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Aboriginal Social, Cultural and Historical Contexts

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OVERVIEW

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

INTRODUCTION—CONTEMPORARY CIRCUMSTANCE

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) estimated that in 2011¹ there were 548,370 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples living in Australia, approximately two and a half per cent of the total Australian population.¹ It is estimated that 90 per cent (493,533 people) were of Aboriginal origin, six per cent (32,902 people) of Torres Strait Islander origin and four per cent (21,934 people) identified as being of both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander origin.¹ These proportions have changed very little in the last 10 years.¹

In 2006, 32 per cent of Aboriginal people lived in major cities, with 21 per cent in inner regional areas and 22 per cent in outer regional areas, while nine per cent lived in remote areas and 15 per cent lived in very remote areas.² While the majority of Aboriginal people live in urban settings, the Aboriginal population is much more widely dispersed across the country than is the rest of the population, constituting a much higher proportion of the population in Northern Australia and more remote areas.² Updated figures for distribution of the Australian population were released by the ABS in September 2013.

ABORIGINAL CULTURE AND HISTORY

In recent decades there has been a strong renaissance of Aboriginal culture and forms of creative expression, and a reconnection and reclaiming of cultural life. Aboriginal culture has roots deep in the past. Australia's Aboriginal cultural traditions have a history and continuity unrivalled in the world.

Far from signifying the end of Aboriginal traditions, new forms of adaptation are bringing new vitality to older cultural themes and values that need to be addressed. Contemporary Aboriginal Australia presents new challenges, issues and options for reconciliation. Aboriginal people have been in Australia for between 50,000 and 120,000 years. They were a hunter-gatherer people who had adapted well to the environment. There were between 300,000 to 950,000 Aboriginal people living in Australia when the British arrived in 1788.³ At that time there were approximately 260 distinct language groups and 500 dialects.

Aboriginal people lived in small family groups and were semi-nomadic, with each family group living in a defined territory, systematically moving across a defined area following seasonal changes. Groups had their own distinct history and culture. At certain times, family groups would come together for social, ceremonial and trade purposes. It is estimated that up to 500 people gathered at the one time. Membership within each family or language group was based on birthright, shared language, and cultural obligations and responsibilities. Relationships within groups predetermined categories of responsibilities and obligations to the group and to family. Aboriginal people built semi-permanent dwellings; as a nomadic society emphasis was on relationships to family, group and country rather than the development of an agrarian society. Being semi-nomadic meant that Aboriginal people were also relatively non-materialistic. Greater emphasis was placed on the social, religious and spiritual activities. The environment was controlled by spiritual rather than physical means and religion was deeply tied to country.^{4,5}

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

We are part of the Dreaming. We have been in the Dreaming for a long time before we are born on this earth and we will return to this vast landscape at the end of our days. It provides for us during our time on earth, a place to heal, to restore purpose and hope, and to continue our destiny.^{6(p414)}

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

Kinship Systems

Complex and sophisticated kinship systems placed each person in relationship to every other person in the group and determined the behaviour of an individual to each person. The kinship system also took into account people external to the group according to their relationship. This practice became important during colonisation, when Aboriginal people attempted to bring outsiders into their kinship systems, particularly through relationships with women. Kinship systems determined exactly how one should behave towards every other person according to their relationship, so there were codes of behaviour between each person outlining their responsibilities and obligations towards others. For instance, a man had responsibilities to his nephews—he taught them hunting skills and led them through initiation. Kinship relations determined how food and gifts should be divided, who were one's teachers, who one could marry. In a sense, kinship systems placed each person securely in the group.⁴

People had defined roles according to age and gender. For example, a man's role involved skills in hunting as well as cultural obligations that were important to the cohesion of the group. Likewise, a woman also had an important role—she provided most of the food for the group, was responsible for early child rearing, and also had cultural obligations. Reciprocity and sharing were, and still are, important characteristics in Aboriginal society. Sharing along the lines of kinship and family remains an important cultural value.⁴

