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The Calculus of Reciprocity: Principles and Implications of Aboriginal Sharing

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ABSTRACT

Over the past two decades a rapidly expanding body of policy research has emerged related to the place of indigenous Australians in the wider economy. Traditionally, the policy focus of much of that research has been on formal supply-side and demand-side issues, while the microscopic, cultural experience of indigenous Australians has tended to be overlooked. This paper attempts to shift the focus of research to a higher level of resolution to examine one of the prominent cultural factors that affects the position of Aboriginal Australians in the wider economy: reciprocity. Drawing on ethnographic evidence, the paper first sketches the broad cultural patterns of sharing and reciprocity in Aboriginal communities. It then goes on to demonstrate that the notions of sharing that underlie the act of sharing are part of a complex cultural system involving a calculus of reciprocity in which individuals and groups make decisions regarding the provision of economic assistance to one another but also variously display, shape or deny social alliances. Some of the key features of that system are illustrated through the identification and exploration of a set of 'principles of reciprocity'. The paper concludes with a discussion of general implications of the principles of reciprocity relevant to policy and research related to poverty, housing, labour market participation and family welfare.

Acknowledgments

This paper grew out of a consultancy for the Legal Services Commission of South Australia in which the author was asked to write an anthropological report related to a court case underway in that state. The core of that report focused on principles of sharing and reciprocity among Aboriginal Australians. Comments from colleagues on an early draft of the report suggested that the some of the findings would be of value to policy makers; this paper represents my attempt to make those findings accessible and relevant to decision-makers and practitioners working in various areas of indigenous policy and research.

An early version of this paper was presented at the Australian Anthropological Society annual conference in Adelaide during September of this year; many helpful comments and suggestions were made by attendees of that conference. Jon Altman, Julie Finlayson, Nicolas Peterson, Beverly Sibthorpe, Diane Smith, and John Taylor provided additional substantive and constructive critical comments on drafts of the paper and to them I express my appreciation. Thanks also to Hilary Bek, Gillian Cosgrove and Belinda Lim for their careful editorial assistance.

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Foreword

This discussion paper is somewhat unusual for the CAEPR genre; it sets out to investigate the very sociological issue of reciprocity among contemporary indigenous Australians, and then links this particular issue to more general data collection and policy concerns. The paper reflects a recent trend in CAEPR research to further broaden the Centre's focus beyond what have always been widely interpreted economic policy issues to highlight sociocultural factors that influence the contemporary economic lives of indigenous Australians. Many of these sociocultural factors are invisible in high level analyses, yet they are often crucial for interpreting and understanding broad patterns at the national, regional and local levels. In this exploratory paper, Dr Schwab identifies the sociocultural principles of reciprocity that underpin behaviours at the individual and household economic levels within Aboriginal communities. Such insights into the cultural logic of these behaviour patterns should be of value to individuals collecting and interpreting data and seeking to formulate effective policy. In considering the paper for publication three factors, in addition to the normal process of refereeing for quality, were influential.

First, as Dr Schwab notes, the paper has its genesis as a consultancy report to the Legal Services Commission of South Australia. CAEPR consultancy research is invariably undertaken, as a matter of policy, with a right of publication if deemed appropriate. This paper clearly demonstrates the link between consultancy research and policy research, even though the particularities of the specific legal case have been omitted here.

Second, CAEPR is broadening its research brief to increasingly focus on case study, community-linked research. While details of the original case are not presented here, the research, nevertheless, provides a thoughtfully selective secondary analysis of ethnographic material.

Third, this research clearly demonstrates the multidisciplinary nature of CAEPR's approach. It also demonstrates the contribution that social anthropology, based on the ethnographic method of direct observation, can make to understanding indigenous social processes, in all their diversity, and to policy formulation.

Jon Altman
Series Editor
November 1995

Introduction

Over the past few years a rapidly expanding body of policy research has emerged related to the place of indigenous Australians in the wider economy (Allen et al. 1991; Roach and Probst 1993; Roach and Bek 1995). Major streams of this research have addressed general patterns and issues of relative economic status at the national level (for example, Taylor 1993a) and regional levels (for example, Taylor 1993b; Altman and Liu Jin 1994), while other research has concentrated on the potential or actual economic impacts of particular industries such as fishing (Altman et al. 1994), mining (Altman and Smith 1994) and tourism (Finlayson 1995). Analysis has also focused on particular labour market programs such as the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme at both the national (Sanders 1993) and local levels (Smith 1994, 1995). Recently, some research has shifted in focus to the micro-level, examining the relation of indigenous households to the wider Australian economy (Daly and Smith 1995).

