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DISCOURSE, DEFICIT AND IDENTITY: ABORIGINALITY, THE RACE PARADIGM AND THE LANGUAGE OF REPRESENTATION IN CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIA

Abstract
Deficit discourse is expressed in a mode of language that consistently frames Aboriginal identity in a narrative of deficiency. It is interwoven with notions of 'authenticity', which in turn adhere to models of identity still embedded within the race paradigm, suffering from all of its constraints but persistently benefiting from all of its tenacity. Recent work shows that deficit discourse surrounding Aboriginality is intricately entwined within and across different sites of representation, policy and expression, and is active both within and outside Indigenous Australia. It thus appears to exhibit all the characteristics of what Foucault terms a 'discursive formation' (see below). Our research adopts the approach that discourse is both constitutive and productive, that it is a social action which frames and constrains understanding, but that it is also productive of knowledge and social relationships (Culler, 1982), and 'defines and produces the objects of our knowledge [and] governs the way that a topic can be meaningfully talked about and reasoned about' (Hall, 2010: 72). As Kerin (2012: 26) notes, it follows that:

Those who have the ability to shape discourse define what it is possible to think, while suppressing other ways of thinking. The ability to shape discourse, legitimatis and reproduce it builds power. By defining what is possible to think and suppressing others, those with institutional power – like governmental agencies – do not need to draw on coercive force to change people's behaviour because the dominant discourse has established a framework, or 'rules of the game', that individuals and groups must 'play to' in order to be recognised and participate.

Overseas research on the prevalence and social impact of deficit discourse indicates a significant link between discourse surrounding indigenousity and outcomes for indigenous peoples (Nairn et al., 2006; Shields et al., 2005). While there is emerging work in this field in Aboriginal education (Armstrong et al., 2012; Gorringe and Spellman, 2008; Sarra, 2011), as well as a growing understanding of the social impact of related behaviours such as lateral violence (Gooda, 2011; Gorringe et al., 2011), the deficit discourse and its influence are substantially under-theorised and have been paid little research attention in the Indigenous Australian context.

Negative stereotypes not only contribute to damaging behaviours such as racism and lateral violence, but 'are entwined with (as well as foster) notions of helplessness and lack of agency' (Gorringe et al., 2009: 14). Disengaging non-Indigenous and Indigenous Australians from such discourse may be fundamental to affecting change, but there are obstacles to this, which derive from factors such as the tenacity, subtlety and pervasiveness of this mode of discourse, its powerful currency in the current socio-political climate and the sensitivity of the topic.

Issues surrounding identity and the ways in which negative stereotypes are used by Aboriginal people against other Aboriginal people are a matter of great sensitivity, with candid and rigorous debate stifled by valid fears of reprisal, which include being perceived as negating the presence of real disadvantage and exposing people and communities to further misrepresentation and outside attack. Identifying these issues does not mean denying the real need of many Aboriginal people, nor the continuing racism which people experience, but provides mechanisms which may effect change in these areas. (Gorringe et al., 2011: 3)
Identity and discourse

Considerable work in the social sciences has focused on the complex relationship between discourse, knowledge and power, particularly through the writings of Michel Foucault. For Foucault, the episteme (or mode of discourse that is characteristic of a particular way of thinking) will appear across a range of texts, and as forms of conduct, at a number of different institutional sites within society (Hall, 2010: 73).

While these refer to the same object, have the same style, support a strategy and have a ‘common institutional, administrative, or political drift and pattern’ (Cousins and Hussain, 1984: 84–85), they belong to what he terms the same ‘discursive formation’.

Simply put, in adopting a Foucauldian approach, what is ‘known’ in a particular period about ‘Aborigines’ has a bearing on how people are regulated and controlled (or regulate and control themselves). As Hall (2010: 76) notes, ‘knowledge does not operate in a void ... it is put to work, through certain technologies and strategies of application, in specific institutions, historical contexts and institutional regimes’.

Foucault’s analysis does not conceptualise power only in the form of an hierarchical chain, but rather as deployed and exercised as a network (Foucault, 1980: 98), indicating that all touched by it are caught up in its circulation – both the oppressors and the oppressed (Hall, 2010: 77).