Descent, Country and Kinship

Descent is about belonging to a people and a place. This involves kinship—that is, relationships and obligations to other people and place or 'country'. A notion of 'country' is fundamental to Aboriginal identity. With the advent of Native Title and Land Rights, the notion of country has had a more urgent imperative, but it has always been of utmost importance from traditional times, throughout the processes of colonisation, and in contemporary times. Where one is from, and the people one belongs to, have always been and will always remain important. Demonstrating where one is from, what 'country' and group/people they belong to, is critical to any Indigenous person in their self-identity and when introducing oneself to other Indigenous people.⁷

There is agreement that Aboriginal identity is predicated upon descent and country of origin, about knowing and being a part of an Indigenous community and perceiving oneself as Indigenous. Descent does not necessarily pertain 'to genetics as inherited essential characteristics but to the historical connection that leads back to the land and which claims a particular history'.⁸

Connection to Country

The relationship Aboriginal people have to their country is a deep spiritual connection that is different from the relationship held by other Australians.⁹ Several texts articulate the spiritual feeling of country for Aboriginal people—for example, Paddy Roe in *Reading the country*,¹⁰ Sunfly Tjuperla in *Two men dreaming*,¹¹ David Mowaljarlai in *Yorro Yorro: Everything standing up alive*¹² and Bill Neidjie in *Story about feeling*.¹³ These texts capture the relationship with country in different ways. This could be described as a spiritual, bodily connectedness. As Neidjie puts it:

Listen carefully, careful and this spirit e [he] come in your feeling and you Will feel it ... anyone that, I feel it ... my body same as you. I am telling you this because the land for us never change round. Places for us, Earth for us, star, moon, tree, animal. No-matter what sort of animal, Bird snake ... all that animal like us. Our friend that.^{13(p182)}

The need to be able to describe relationships to land in different ways has been taken up by Moreton-Robinson.¹⁴ Here, Indigenous relationships with land are described as forming an ‘ontological belonging’. Indigenous people’s spiritual beliefs are based on ancient systems that tie one into the land, to other members of the group, and to all things of nature. This relationship with the country means that there is an incommensurable difference between sense of self, home and belonging to place. ‘Our ontological relationship to land, the ways that country is constitutive of us, and therefore the inalienable nature of our relation to land, marks a radical, indeed incommensurable, difference between us and the non-Indigenous.’^{14(p31)} Most Aboriginal people living away from their homelands, towns or cities express a desire to be buried in their country of origin. Serious legal disputes can erupt over where a deceased person is to be buried, should different ‘country’ groups feel that they have connections and claims to the person.

Being Aboriginal

Being part of an Aboriginal community is another facet of Aboriginal identity; other Aboriginal people know who you are and what family you belong to.¹⁵ The concept of a community has a political agenda for the state, whereby Aboriginal people were moved into sites such as reserves, missions and fringe camps as part of the processes of colonisation, dispossession and dispersal, and later for bureaucratic convenience. However, there still is a strong Aboriginal sense of what it means to belong to a community. Overall, Aboriginal society is structured around the community. Within or forming the community are strong kinship and family ties and networks.

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

The Aboriginal community can be interpreted as geographical, social and political. It places Aboriginal people as part of, but different from, the rest of Australian society. Aboriginal people identify themselves with the idea of being part of ‘community’; it gives us a sense of unity and strength. Sometimes issues based groups are perceived as a community—but that is not the case, it is a re-configuration of some parts of the existing community. I think of all of us together, as a political and cultural group. It includes everyone, no matter what ‘faction’ or local group they are affiliated with, or which part of our diversity they live in. It is [also] a national concept.^{15(p248)}

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

The definition of Aboriginal identity is generally accepted as a person who is a descendant of an Aboriginal inhabitant of Australia, who identifies as an Aboriginal person, and who is recognised as Aboriginal by members of the community where they live. Aboriginal identity is not about the colour of a person’s skin or the percentage of ‘blood’ they have. Many Aboriginal people have both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal ancestry but this does not make them any less Aboriginal. Aboriginality is about descent, culture, upbringing and life experiences.