This more recent research is useful in attempting to join discussions of the structure of indigenous households with considerations of current social and economic policies. The research juxtaposes census and case-study material to contrast the economic status of indigenous and non-indigenous Australian families, but goes on to explore the differing structural and organisational characteristics of indigenous Australian families. Also at the level of households, and bringing together data from a variety of ethnographic sources, Smith (1991a, 1991b) provides an overview and analysis of the complexities of Aboriginal household expenditure patterns. These findings indicate that these patterns differ from those of non-Aboriginal households. Looking closely at Aboriginal household economies, she emphasises the significance of extra-household economic networks over intra-household structures, and highlights their significance for understanding expenditure patterns. Integral to this argument is the suggestion that one must pay attention to the role and impact of cultural factors if one wishes to understand household expenditure patterns (Smith 1991b).

Attention to the cultural factors that underpin Aboriginal society is critically important to understanding the articulation of indigenous Australians with the wider economy, but these factors are often invisible in research focused on the national or regional levels. This in itself is not surprising since most research addressing issues at the national and regional levels employs data collection strategies and instruments geared to the collection of quantitative data, the research resulting in broad depictions of patterns of behaviour or features of populations. The five-yearly Australian Bureau of Statistics' (ABS) Census of Population and Housing is one example of data collection employing this approach. Such research is obviously of tremendous value but can be enriched, as Smith

has argued, when the design of data collection strategies and instruments are informed by insights into the cultural factors that shape those patterns and features (Smith 1992).

In the economic arena, the traditional policy focus is often on formal supply-side issues (for example, how to produce educated, job-ready individuals) and demand-side issues (for example, how to overcome discrimination in the labour market); the microscopic, cultural experience of indigenous Australians is often completely overlooked. This paper attempts to shift, to a higher level of resolution, the focus on the examination of cultural factors that affect the position of Aboriginal Australians in the wider economy to look not just at the local or even household level but to examine one of the key cultural factors at play in all Aboriginal communities: reciprocity.[1] Rather than count or measure the observable behaviours or the social patterns and structures that result from those factors, this paper attempts to examine the subtle and sometimes invisible principles of reciprocity that underpin individual behaviour.

Drawing on ethnographic evidence, the paper first sketches the broad cultural principles of sharing and reciprocity in Aboriginal communities. It then goes on to demonstrate that the notions of reciprocity that underlie the act of sharing are part of a complex cultural system in which individuals and groups provide economic assistance to one another but also variously display, shape or deny social alliances. The paper argues that such assistance is not automatic but involves careful, though often subtle, strategic calculation, action and decision-making. Next, a summary of some of the principles of Aboriginal reciprocity is provided.

A better understanding of the principles of reciprocity in contemporary Aboriginal communities should be useful in a range of policy contexts. Thus, the aim of the paper is to provide insights that can contribute to policy formation and data collection in a variety of areas; the paper will make no attempt to focus in detail on a single policy issue or area. Rather, the paper will conclude with a discussion of general implications relevant to further research in a limited set of policy areas. It is hoped that the paper might provide useful insights for individuals working with Aboriginal communities and for policy makers in a wide range of areas.

'An old-established custom'

In their classic book on traditional Aboriginal society, *The World of the First Australians*, the Berndts refer to the commonly held misconception of some sort of 'primitive communism' within Aboriginal communities (Berndt and Berndt 1977: 121-22). According to this view, ownership is vague or non-existent among Aborigines and pervasive sharing the prescribed mode of interaction. This view is a highly romantic and

simplified one that stems, in part, from the writings of early European explorers and settlers. For example, Spencer, in his *Wanderings in Wild Australia* described the Arrernte of Central Australia:

> Generosity is certainly one of his leading features. He is always accustomed to give a share of his food, or of what he may possess, to certain of his fellows. It may, of course, be objected to this that, in doing so, he is only following an old-established custom, the breaking of which would expose him to harsh treatment and to being looked upon as a churlish fellow (Spencer 1928: 198).

Yet the explanation 'old-established custom' is not very helpful in assisting non-indigenous Australians to understand the puzzling propensity of Aboriginal people to give away items they 'should' have valued and thus retained, or their willingness to share when material goods are in short supply; to many non-Aboriginal observers, the logic of such behaviour is elusive. This, as will be shown, is because the intricacies of Aboriginal exchange and social interaction are complex, often subtle and sometimes invisible.

Sharing in remote communities

Hiatt suggests that sharing is highly valued among Aboriginal people in remote communities and that there are clear objective reasons for this. Interestingly, his contemporary analysis is not far from Spencer's:

> Probably every where in Aboriginal Australia the highest secular value is generosity. Readiness to share with others is the main measure of a man's goodness, and hospitality an essential source of his self-esteem ... It is likely that this pervasive and highly-developed ethic of generosity emerged as a cultural adaptation to the exigencies of hunting and gathering, and conceivably conferred improved fitness on those who adopted it (Hiatt 1982).

Hiatt's evolutionary and economically rational explanation for sharing is intuitively appealing. During lean times, it makes good sense to be on the best of terms with neighbours and kin, able to rest assured that one's generosity to others in the past will be returned in one's own times of need.