Foucault’s work shifted attention away from large-scale strategies of power ‘towards the many, localized circuits, tactics, mechanisms and effects through which power circulates’ – the ‘microphysics of power’ that articulate power relations, which ‘go right down to the depths of society’ (Foucault, 1977: 27). The evidence of deficit discourse as a discursive formation also presenting within Aboriginal communities is therefore unsurprising: ‘Power relations permeate all levels of social existence and are therefore to be found operating at every site of social life.’ (Hall, 2010: 77)

Historical context

Assumptions and accusations of Indigenous deficit have saturated the history of cultural relations in Australia since contact, and are a key component of racism and prejudice. There has been substantial research to show that colonial ideology adhered to constructed ‘truths’ about Aboriginal people that were underpinned by notions of deficiency, and had very little to do with how Aboriginal people saw themselves (Dodson, 1994; Langton, 1993, 1999; Healy, 2008; Russell, 2001). For most non-Indigenous Australians, the dominance of Eurocentric representations about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people has been their sole point of reference and understanding. Rather than knowing and relating to Aboriginal people, ‘they relate to stories told (about) Indigenous people’ by former colonists’ (Langton, 1993: 33). As noted by Dodson (1994), defining characteristics were described in an unambiguously loaded language that predominantly identified Aboriginal people in terms of what they lacked. Under the gaze of the colonising culture, ‘Aboriginalinity’ changed from being a daily practice to being a ‘problem to be solved’ (Dodson, 1994: 3). Conceptualisation of Aboriginality in terms of racial theories based on blood quotient, coupled with notions of the ‘noble and persistent’ concepts of ‘authenticity’ wherein some people are designated as ‘less Aboriginal’, ‘less real’ or ‘less valid’ than others. While these perceptions were constructed first by non-Indigenous Australians, the CTC workshops focused on the presence of these introduced deficit concepts among Aboriginal peoples, noting their effect on relationships between and within families, groups, peoples and communities (Gorrige et al., 2011: 5; see also Goods, 2011).

The recent case of Eustock v Bolt (2011)7 and the public interest it created, demonstrate the intensity of issues surrounding ‘authenticity’ faced by Aboriginal people who may not conform to outside notions of the so-called ‘real Aborigine’. Similarly, a report by the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) on racism experienced by Aboriginal people working in universities shows that a considerable component of the prejudice they encounter relates as much to ‘being black’ as it does to not being black enough, and that the latter accusation is received from both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people (NTEU 2011: 22–35). The report provides qualitative data on internal racism, which is often expressed through lateral violence. The timeliness of the CTC discussion topic is demonstrated by the frequent citation of a publication resulting from the 2009 workshop (Gorrige et al., 2009) in the 2011 Social Justice Report. Focusing on relationships within and between communities, the Social Justice Report dedicates a chapter to the subject of lateral violence, and identifies a need for further research (Goods, 2011: 15).

While there is some emerging research on lateral violence in Australia and Canada (Coiff et al., 2010; Dodson et al., 2000; Langton, 2008), there remains a significant deficiency in understanding its prevalence, impact and drivers.

The construction and representation of Aboriginal identity by ‘white’ Australians have received considerable attention (Cowlahsw, 1993; Dodson, 1994; Langton, 1993, 1999; Lattas, 1993; Meadows, 2001; Russell, 2001), including some application of Foucauldian theories (Arnold and Atwood, 1992; F‘orre, 2002) and analysis of ‘Aboriginality’ as a construct arising from interaction between white and black Australians (Bamber, 2011a; Healy, 2009; Nakata, 2007). The ‘legacy of definition’ and ‘the prison knowledge builds’ have been identified (Dodson, 1994: 2, 3) and the field of whiteness studies has contributed to understanding of the use of racial notions of ‘superiority’ as central to construction of ‘white’ identity, with significant research in this area in the Australian context (Moreton-Robinson, 2005; Russell and Fee, 2007). Research on the politics of representation, recognition and difference (Cowlahsw, 1993; Merlan, 2003; Langton, 1999; Rowe, 2008) has examined the role of identity as a powerful site of struggle for social justice, within which notions of ‘authenticity’ can be regarded as an increasingly significant factor. Wetherell and Potter’s research (1992) into the discourse of Pakeha New Zealanders about Maori identity has broadened understanding of the subtle language of racism. However, much less work has been done on the nature and impact of the discursive environment surrounding Aboriginal identity.

Policy platforms: ‘The Intervention’ and ‘Closing the Gap’

Policy platforms such as the Northern Territory Emergency Response (known widely as ‘the Intervention’) and ‘Closing the Gap’ allow initial assessment of the extent of the deficit discourse landscape within particularly significant policy framings for Indigenous issues implemented for the express reason of improving outcomes for Indigenous Australians.