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

towards creating new constructions of identity. Many Aboriginal authors have written about identity and discussed the lived experience of being an Aboriginal person.^{16,17}

This lived experience is the essential, perennial, excruciating, exhilarating, burdensome, volatile, dramatic source of prejudice and pride that sets us apart. It refers to that specialness in identity, the experiential existence of Aboriginal people accrued through the living of our daily lives, from 'womb to tombs' as it were, in which our individual and shared feelings, fears, desires, initiatives, hostilities, learning, actions, reactions, behaviours and relationships exist in a unique and specific attachment to us, individually and collectively, because and only because, we are Aboriginal people(s).^{16(p139)}

COLONISATION: RESISTANCE AND ADAPTATION

European settlement moved from Botany Bay outwards, as settlers claimed land for economic purposes. The pastoral industry escalated the expansion, bringing increases in British immigrants. Broome calls the rapidly moving frontier of the mid-1800s the most 'fantastic land grab which was never again to be equalled.'^{5(p37)} Many Aboriginal groups took livestock from European flocks. Reprisals followed, which escalated to full war over land because Europeans saw this as stealing. Aborigines fought with guerrilla tactics, destroying livestock, raiding shepherds and their flocks and homesteads. Small pitched battles were common. European retribution followed, mainly by the military but also by civilians, with massacres not only of warriors but also of women and children.¹⁸ In some parts of the country, the objective of the colonisation was to clear the lands of Aboriginal people to enable development of the land. Poisoned flour was distributed to Aboriginal people, and introduced diseases (sometimes deliberate) such as measles, chicken pox and influenza had dramatic effects on people who did not have the immunity to such viruses common to Europeans. Smallpox was particularly devastating—entire tribes were wiped out.¹⁹ Aboriginal fighting and warfare skills were small in scale because there had never been the need to engage in large-scale military tactics. The Europeans had guns, horses and organised military forces, and with this superior advantage they won the war for the land. Historical accounts of Aboriginal resistance to colonisation have only emerged in recent years.^{5,18} There has been a recent proliferation of significant texts that include detailed accounts of Aboriginal resistances and warfare.²⁰ Military analyses of frontier warfare between Aboriginal people and the British²¹ have been complemented by local histories with an Aboriginal perspective.²²

As their lands became increasingly occupied, Aboriginal people gravitated towards European settlements because their own food supplies were disrupted and because of the convenience of European foods, tobacco and implements. They attempted to use their own kinship systems to exchange labour for goods. However, the settlers perceived the exchanges differently. They saw labour as an individual exchange rather than a gift to be reciprocated by providing food for the whole group. Extremely high death rates and low birth rates led to an estimated Aboriginal population of just 75,000 people at the turn of the 20th century.⁵ Disruptions to traditional life led to many Aboriginal people becoming fringe dwellers to white society. They were perceived by the dominant society as hopeless remnants, clinging to what was left of their cultures and merely surviving. In some states, relatively high proportions of Aboriginal people survived the violence of initial colonial contact,²³ and there are many examples of Aboriginal groups across the country successfully adapting to colonisation and making new independent lives amid this immense change.^{5,24} However, Aboriginal people were then subjected to government policies that attempted over time to displace, 'protect', disperse, convert and eventually assimilate them.