The Central and Western Deserts

In the Western Desert area, Tonkinson has described a similar ethos of generosity among five different linguistic groups he refers to collectively as the Mardu. Among the Mardu, prescriptions for sharing derive from the Dreamtime stories wherein specific moral lessons relate to 'proper' human behaviour. Accordingly, a respected and respectful person is one who 'shares unselfishly and without hesitation, who is generous without making an issue of it or asking for return, who fulfils ritual and kinship obligations without question' (Tonkinson 1978: 120).

According to Meggitt, reciprocity is the norm in Central Australia as well. Even where resources are in limited supply, the expectation is that they

will be shared until they are gone:

> ... it is a basic Walbiri rule that people with food should share it with those who have none ... requests often took the form of appeals to actual kinship ties and, couched in these terms, could hardly be refused. The supplicants, then or later, made gifts of weapons, hair-string, red ochre and the like to express their gratitude and, equally important, to rid themselves of feelings of shame or embarrassment (Meggitt 1962: 52).

Similarly, Myers (1986) describes a Pintupi social universe where sympathy and compassion are considered the proper moral response to the needs of co-residents and relatives. This moral basis of Pintupi society is clearly detailed in myths 'where long cycles of vengeance follow a failure to share' (Myers 1988: 60).

Northern Australia

Altman's research among the Gunwinggu of north-central Arnhem Land provides an overview of the complex rules and contingencies surrounding cultural prescriptions of sharing (Altman 1987: 130-39). For example, the sharing of game is underpinned by a variety of rules, but these rules may be relaxed according to a number of factors. Large, prestigious game such as emu or estuarine crocodile will be subject to more stringent rules regarding distribution than will smaller game such as goannas or geese. Similarly, seasonality modifies rules surrounding sharing where, for example, larger groups tend to disperse during the dry season and regroup during the wet: sharing intensity decreases during the dry. Other factors that influence variation in the rules of sharing include the number of people and their kinship categories co-residing when the game is obtained, the status of the hunter (for example, there are strict taboos excluding particular classes of kin from access to game secured by ritually junior men), and the relationship of the hunter to the owner of the equipment or the land from which the game was taken. Interestingly, Altman suggests that kinship among the Gunwinggu is the most common basis for claiming shares (see also Altman and Peterson 1988), a theme that this paper will return to later.

Sharing in urban communities

As Langton has written, 'different Aboriginal communities have distinctive cultural histories ... but a common Aboriginality' (1981: 17). This common Aboriginality is what makes Aboriginal communities in Broome and Brisbane or Maningrida and Melbourne similar in so many subtle ways (see also Sansom 1982). One of the most visible features of this common Aboriginality in urban communities is an emphasis on sharing, and anthropological studies of urban Aboriginal communities over the past 30 years are replete with examples of the ethos of sharing and generosity.

Melbourne

Barwick's work in Melbourne in the early 1960s provided evidence of urban Aboriginal perceptions of generosity which paralleled perceptions in more remote regions (Barwick 1963). Contrasting Aboriginal households with those of working-class Australians, Barwick notes that Aboriginal households are often built around extended family ties but sometimes include boarders or acquaintances who share meals, money, domestic tasks and leisure-time activities (Barwick 1980). Specific expectations regarding appropriate behaviour provide a basis for interaction:

> Aboriginal notions of right conduct and decent behaviour require householders to give help and accommodation to any relative who asks, especially if young children are in need. Few can refuse, unwilling to be shamed by reminders of their own past indebtedness and also acknowledging the likelihood of their own future need. Rarely are individuals so economically secure that they can be wholly independent ... present-day hospitality is usually a consequence of a lifetime of obligations (Barwick 1980: 198-99).

Kuranda

In her recent study of the Kuranda Aboriginal community in North Queensland, Finlayson describes a feast and famine economic cycle in Aboriginal households (Finlayson 1991). Within this pattern, household expenditure follows the cycle of fortnightly pension payments. Funds appear then quickly disappear within days of the government payment, and making ends meet is accomplished by securing the extension of loans and credit within and between households:

> Peggy's household, like other Aboriginal households, develops fall-back arrangements to cope with periods of financial strain. Borrowing money is a common means of dealing with scarcity. Members of Peggy's household borrow from Mary; but Agnes' household borrows from a source outside the immediate family (Finlayson 1991: 179).

Such networks for borrowing provide a safety net for many in the community. Through such means, an alternative system of social security is established which allows individuals to overcome short-term financial emergencies without having to involve themselves with banks or government agencies.

Kempsey

Sibthorpe's research in northern New South Wales in the mid-1980s reveals a complex local Aboriginal economy which, like that in Kuranda, revolves around fortnightly unemployment benefit and social security pension payment cycles. Borrowing and lending among relatives and friends is common in Kempsey. Cash is the main medium of exchange though individuals also call upon one another when looking to borrow vehicles, food or alcohol. Beyond such day-to-day items, Aboriginal people call on others to 'cushion against the hardship caused by large irregular financial outlays - e.g. car repairs, car purchase, funeral expenses, bail, or court fines' (Sibthorpe 1988: 118). This is not to suggest, however,

that the system is without its own particular tensions and frustrations:

> Failure by debtors to make repayment when it is known that they had surplus with which to meet their obligations sometimes caused considerable animosity. On the other hand great leniency could be shown to defaulters if they were seen to be down on their luck, or in trouble with the law, and quite simply unable to pay (Sibthorpe 1988: 121).

