Indigenous disadvantage: can strengthening cultural attachment help to Close the Gap?

by Lenny Roth

1. Introduction

On 27 May 2011, the new Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Victor Dominello, announced that the NSW Government would investigate "how to create further Aboriginal cultural and linguistic education opportunities as a key way of closing the gap".[1] The Minister said:

> The consistent feedback I am getting from Aboriginal people is that knowing where you are from and being proud of it, shows where you can go...
>
> Identity, pride and self-worth are the core factors in determining success and the Government is determined to work with Aboriginal communities to foster that success...[2]

The Minister also referred to a recent publication by the Australian Bureau of Statistics which showed that, in 2008, in remote areas, Aboriginal youth (aged 15-24) who spoke an Indigenous language were less likely than other Aboriginal youth to have engaged in risky alcohol use (8% compared to 18%) and illicit substance use (16% compared to 26%).[3]

The Minister's approach is consistent with the National Indigenous Reform Agreement, which was agreed by all Australian Governments in November 2008. In a section on "The importance of culture", it states (in part):

> Connection to culture is critical for emotional, physical and spiritual well being. Culture pervades the lives of Indigenous people and is a key factor in their wellbeing – culture must be recognised in actions intended to overcome Indigenous disadvantage.

The former NSW Labor Government, which signed up to this agreement, had developed a number of policies to promote Indigenous culture including the NSW Aboriginal Languages Policy, and the Aboriginal Affairs Plan, Two Ways Together, in which culture and heritage was one of the priority areas.

An Aboriginal Elder's perspective on the importance of culture can be found in a 2005 report on the wellbeing of Aboriginal children in Western Australia. In the foreword to one part of the report, Pat Kopusar commented:

> In my opinion, restoring cultural vitality is as important as equity in our access to resources to combat ill-health, poverty, education, homelessness, shelter and safety for our children.[4]

This e-brief presents a review of empirical academic studies from Australia and overseas which have examined the relationship between

Indigenous people's levels of cultural attachment and their socio-economic outcomes. It is important to note that these studies have a number of limitations and the findings of the studies are not all consistent with each other. It should also be noted that the studies use different methodologies. Before discussing the research, statistics are presented on reported indicators of cultural attachment.

2. Statistics on language & culture

Some findings from the 2008 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSSIS) in the section "Culture and Language" were:

- 19% of Indigenous people aged 15 years and over spoke an Indigenous language;

- 62% of Indigenous people aged 15 years and over identified with a clan, tribal or language group;

- 72% of Indigenous people aged 15 years or over recognised an area as their homelands or traditional country;

- 63% of Indigenous people aged 15 and over were involved in cultural events, ceremonies or organisations in the past year;

- 31% of Indigenous children aged between 3 and 14 years spent at least one day a week with an Indigenous leader or elder;

- 65% of Indigenous children aged 5–14 years were taught about Indigenous culture at school.

As shown in the chart below, there were significant differences between people living in remote areas and those living in non-remote areas.[5]
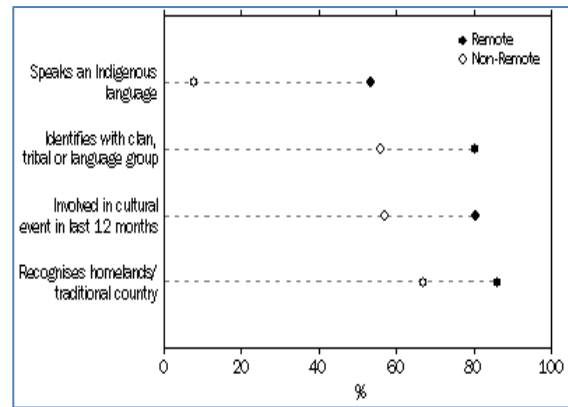
3. Limitations of academic studies

It is important to note that empirical research in this area is relatively new and there are a number of issues associated with the studies including:

- How is culture to be defined? And, to what extent is it possible to measure the strength of a person's cultural attachment?

- To what extent can the studies identify a *causal* relationship between cultural attachment and socio-economic outcomes?

- To what extent do the studies take into account other factors that might be more significant in explaining the outcomes?

4. Australian studies

Associate Professor Mike Dockery (Curtin Business School) has recently used data from the NATSISS to explore the links between Indigenous cultural attachment and a range of socio-economic outcomes. The results of these studies have been published in three separate papers.

Dockery measured Indigenous cultural attachment on the basis of responses to NATSISS questions on matters such as participating in cultural activities, identifying with a clan, and

speaking an indigenous language. Individuals were categorised into four different levels of cultural attachment: strong, moderate, weak, and minimal.