While there has been much critique of the Intervention itself, there has been less analysis of the discourse used by political leaders, government documents or news media to articulate and promote the policy, or by Aboriginal people to support or oppose it, particularly since its reiteration as ‘Stronger Futures’. Nonetheless, Himono (2007) has written on the discursive, puns used in the justification for the intervention, and Lovell (2012) has examined content from parliamentary debates, public speeches and government reports to ‘develop an understanding of the discursive and rhetorical context in which these interventionist and authoritarian strategies came to be seen as essential to the protection of Aboriginal children’s safety and wellbeing’ (2012: x). Similarly, Mazoun (2011) has identified the dominance of ‘deficit’ in the discourse...
of Aboriginality utilised in political texts about the Intervention for the period of its initiation through to its legislative passage, concluding that:

Constructs of Aboriginality deployed to justify the intervention are formulations that link Aboriginality to the abuse of Aboriginal children. This alignment establishes a political debate about the nature and future of Aboriginality in a discursive terrain in which the authority and perspectives of Indigenous people are problematised. In deploying constructions that attempt to situate and contain Aboriginality temporally and spatially, the intervention’s settler advocates seek to resolve the ‘problem’ of Aboriginality by subduing the savage and developing the primitive in spaces they designate an authentically Aboriginal domain.

(Macoun, 2011: 331)

Although there has been some examination of the conceptual weaknesses of ‘Closing the Gap’ (e.g. Atman, 2005; Atman and Fogarty, 2010; Pholi, 2009), this has not explicitly been in terms of the impact of the discourse employed. Terms such as ‘Closing the Gap’ employ language that continues to carry an implicit assumption of deficit that, posit...
Research emerging overseas has increased understanding of the pervasive influence that stereotype, prejudice and discrimination have on behaviour, and health and educational outcomes (Nelson, 2009; Stangor, 2009). Of particular interest in assessing impact are the concepts of stereotype threat (Feldcht and Schmader, 2011) and social identity threat (Aronson and McGhine, 2009). Studied as situational mechanisms to understand disparities in outcomes between and across a range of groups, these occur when ‘individuals are at risk, by dint of their actions or behaviours, of confirming negative stereotypes about their group’, whether they personally believe these stereotypes or not (Steele and Aronson, 1995). Such threats have been shown to contribute to low performance across a range of areas and groups – for example, African Americans in education or girls in maths – and to impact on mental and physical health (Blascovich et al., 2001). Of significance in the context of this article, research has shown that stereotype threat and social identity threat can occur simply with the application of priming effects, as when subtle exposure to words associated with negative aging stereotypes resulted in older people walking more slowly and exhibiting poorer memory than those who were exposed to words that cast age in a positive light (e.g. Levy, 2003). If being surrounded by deficit discourse associated with identity affects performance across a range of groups, there is significant reason to believe that its saturation in the Australian Indigenous context has substantial impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Recent work around community engagement with mainstream schools has demonstrated that there is a clear link between the representations of Wiradjuri identity and the choices people make. Bamhlett (2013b) found that a Wiradjuri community had disengaged from mainstream schools for generations in response to continual reference to cultural and social deficit.

**Alternatives: ‘Strength-based’ approaches**

Assessment of the relationship between deficit discourse and outcomes is assisted by comparison with initiatives that proactively reject such discourse and challenge the perceptions within which it is embedded. One such initiative in Australian Indigenous education is the work of the Stronger Smarter Leadership Program (SSLP) (Sara, 2011). Schools, educators and parents of Aboriginal students have been heavily socialised into a discourse of deficit. This constrains how Indigenous education is thought and represented, both qualitatively and quantitatively. Data on Indigenous education (which inform decisions on funding allocations) are also delivered in this frame, both deriving from and reinforcing perceptions of Indigenous deficit (Fogarty, 2013). It is instructive for the current purpose to question why Indigenous educational success is rarely, if ever, framed in terms of innate Indigenous educational ability.

Focused on shifting this discourse, the SSLP is a professional learning space that challenges how people perceive, talk and think about teaching and learning in the context of Aboriginal education. It actively engages with educational leadership from across Australia to focus on the strengths of individuals (teachers, students, parents) as its starting point. Sara’s research (2011) provokes the consciences of school leadership about which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity they collude with – one grounded in deficit or one grounded in strengths?

Engouri is the foundational process from which the SSLP is delivered. A three-phased strength-based process, Engouri focuses on the question, ‘What makes/keeps us strong?’ Subtle, this question leads to a conversation about ‘how’ we want to be, rather than ‘who’ we are – a powerful shift enabling people to remember their strengths, their hopes and aspirations, and their sense of connection. From a foundation of ‘how we want to be’, and with a strong recognition of the impact of deficit discourse, the robust, trusting and challenging conversations around the big issues can be had. Its processes enable a safe space for dialogue as well as a sense of freedom from the overwhelming dominance of negativity and ‘can’t do’.