Adelaide

There have been several major studies of life among Aboriginal people in Adelaide over the past 30 years, and each of these has identified the ethos of sharing and generosity as a significant feature of contemporary urban life. Inglis, writing in the early 1960s describes an emerging Aboriginal community comprising 'insiders' and 'outsiders'. Most significantly, the 'insiders' include those Aboriginal people who identify as Aboriginal and retain contact with relatives and friends, willing to 'help them with hospitality, with clothes or with money ' (Inglis 1961: 203). 'Outsiders', on the other hand, are Aboriginal people who came from remote areas and have no binding kinship links in the city, or who have kin in Adelaide yet shun these social links and their attendant responsibilities. Yet even where responsibilities for kin are recognised, this is sometimes problematic:

> The greatest threat to the economically secure, well-run household is the idler or drunkard who cannot be turned away because he has nowhere else to go or is a relative. 'Insiders' cannot say No to such people - and if they say No decisively they have become 'outsiders' (Inglis 1961: 208).

Gale, a geographer who conducted research in Adelaide, confirmed Inglis' findings. Following an analysis of housing and income among Aborigines in the early 1970s, Gale describes a pattern in which individual incomes within a particular household are pooled in order to make ends meet. This sharing of resources allows the crowded households to remain above the poverty line, where should the household fission into its constituent parts this would be impossible. The comments of individuals surveyed are revealing in what they indicate of the cultural values of urban Aboriginal people:

> 'Us Nungas always help each other'. 'We always share everything; it is better that way'. 'Sharing is a necessary part of our lives' (Gale 1977: 331).

My own anthropological research in Adelaide in the mid-1980s focused on Aboriginal ideology and identity, and I collected a great deal of material which focused directly or indirectly on sharing. Based on my observations and interviews, I would argue that the notion of generosity is one of the key features of contemporary Aboriginal identity and it emerges repeatedly in the ways Aboriginal people define themselves. In the words of one elderly man:

> Sharing's just a way of life for Aboriginal people. Probably in our genes or something. Might be left over from the old days when we was hunters and that. I don't know, maybe it's 'cause all Aboriginal people know what it's like to be

> hungry. We just can't turn someone away who says he's hungry. My word, we all know what it's like to really be needing a feed. I guess white people have a hard time understanding that one (Schwab 1991: 145).

Similar thoughts were shared by an Aboriginal woman from inner Adelaide:

> Now I've always tried to live that Blackfella Way, sharing, looking after my own people. I've been like a stray dog, here, there and everywhere, but I've never felt like there was nowhere to go, I never worried that I was going to starve or live in the gutter. I always had my people....we've always looked after each other, always shared what little we've got (Schwab 1991: 146).

Based on these and other comments, it would appear that Aboriginal people are guided unerringly by a golden rule: one must look after one's own. Indeed, the rule is encapsulated in the phrase 'caring and sharing', often used by Aboriginal people to identify their approach to life and to contrast with the behaviour of non-Aboriginal Australians who, it is said, only look after themselves. Yet, some of the previous examples suggest that sharing among Aboriginal people is not quite so simple. In fact, sharing in Aboriginal communities is far more complex and problematic than it first appears.

The calculus of reciprocity

Hamilton, in her discussion of Anbarra child-rearing, details the process whereby children come to understand the importance of sharing. Children are taught to share food from an early age, and such lessons link the action directly to kinship: 'give her some, she's your sister'. According to Hamilton, 'the expressed reason for sharing is not of a general type but devolves around the notions of relationship and need' (Hamilton 1981: 150-51). This pattern is widespread among Aboriginal people in remote and urban settings, and creates the expectation that generosity and sharing are the normal states of affairs, particularly among those defined as kin. Yet this simple expectation is founded on a variety of complex assumptions about the breadth of Aboriginal kinship, the nature of generosity, and the basis of social and cultural identity. These assumptions underpin a system of strategic interaction through which individuals evaluate and respond to requests for assistance from other Aboriginal people. This social interaction is guided by what might be described as a calculus of reciprocity.