Oppressive Legislation

At Federation, Australian states and territories had control and responsibility for Aboriginal Australians. Each state of the newly formed Federation framed and enacted suites of legislations and policies that were punitive and restrictive towards Aboriginal peoples. New South Wales established the Aboriginal Protection Board in 1883, granting legal power to the Board with the introduction of the *Aborigines Protection Act 1909*.²⁵ Other states passed similar legislation in an attempt to control Aboriginal people:²³ in South Australia the *1911 Aboriginal Protection Act*;²⁶ the *Cape Barren Island Act 1912* in Tasmania;²⁷ the Queensland *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897*;²⁷ the *Northern Territory Aboriginal Ordinance of 1911* and the *Welfare Ordinance 1953*.²⁷ Victoria introduced the *Aborigines Act 1869*, before Federation in 1901.²⁷ The intention underlying these punitive and restrictive laws was clear, for under the pretence of *for their own good*, the effects were a form of cultural genocide of Aboriginal Australians, through the loss of language, family dispersion and the cessation of cultural practices.²⁸

The Western Australian *Aborigines Act 1905*²⁷ has special connotations today because of its gross erosion of rights, resulting in forcible removal of children and internment of Aboriginal people in bleak reserves, to live in servitude and despair. It marked the start of a period of formidable surveillance and oppression of Aboriginal people. The WA *Aborigines Act 1905* made the Chief Protector of Aborigines the legal guardian of every Aboriginal person and of 'half-caste' children. At the local level, police constables or pastoralists were delegated powers as Protectors of Aborigines. 'Half-caste' children were to be removed from their families so that they could have 'opportunities for a better life', away from the contaminating influence of Aboriginal environments. Missions and reserves were established. The Chief Protector also had the power to remove any Aboriginal person from one reserve or district to another and to be kept there. Aboriginal people were forbidden from entering towns without permission and the cohabitation of Aboriginal women with non-Aboriginal men was prohibited. Local Protectors implemented these new regulations.

While the *Native Administration Act 1936* consolidated the absolute rights of the State over Aboriginal people, the 1905 Act is symbolic of Aboriginal oppression, just as the 1967 National Referendum, when Aboriginal rights were won back, is symbolic of emancipation.

This history demonstrates how racist beliefs became legislation. Aboriginal people were believed to be less than human, and legislation was used to control them and confine them away from 'the public'. According to Milnes, 'The pauperisation of Aboriginal peoples was sealed by legislation. The *Aborigines Act 1905* was not a protection for Aboriginal peoples, but allowed for an instrument of ruthless control'.^{29(p32)} Such legislation was finally repealed in 1967, but by then the damage was done. Very few Aboriginal people escaped the direct and indirect effects of the legislation that controlled and governed their lives.^{30,31}

State control of, and intervention in, the lives of Aboriginal people was extreme. Not one Aboriginal person was untouched by the legislation implemented across the country. Such legislation reflected the dominant society's perceptions of Aboriginal people and how they ought to be treated. These perceptions were underpinned by the influences of social Darwinism, where cultural groups or 'races' were seen to be at different stages of evolution, and within which Aboriginal people were thought to be primitive and childish. This period of colonisation profoundly affected the lives and self-perceptions of Aboriginal people. However, Aboriginal people and white supporters have continued to resist and struggle for justice since colonisation. The Aboriginal rights movement began in the 1920s, with the establishment of Aboriginal political organisations, including the Australian Aborigines League led by William Cooper, and the Aborigines Progressive Association led by William Ferguson.³² Over time, various Aboriginal political and support groups were established across the country.

The 1967 Commonwealth Referendum

The 1967 Commonwealth Referendum symbolises the granting of citizenship rights to Australian Aboriginal peoples. However, as well as striving towards political equality and self-determination, the quest for a cultural identity gained new significance.³³ Despite continual difficulties with racism and disadvantage, many Aboriginal people have written of the need to recover, regain and reconstruct identities, and to reject negative white stereotypes.

Although the conception of Aboriginal rights had changed significantly since the 1960s, the formal Commonwealth and state restrictions that had denied Aboriginal people meaningful status as citizens had started to dismantle before the 1967 referendum. Legal changes from that time reflected changing government attitudes towards Indigenous peoples. This period also saw a change from an emphasis on civil rights to one on Aboriginal rights, acknowledging that Aboriginal people possessed certain rights that did not pertain to other Australians. These changes involved:

- the prohibition on racial discrimination;
- land rights; and
- the facilitation of self-determination.³⁴

Around this time, key events such as the Gurindji people's walk-off from the Wave Hill cattle station in 1966 heralded the fight for land rights. Aboriginal activists gained national attention, leading public protests, rallies and political agitation.³⁵ The 1960s and 1970s saw significant achievements that have become historical moments in the struggle for Aboriginal rights. These include:

- the establishment of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in Canberra;
- the creation of the Aboriginal flag by Harold Thomas in 1971; and
- the beginning of civil rights and land rights legislation.