Dockery noted that his research:

> …must be considered largely exploratory in the absence (to the best of my knowledge) of previous empirical work or any established and accepted framework for the analysis of such a topic. Indeed the attempt to measure culture is, in itself, a somewhat controversial undertaking.[6]

In summary, Dockery found that:

- In non-remote areas, there was a positive relationship between cultural attachment and educational attainment (as well as participation in vocational education and training courses). However, there was a negative relationship for people living in remote and very remote areas.[7]

- Having strong cultural attachment was associated with better outcomes in the four domains that were considered: i.e. self-assessed health, alcohol abuse, being arrested, and employment status. However, those with minimal attachment fared better than those with weak or moderate attachment in some of these domains. The relationship also varied by remoteness.[8]

- In remote areas, there was a positive relationship between cultural attachment and mental wellbeing. In non-remote areas, stronger cultural attachment was associated with greater psychological stress (which appeared to be explained by experiences of discrimination).[9]

It is important to note that these findings are about correlations between levels of cultural attachment and socio-economic outcomes. The findings do not inform us about causation: i.e. whether higher levels of cultural attachment result in better socio-economic outcomes or whether better socio-economic outcomes result in higher levels of cultural attachment, or whether causation runs both ways.

The finding of a positive association between cultural attachment and educational attainment (in non-remote areas) seems to be somewhat inconsistent with an earlier Australian study. In 2000, Nola Purdie et al (Queensland University of Technology) published a report on the relationship between positive self-identity for Indigenous school students and school outcomes.[10] Consultations with a national sample group found:

> Indigenous students often expressed positive feelings about themselves, their culture, and their family, but their feelings about school and about themselves as students were ambivalent. High self-esteem and a positive identity as an Indigenous person did not appear to be necessarily linked to successful educational outcomes.[11]

Another Australian study has examined cultural identity and peer influence as predictors of substance abuse.[12] The study by Nick Gazis et al (University of Queensland) was conducted in Cairns and its regional area, and the subjects were students from schools that had a high proportion of Indigenous students. To measure cultural identity, the study used the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure, which comprised 12 items including (for example) "pride in cultural group", "participate in cultural practices", "feel good about culture".

One finding from this study was that strong cultural identity was protective of non-Indigenous and Indigenous alcohol initiation.[13] However, taking into account peer influence resulted in different findings for non-Indigenous and Indigenous youth:

> Among Non-Indigenous youth, high cultural identity was protective of alcohol initiation for up to four drinking friends. Alternatively, Indigenous youth with any number of drinking friends were more susceptible to alcohol initiation even with high cultural identity.[14]

Gazis et al suggested that:

> One explanation for this result may have to do with differences in cultural values between the two groups. Indigenous youth who have been raised with a strong sense of community may be more conforming and therefore more susceptible to peer pressure use. On the other hand, Anglo-Australian youth with cultural values that emphasise independence may be more resilient to peer influences than their Indigenous counterparts.[15]

5. Canadian & New Zealand studies

A 2010 article by Donald Taylor (McGill University) and Esther Usborne (University of Montreal) refers to Canadian studies on the relationship between Aboriginal cultural continuity and the risk of youth suicide:

> Chandler and his colleagues (1998 and 2003) argue that in the case of Aboriginal Canadians, cultural continuity is essential for personal continuity, which in turn decreases risk for youth suicide. Chandler and Lalonde (1998) found that Aboriginal Canadian communities that were engaged in preserving and restoring a sense of their own cultural continuity demonstrated lower rates of youth suicide than counterpart communities that were not engaged in such collective activities. They concluded that these communities succeeded in providing their members with an otherwise missing measure of cultural continuity or clarity essential to

> understanding themselves as connected to their own past and future.[16]

In New Zealand, academics from the University of Otago have conducted several studies using data from the Christchurch Health and Development Study (CHDS) to explore the relationship between Maori cultural identity and various socio-economic outcomes. The studies have typically been based on a sample group of around 1,000 participants who, at age 21, were asked about their ethnic identification. About 11 percent of this group self-identified as Maori (109 people). Of this group, slightly less than half (50 people) reported sole Maori identity and slightly more than half (59 people) reported Maori identity and identity with another ethnic group.

The studies look at differences between those in the sole Maori group and those in the Maori/other group. Unlike Dockery's research, the studies do not generally examine the extent to which Maori people were attached to their culture as measured by indicators such as participating in Maori cultural activities. However, questions about such matters were asked as part of the CHDS, and Marie et al have noted that people in the sole Maori group were more likely to report having taken part in several aspects of Maori culture.[17]

In summary, some studies found that individuals who reported having sole Maori identity had better outcomes in certain domains (e.g. mental health and criminal offending) than those who reported Maori identity and identity with another ethnic group.[18] However, other studies found that outcomes in other domains (e.g. cannabis use, educational attainment and welfare dependency) did not vary according to Maori cultural identification.[19]

In those cases where a relationship was found between Maori cultural identity and a socio-economic outcome, the researchers pointed out that other explanations of the results required consideration. They also explained that the findings were:

> ...based on a particular cohort born in a particular geographic region and study over a specific time period. The extent to which the findings based on this cohort generalize to other New Zealand cohorts and regions remains to be determined.[20]

Another New Zealand study has examined the relationship between Maori cultural identification and alcohol behaviour.[21] The 2010 study by Erin Ebbet and Dave Clarke (Massey University) was based on a survey sample of 450 Maori people. Maori cultural identification was measured on the basis of questions relating to matters such as ancestral knowledge, and attendance at tribal meeting places. The study found that:

> …drinkers were not significantly different from abstainers in Maori identification...Maori identification was not related to the amount of alcohol consumed [on a particular occasion], but to frequency of drinking.[22]

Ebbet and Clarke explained:

> Given that socialisation can reinforce drinking patterns, Maori who strongly identify with their culture might attend more social occasions when alcohol was consumed.[23]

A number of limitations to the study were noted. One of these was that the sample group differed significantly from the general Maori population in gender, education and income.[24]

6. Conclusion

It appears that only a small number of empirical studies in Australia, Canada, and New Zealand have examined the relationship between Indigenous people's levels of cultural attachment and their socio-economic outcomes.