Depending on 'kin'

There is a clear expectation running through the examples above that an Aboriginal person should be generous with his or her kin. Individuals certainly recognise consanguineal (related by birth) and affinal (related by marriage) kin, particularly in and around the household, but there is also broad recognition of kinship links outside the home. For example, a

significant proportion of the Adelaide Aboriginal community has ties to Point Pearce, the former Aboriginal reserve on the Yorke Peninsula, and links to uncles, aunts and cousins sharing a common history of life on the reserve are also highly significant (see also Schwab 1988). In Kempsey, these historical circumstances also resulted in the development of many putative kinship links (those who provided food, shelter or care becoming 'kin') and the obligations have been passed down to succeeding generations (Sibthorpe 1988). Such connections have emerged in recent years as symbolically powerful ones indicative not only of kinship, but of common history and struggle. As a result, one often hears individuals referring to 'old Uncle Tim' or 'Auntie Alice' when in fact a consanguineal or affinal kinship link is remote or non-existent; the connection is a common history derived from life on the reserve.

Similarly, there is a tendency for many to refer to individuals of their own generation as 'cousin', 'brother' or 'sister'. In this way it is common for individuals to refer to whole generations of individuals by a specific kinship term (for example, 'brother') rather than limit the use of the term to particular individuals of specific relationship. Again, it is not being suggested that individuals do not recognise the difference between consanguineal and putative kinship when it is necessary to discriminate, but that in many situations the use and recognition of kinship terms for individuals not otherwise closely (or at all) related implies particular expectations and responsibilities which become sedimented over time. The implication of this is that the web of kinship is significantly expanded along with the attendant responsibilities for generosity. This phenomenon is widely reported in Aboriginal communities throughout the country.

Demanding generosity

Aboriginal people often say that sharing is a fundamental and inflexible feature of Aboriginal culture. Yet, public testimony to the importance of 'caring and sharing' to the contrary, seldom does generosity spring spontaneously from the recognition of need. More often it is sought or demanded by another party. Peterson refers to this phenomenon as 'demand sharing' and suggests that in practice, little giving is in fact purely altruistic (Peterson 1993: 860).

Generosity is not merely a highly valued quality to display when the giver sees fit but, rather, a social burden, continually open to challenge and defence. In practice, the burden is as much if not more on the back of the person asked to share as on the back of the person making the demand. This is because Aboriginal culture casts generosity as 'the norm' where one has the right to seek assistance from one's kin. Where many Australians of European descent expect the potential borrower to make a case of need ('I need a loan of cash because...'), Aboriginal people tend to place the greater burden of explanation on the owner of the goods or services ('I can't loan you the cash because...').

When demands come from a stranger, they are easier to refuse, but when demands come from kin the situation is much more problematic. In such cases, the owner of the demanded item must weigh up the costs of agreement or denial, and the costs of denial are often significant. Refusal to share can bring public accusations of stinginess or selfishness resulting in loss of face. Still, there are many strategies which can be deployed to evade requests. Requests for money, for example, can be easily denied by simply stating that one has no money at the moment because an outstanding bill was paid, money was loaned to someone else, it was lost on the horses, and so on. This assumes, of course, some degree of good timing in not being observed with a bulging purse or coming out of the bank on pay day. For many Aboriginal people, outright refusal in such circumstances is seen to be grossly inappropriate and unacceptable, while having nothing to share, on the other hand, is not. Consequently, many people resort to deliberate strategies to avoid demands: food might be purchased and consumed before returning home, money might be hidden in a boot or cigarettes inside a hat. Carter (1984: 120), for example, describes attempts by Aborigines on the south coast of New South Wales to conceal food by storing basic staples outside the kitchen and in less obvious public areas such as bedrooms. Yet refusal through deception is sometimes a high-risk strategy, for to be revealed as a deceiver carries the risk of public shame and humiliation for both parties, as revealed in this episode from my own research in Adelaide:

> On one occasion, among a group of men in a city pub, I witnessed a man, Johnny, open his wallet to show he had no money when asked by his 'cousin', Peter, for a loan. Later, after Johnny left, Peter remarked in a low voice that he knew Johnny had money - he always carried money in his boot. When I asked why Peter hadn't said that at the time, he replied, 'No, couldn't do that, would've made me 'shamed'. When I asked why Johnny went to the trouble of opening up his wallet, Peter explained that it was necessary since 'Nungas can't just say no, that wouldn't be right' (Schwab 1991: 205).

It is no secret that particular individuals sometimes abuse the generosity of others. In this way Aboriginal people are no different than other people. While demand sharing is the traditional pattern and Aboriginal people have developed appropriate mechanisms to ensure it is not abused, those mechanisms sometimes fail. For example, alcohol is often associated with aggressive demands and many Aboriginal households have known the frustration of dealing with aggressive drunks who appear in the middle of the night demanding food or shelter. Most often these individuals are young men. In many cases the behaviour is a bluff, with normal inhibitions and subtleties about the boundaries of demands dissolved by alcohol. Yet households without permanent male membership are sometimes singled out by such individuals since women will often give in to ensure their own safety. It should be noted, however, that in no case are such threats encouraged by any corner of the community and without exception these individuals are seen to bring shame on themselves and their families.