An international comparison is provided by Te Kootahianga in New Zealand. Designed at Waikato University, this initiative is a professional development program for teachers that has achieved considerable success in improving outcomes for Māori students in mainstream secondary schools (Bishop et al., 2006). A fundamental component of the program requires teachers to explicitly reject deficit theorising as a means of explaining Māori students’ education achievement levels (Berrymann and Bishop, 2011). This includes rejecting the tendency to attribute blame that accompanies explanations of differences in student achievement in ‘high-stakes’ assessments (Shields et al., 2005).

Rejecting deficit thinking and moving away from the attribution of blame were key components of a dramatic improvement in early childhood English literacy outcomes at Erambie Mission near Cowra in central-west New South Wales (Bamhlett, 2013b). Wiradjuri people at Erambie made a similar demand to that of Māori families in the Te Kootahianga project, that schools and teachers see their culture as an advantage rather than dismissing it as a disadvantage, as would have occurred in the past. At Erambie, schools worked with the community to develop an English literacy plan based on key elements of Wiradjuri culture. The program focused on the compatibility of a thriving Wiradjuri storytelling tradition and a strong sense of communal responsibility with key reading development strategies for the early years. Prime Minister Julia Gillard noted the improved results in reading at Erambie in an address to the National Press Club. However, demonstrating the tenacity of deficit thinking, while the school was given credit for improved outcomes, no mention was made of the central involvement of the Aboriginal community in achieving this success.

**Conclusion**

Constructs about Aboriginality lodged in an old and enduring paradigm are likely to become more and more distant from self-expressed Australian Indigenous identities today and in the future. Identity is contextual, and as the political, social and historical context in this country changes, so do aspects of identity for many Aboriginal people. However, if dominant notions of Aboriginal identity are still tied to philosophical understandings generated during the colonial era, effective policy development and societal relations will be similarly constrained. Despite the significant changes that have taken place in the relationship between Aboriginal people and the state, deficit discourse appears to continue to be the dominant discursive formation for 'Aboriginality' in Australia, and until this undergoes a formative shift, it will continue to impede successful policy and relations.

Research on discursive formation has an important place for Aboriginal people and wider Australia in deconstructing and developing debates about Aboriginal Australia, especially in terms of policy (Sullivan, 2011a). There is a real need to ‘unpack’ and scrutinise deficit discourse surrounding Aboriginality and the context within which it is saturated, produced and replicated. Progress within the postcolonial space appears hampered by a discourse dominated by either participation in deficit models or, at best, oppositional reaction to these. Continuing evidence of the need to improve health and educational outcomes urgently calls for reassessment of the dominant discourse about Aboriginality, as it may continue to compromise the capacity of Australia to either effectively re-evaluate past public policy in relation to Indigenous peoples or to develop new policy to chart the decades ahead.
The Foucauldian approach provides an instructive tool to investigate the discursive landscape, its interactions and implications, while recent work in the field of stereotyping and prejudice suggests additional methods to understand the relationship between discourse and outcomes. Existing programs that reject deficit discourse provide important comparisons to assist in understanding this relationship further. Taking such an approach may pave the way for new insights into a variety of questions, such as: How does deficit discourse in the health and education arena influence and distort policy discussions in terms of notions of equity and service provision? What does policy freed from deficit discourse look like? How do organisations secure funding and express aspirations without engaging in a deficit model? How will Indigenous success be framed in non-oppositional media accounts? What type of discourse best engages students in education? What does history look like when freed from a deficit model, and how might this reframed current understandings? The utility of even considering that the conversation can and should be changed is demonstrated in the first instance simply by the different types of questions enabled by such a discursive shift.

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Notes
1 The 2009 workshop was convened by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATISS) and the 2011 workshop was co-convened by AIATISS and the Lowitja Institute.
2 The term ‘lateral violence’ describes a range of damaging behaviours by those of a minority oppressed group towards others of that group, rather than towards the system of oppression; in particular, it uses accounts of inauthenticity as a tool of social exclusion.
6 A set of processes that belong to the Timjpa (Mithaka peoples) of far South-West Queensland. Enegoorp has been developed to assist organisations to navigate complex intercultural challenges. A strengths-based approach, it derives from principles used by Mithaka in the past within protocols for diplomacy and conflict resolution.

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