Due to the limitations of these studies, the findings that they have reached can only be regarded as very tentative. In addition, the findings that have been made are mixed. There is also the problem of relying on research from other countries to draw conclusions for Indigenous Australians.

It is hoped that further research will shed more light on this important but complex area of enquiry. In the meantime, it will be important for policy makers to listen to what Indigenous communities are saying about the value of culture in their lives.

Of current interest in this area is a federal Parliamentary Committee inquiry into Indigenous language learning, the terms of reference for which include examining "the contribution of Indigenous languages to Closing the Gap and strengthening Indigenous identity and culture".

Finally, although not directly relevant to the discussion in this paper, it is worth noting that the *Closing the Gap Clearinghouse* has recently published a report entitled *What works to overcome Indigenous disadvantage: Key Learnings and Gaps in the Evidence 2009-10,* which is based on evidence collected by the Clearinghouse in its first year.

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1 Victor Dominello, 'Minister announces investigation into Aboriginal cultural and linguistic opportunities', *Media Release,* 27 May 2011

2 Victor Dominello, n1

3 ABS, 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Wellbeing: A focus on children and youth', Cat 4725.0, April 2011

4   Zubrick SR, Silburn SR, Lawrence DM, Mitrou FG, Dalby RB, Blair EM, Griffin J, Milroy H, De Maio JA, Cox A, Li J. *The Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey: The Social and Emotional Wellbeing of Aboriginal Children and Young People*. Perth: Curtin University of Technology and Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, 2005, Volume 2, p v.

5   This chart has been reproduced from ABS, *The Health and Welfare of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples,* Cat 4704.0, October, 2010.

6   M Dockery, *Cultural Dimensions of Indigenous Participation in Education and Training,* Curtin Business School, Curtin University, 2009, p10

7   M Dockery, note 6.

8   M Dockery, *Culture and Wellbeing: The Case of Indigenous Australians,* Curtin Business School, 2009. See also M Dockery, *Traditional Culture and the Wellbeing of Indigenous Australians: An analysis of the 2008 NATSISS,* Curtin Business School, 2011.

9   M Dockery, *Traditional Culture and the Wellbeing of Indigenous Australians: An analysis of the 2008 NATSISS,* Curtin Business School, 2011.

10 N Purdie et al, *Positive Self-Identity for Indigenous Students and its Relationship to School Outcomes,* Queensland University of Technology, July 2000

11 N Purdie, n10, p38

12 N Gazis et al, 'Cultural identity and peer influence as predictors of substance use among culturally diverse Australian adolescents', (2010) 30(3) *Journal of Early Adolescence* 345

13 N Gazis et al, n12, p365

14 N Gazis et al, n12, p364

15 N Gazis et al, n12, p364

16 D Taylor and E Usborne, 'When I know who "we" are, I can be "me": The Primary Role of Cultural Identity Clarity for Psychological Wellbeing' (2010) 47(1) *Transcultural Psychiatry* 93, p100-101

17 D Marie et al, 'Educational Achievement in Maori: The role of cultural identity and social disadvantage', (2008) 52(2) *Australian Journal of Education* 183, p186

18 D Marie et al, 'Ethnic Identification, social disadvantage, and mental health in adolescence/young adulthood: results of a 25 year longitudinal study' (2008) 42(4) *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* 293; and D Marie et al, 'Ethnic Identity and Criminal Offending in a New Zealand Birth Cohort' (2009) 42(3) *The Australian and New Zealand Journal of Criminology* 354

19 D Marie et al, 'The links between ethnic identification, cannabis use and dependence, and life outcomes in a New Zealand birth cohort' (2008) 42(9) *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* 780; D Marie et al, 'Educational Achievement in Maori: The role of cultural identity and social disadvantage', (2008) 52(2) *Australian Journal of Education* 183, p186; and D Marie et al, 'Ethnicity and pathways to welfare dependency', (2011) 7(2) *Policy Quarterly* 14

20 D Marie et al, 'Ethnic Identification, social disadvantage, and mental health in adolescence/young adulthood: results of a 25 year longitudinal study' (2008) 42(4) *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* 293, p299

21 E Ebbett and D Clarke, 'Maori Identification, Alcohol Behaviour and Mental Health' (2010) 8 *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction* 145

22 Ebbett and Clarke, n21, p154

23 Ebbett and Clarke, n21, p154

24 Ebbett and Clarke, n21, p155