These examples illustrate some of the variables in the calculus of reciprocity among Aboriginal people in remote and urban communities. To cope with demands for sharing from a wide range of (broadly defined) kin, Aboriginal people develop and deploy a range of strategies to ensure that some control is maintained over individual or household resources. Decisions over when to deploy such strategies require explicit calculations not only about the extent of available resources but also about the degree of relationship of the resource holder and the person demanding assistance. To fully understand the phenomenon of sharing among Aboriginal people, one needs to look more closely at the social significance of such calculations and at the social meanings embedded in such transactions.

Sharing as social investment

Unquestionably, sharing among Aboriginal people functions at times as an economic levelling mechanism, allowing those in need to draw on the resources of individuals who have surplus (see especially Anderson 1982, 1989). This pattern in both remote and urban communities has long been recognised by Aboriginal people and is well documented by social scientists, but to stop at this point is to oversimplify and misunderstand the essence of such economic exchanges. To take the point further, one needs to ask what else, besides 'the right' at some point in the future to call on the resources of borrowers, does the sharer gain in acceding to the demands of others?

Where sharing takes place, both parties enter into not only an economic transaction (for shelter, food, money and the like), but also a social transaction; both are laden with meaning. For example, providing a meal to a nephew who shows up unannounced and demands food (or hangs about at meal time) creates and/or sustains a bond between the parties. It is a statement of relationship validated by the action of the giver, and it creates obligation on the part of the recipient. On the other hand, the demand for food is also an implied demand for recognition of a particular relationship between the two parties. It is in this sense a 'test' of the relationship (Peterson 1993). From either perspective, to deny the demand is to deny the relationship, not just the material transaction. Thus, through sharing, the two parties transact and validate their relationship.

Sharing also provides those who are generous with social renown. While a person who is generous is, in theory anyway, well placed to call for material assistance at some point in the future, that person may also generate social capital in the form of good will and influence (see Sansom 1988 for a description of this among Aboriginal people outside Darwin). Such individuals are admired and highly regarded, especially if they are able to fend off disingenuous requests. This is always a difficult balancing act since, almost invariably, such requests are couched in terms and structures of kinship. The poor health and high burn-out rate of middle-class Aborigines is in large part a result of the tremendous pressures they

bear in attempting to balance the varying needs and demands of their immediate families, their extended kin group and their employers (Schwab 1991).

Aboriginal decisions to deny the demands of kin are more than simple personal economic decisions, they may have profound social ramifications. Finlayson's description of one such situation in Kuranda is indicative in this regard:

> When Agnes' daughters had problems paying their rent, they ... moved in for a month or more and brought their young children with them. Agnes once complained to a woman friend of similar age about the problems of having grown children living with her. Both women agreed they did not want their children 'following them' and living with them and they imagined the pleasure of finding a house away from family with the address kept secret (Finlayson 1991: 175).

In this case Agnes clearly felt put-upon, yet to refuse hospitality to her daughters was in this case impossible; the social cost, particularly in a context where individual economic fortunes fluctuate wildly and one might need to call on kin during lean times, would be too high. In a similar situation described in Adelaide, a woman reached the point where she could no longer entertain the demands of borrowers. Though highly respected, generous and proudly Aboriginal, one day she packed her belongings, collected her children and moved to Ceduna, complaining that the constant demands and disruptions caused by her relatives had reached the point where she had to flee (leaving the borrowers behind). A few months later, however, she returned to Adelaide, finding the time away from friends and family unbearably lonely (Schwab 1991: 206). Note that in both of these cases, the fantasy and the action which provided the solutions to the problem involved evasion rather than confrontation. Such solutions provide a means of saving face and protecting the social relationship.

Sharing as Aboriginality

Anthropologists have expended a great deal of energy in recent years exploring the nature of Aboriginal identity, often under the broad rubric of Aboriginality.[2] The issue remains complex, but for many Aboriginal people, Aboriginality is at some basic level about difference, and comparisons between 'blacks' and 'whites' the frame for explanation. In the words of one Aboriginal woman in Adelaide:

> The difference between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people? I'll tell you what the difference is! You Whitefellas see somebody lying on the street you just walk around him, most often you walk right on top of him! Us Blackfellas can't do that. We see somebody on the street we've gotta stop and help him. We can't just walk away, we've gotta stop. It's our way, it's in our blood. We're different that way (Schwab 1991: 132).

Another woman used the frame of 'difference' in criticising members of the local community who focused on material gain rather than one another:

> Proper Blackfellas don't worry about 'things', they worry about each other. Those who are climbing the ladder to swimming pools, big houses and big cars have lost their culture. Aboriginal culture is built on caring, sharing and loving. You can't care, share and love and climb that ladder too. Just wanting things changes you. Aboriginal people gave things away to get that great spirit all you Whitefellas are after. You can't put 'things' before people and get that spirit, and a lot of Blackfellas have forgotten that now (Schwab 1991: 144-45).

