et al., 2005). A 2001 survey found that approximately 30% of Indigenous peoples reported experiencing racism (defined as discrimination due to ethnic origin) (Dunn et al., 2003) and a 2003 survey found that 40% of Aboriginal respondents reported being physically or emotionally upset as a result of treatment based on their race (Larson et al., 2007).

The prevalence of systemic racism is more difficult to establish. However, a range of studies and inquiries highlight the widespread nature of such racism in domains such as national politics (Augoustinos et al., 1999), media (Cunneen, 2001), education (Sonn et al., 2000) and the welfare system (Sanders, 1999), as well as in the provision of public housing (Equal Opportunity Commission, Western Australia, 2004) and the legal/criminal justice systems (Blagg et al., 2005). Evidence from Victoria indicates that when apprehended by police, Indigenous people are half as likely to be given a caution as non-Indigenous people and ‘were nearly three times less likely to be cautioned when processed by police’ than non-Indigenous youth (Department of Justice, 2005; Indigenous Issues Unit, 2006). Research on systemic racism against Indigenous peoples in the health care sector has been the most common to date. The direct effect of racism on Indigenous health will be discussed in Chapter 4.

CONCLUSION

Contemporary life is always shaped by history and culture. This is perhaps especially so for Indigenous Australians. Since white people first came to Australia in 1788, Indigenous people have experienced displacement, been the targets of genocidal policies and practices, had families destroyed through the forcible removal of children, and continue to face the stresses of living in a racist world that systematically devalues Indigenous culture and people. Such experiences have profound effects on health and social and emotional wellbeing, for individuals, families and communities. These experiences have been resisted over the years, and the histories of resistance and resilience are as much part of contemporary Indigenous culture and identity as are the experiences of devastation. It is important to remember also that Indigenous culture and people are diverse; there is no single culture or people. There are important differences between Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders, just as there are important differences within these broad groupings.

Reflective exercises

- 1 This history and social issues chapter has been purposely written from a particular perspective. Is this different from other histories you have read about Australia? What are those differences and why do you think the authors choose to present Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in the way that they have?
- 2 From reading this chapter, what do you think are the main differences between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non-Indigenous Australians?
- 3 What are the main characteristics of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's concepts about identity and perceptions about community?
- 4 The Stolen Generations is a topical issue in Australia now. Why is this so and why didn't the matter receive such attention before?
- 5 According to this chapter, overt racism may have declined, but other forms of racism have not. Imagine being born as an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person. What would your life be like? What forms of racism do you think you would encounter?

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