While there is much encapsulated in these comments, it is useful to highlight for the moment the central theme of the two pieces of text. At the heart of Aboriginal culture is a core value: caring and sharing. The phrase 'caring and sharing' has been used widely in writings by and about Aboriginal communities for many years. For example, Grandfather Koorie, in Gilbert's *Living Black* (1978: 304-5) describes caring and sharing as the first two rules of Aboriginality. The ethos of sharing and generosity is integral to the definition of Aboriginality. Indeed, sharing in contemporary urban communities provides a mechanism to exhibit Aboriginality (Schwab 1991). In this way, sharing is a political act. According to this ideology, to be Aboriginal is to share. Clearly, Aboriginal identity is defined, at least partly, in opposition to what they perceive to be the ways of Whites. According to popular Aboriginal stereotypes, Whites are 'hard': stingy, selfish and disinterested in looking after their own. Yet, while it may be sometimes necessary to protect the resources of the household, there is some degree of risk in being seen to be like Whites. Consequently, the act of sharing is commonly perceived to be an act of identity and belonging. The social and economic pressures which emerge from this ideology are often enormous and some individuals who have chosen to maintain more strict control over resources by denying the demands of others have found themselves the recipients of disdain and condemnation. In many cases their Aboriginality is called into question by those whose demands for sharing have been denied.

Some principles of Aboriginal reciprocity

The following is a summary of some of the cultural assumptions and principles of Aboriginal sharing and reciprocity. While it is not being suggested that the principles of reciprocity operate flawlessly within households and communities and that tensions and misunderstandings never arise, it is possible to identify a core set of principles that underpin Aboriginal social interaction:

- Aboriginal kinship is extended and flexible: while people recognise fundamental differences and distances among kin, they also include individuals as kin who are not (or who are only distantly) related by blood or marriage. Most Aboriginal people are part of a much larger

kinship network than many non-Aboriginal people might recognise from their own experiences. To many non-Aboriginal Australians, individuals any one Aboriginal person might identify as kin would be considered as only distantly, or not at all, related. Yet as participants in such kinship networks, Aboriginal people have not only rights but also obligations toward all the individuals they define as kin.

- Sharing is the norm among Aboriginal kin. Aboriginal people are, in general, protected by and benefit greatly from the generosity of members of broad-ranging kinship systems. Individuals involved with and supported by such systems consider them normal and sensible, and expectations related to the sharing of shelter, food, cash and other resources appear entirely reasonable to the participants in such kinship networks.

- Sharing among Aboriginal people is propelled by demand but constrained by a delicate balance between what is considered appropriate to demand and appropriate to refuse. In Aboriginal communities, individuals are expected to understand the subtleties and limitations of both making and deflecting demands. Individuals learn early in life the rules for responding to demands in culturally appropriate ways.

- Saying 'No' to demands for resources has social, not just material, implications. A direct refusal of a demand for assistance is a significant act in the Aboriginal community. To bluntly refuse a demand is a poor economic strategy since the refusal effectively denies the authenticity of the basis of the demand. This is a grave decision few Aboriginal people will make lightly, particularly if they anticipate that they may at some point in the future need to call on the other party for assistance.

- Deflecting demands is acceptable but requires strategic behaviour so as not to shame or embarrass either party. Aboriginal people are highly adept at avoiding demands which are unreasonable or immediately inconvenient. Yet, evading such demands requires finely-tuned diplomatic and strategic skills to ensure the relationship is not damaged. Successfully evading requests to share requires graceful and subtle manoeuvring so as not to incite resentment and abuse.

- The social implications of refusing to share are particularly profound for individuals in peripheral positions. For individuals with tenuous links to an Aboriginal community, sharing is one way to establish and maintain connections with the community and to assert identity as Aboriginal. It is important to recognise that reciprocity is a core element in the organisation of Aboriginal communities; Aboriginal people operate in a social universe, not in isolation.

These principles illustrate some of the rules and complex assumptions and expectations that surround reciprocity in Aboriginal communities and highlight some of the cultural underpinnings of everyday interaction. Though some are tempted to cynically dismiss 'caring and sharing' as groundless rhetoric, sharing remains a keystone of Aboriginal culture and identity. While it is certainly one of the elements of the social glue that holds Aboriginal families and communities together in precarious economic and social circumstances, it is also a mechanism through which individuals may test, affirm and display their sense of community and Aboriginality.

This cluster of principles suggests the subtle understandings and modes of strategic interaction that are such a prominent part of the calculus of reciprocity. In social interaction, individuals operate through a system of shared understandings where actions are largely predictable and reactions follow a cultural logic of their own. Where understandings and expectations are shared, the social system maintains its equilibrium; individuals move through a sequence of steps which, though not choreographed, are of limited variation and predictable to a large degree. However, where one party violates the logic of the interaction by misreading a cue or reacting to a particular action in an inappropriate manner (for example, by refusing a demand where agreement is clearly culturally appropriate), ambiguity and tension may derail what is an otherwise predictable, stable set of interactions.

Reciprocity, culture and policy

The cultural rules underpinning sharing and reciprocity among indigenous Australians are relevant to a broad range of research and policy issues, and careful consideration of the manifestation of such rules in the everyday lives of indigenous people can contribute to a more accurate interpretation of data collected at the national and regional levels. Similarly, understanding the cultural principles of interaction may increase the chances of developing approaches to policy that are culturally appropriate and that will fit with existing community structures and expectations. Though it is beyond the aim of this paper to attempt an exhaustive analysis here, it may be useful to explore some general implications relevant to a limited set of policy issues.

Measures of poverty

Calculations of indigenous poverty levels remain problematic, and benchmarks have been officially reassessed only once (in 1973) since the Henderson Poverty Inquiry in 1966 (Saunders 1994). Subsequent research on indigenous poverty levels (Choo 1990; Ross and Whiteford 1990; Mikalauskas and Ross (forthcoming)) continues to rely on these benchmarks, but some have suggested that the value of the Henderson

Poverty Line has been compromised as a tool for policy analysis (King 1991). Assuming it is only a matter of time before the Henderson line will be re-calibrated or replaced, it would certainly be useful to look carefully at its applicability to indigenous families in light of the specific cultural factors surrounding sharing and reciprocity at play in indigenous households and communities.

Given the prominent nature of the extended family, models of income and expenditure which appear to work well in describing non-indigenous Australian families present difficulties when mapped onto indigenous communities. Many indigenous households expand and contract in a cycle which is varied and often unpredictable. Individual or even family income is often a meaningless category, and therefore a meaningless measure of poverty, as resources are pooled or transferred among a broadly defined collection of 'kin' - some transient, some permanent - within a particular house at various times. Further, household expenditure is often highly contingent and expenses unpredictable. A complex yet subtle calculus is employed on a daily basis as individuals decide which expenses require immediate attention and which can be deferred. Thus, traditional economic concepts related to investment strategies, resource accumulation and property rights do not translate easily or may be meaningless when applied to indigenous households.

Housing

The housing need of indigenous Australians continues to be a prominent policy issue (Jones 1994), and the principles of sharing and reciprocity in the realm of cash and material goods are also relevant to considerations of shelter and accommodation; the same sorts of cultural rules and expectations come into play for both. Shelter can be demanded, either overtly or more subtly, and a social relationship is signified and displayed in the outcome of that demand. In this sense, certain policy assumptions about household overcrowding or the lack of alternative accommodation become problematic. It may not be the case that individuals are forced to share accommodation merely because nothing else is available; for many indigenous Australians, a crowded house is a source of cultural and social security.

Labour market participation

For many indigenous Australians, the social and financial support of kin is a more predictable resource than the labour market, and training and job opportunities are often weighed up in terms of costs and benefits to the participant. Consideration of this support system would be important when attempting to understand patterns of mobility among indigenous Australians (Taylor and Bell 1994); a job or training program which requires movement away (physically or culturally) from a network of kin is a high-risk economic proposition for many indigenous people. Attractive salaries, travel and accommodation or guarantees of special support and

promotion opportunities may not compensate for the loss of social support many indigenous people feel when entering a mainstream labour market program.

Similarly, preferences for employment in the community rather than public sector (Taylor 1992) may be related to the fact that the relatively higher concentration of indigenous workers in community sector jobs offers the potential for a more supportive and culturally familiar work environment than do jobs in the private sector where the number of other indigenous workers will be fewer. The popularity of the CDEP scheme within indigenous communities is at least partly explained by the fact that they are local, involve work 'for the community' and provide work in the company of other indigenous people (Smith 1994, 1995). Thus, participation in labour market programs, whether CDEP or mainstream, is a complex social decision and not merely a question of economic opportunity.

Family welfare

Finally, though not linked directly to indigenous participation in the wider Australian economy, understanding of the structures and expectations of sharing and reciprocity are significant to a variety of family welfare issues. For example, there is increasing social policy research indicating the significance of family networks in Australia (Millward 1995), a finding which has been prominent in the literature on indigenous families for decades. Yet the experience of indigenous families suggests the possibility that policies that are part of structural or programmatic 'support systems' may in fact conflict violently with the traditional family support mechanisms of indigenous families; the legacy of the removal of children from indigenous communities, one of the most horrifying of such conflicts, is soon to be the focus of a Royal Commission.

The principles of reciprocity operating in indigenous households also make it difficult to calculate individual or family incomes as required by some family assistance programs. Individuals move in and out of households and household income levels can fluctuate dramatically within a short period of time. Policy makers need to ensure that program eligibility criteria (related, for example, to household income) accommodate rather than contravene the economic fluctuations of households and existing family support structures.

Notes

1. While the focus of this paper is on Aboriginal Australians, much of the argument is applicable to Torres Strait Islanders as well.

2. Anthropological examinations of this topic through the late 1980s and early 1990s are well documented in the edited volumes by Beckett (1988), Keen (1988) and a special issue of *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* edited by Thiele (1991).

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