Aboriginal people in Australia are still grappling with the effects of colonisation. Thirty years ago, Kevin Gilbert, in *Living Black*, stated that as invasion occurred, Aboriginal people began to sicken physically and psychologically:

[T]hey were hit by the full blight of an alien way of thinking. They were hit by the intolerance and uncomprehending barbarism of a people intent only on progress in material terms, a people who never credited that there could be cathedrals of the spirit as well as stone. Their view of Aborigines as the most miserable people on earth was seared into Aboriginal thinking because they now controlled the provisions that allowed blacks to continue to exist at all. Independence from them was not possible ... It is my thesis that Aboriginal Australia underwent a rape of the soul so profound that the blight continues in the minds of most blacks today. It is this psychological blight, more than anything else, that causes the conditions that we see on the reserves and missions. And it is repeated down the generations.^{36(p2)}

Aboriginal intellectuals have been writing about oppression for some time. Gilbert in his book had particularly identified cultural racism, internalised racism and intergenerational trauma as the psychological issues for Aboriginal people. These accounts have been silenced until recent times. Many of the chapters in this book reaffirm the 'transgenerational, psychological blight' identified by Gilbert that still impacts upon the lives of many Aboriginal people.

Aboriginal people were hunter-gathering people who lived in close connection to their country. The world, the earth and the waters, the flora and fauna and other humans were understood and spiritually connected. Colonisation brought dramatic change and the destruction of

Aboriginal people and their cultures. However, a process of rapid adaptation was derailed with the introduction of oppressive legislation across all states and territories, stripping people of their human rights, and a period of absolute state control was put in motion. People were dispersed into government reserves and missions and the effects of this was a form of cultural genocide of Aboriginal Australians through the loss of language, family dispersion and the cessation of cultural practices. Throughout these times, Aboriginal people have continually resisted invasion and oppression. An ongoing struggle for equality and Aboriginal rights is part of Aboriginal history. Aboriginal people have retained their cultures and these have been strengthened in recent times.

TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER CULTURE AND HISTORY

Introduction

The following section provides a brief overview of Torres Strait Islander culture and history—a history that is distinctive yet inseparable from the broader Aboriginal story.

The Torres Strait is the seaway between Cape York and Papua New Guinea, and is the only part of Australia that shares an international border with another country. The Torres Strait bears the name of the Spanish explorer Luis Vaez de Torres, who sailed through the area en route to the Philippines in 1606. Voyages by British explorers Cook, Bligh, Flinders and others charted the channels through Torres Strait in the late 1700s–early 1800s.

From 1800 to 1850, only a few ships stopped in Torres Strait to take on water, to trade with Islanders, or to carry out repairs; many were also wrecked on the numerous reefs. The Torres Strait remains an important shipping route and a strategically important region of the Australian coastline.

There are approximately 270 islands in the Torres Strait, remnants of the Sahul Shelf, a now submerged land-bridge that linked the Australian mainland and Papua New Guinea between 80,000 and 9,000 years ago.³⁷ Torres Strait Islanders live permanently in 20 communities on 17 of the islands, as well as in locations in every Australian state. Two communities, Seisia and Bamaga, sit on the Queensland coast as part of the Northern Peninsula Area (NPA). At 30 June 2006, the estimated resident Torres Strait Islander population was 54,836 people, or 0.3 per cent of the total Australian population.³⁸ Torres Strait Islander people comprise 10 per cent of the total Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population nationally. Queensland has the highest population of people identifying as Torres Strait Islanders, followed by NSW and Victoria.²

A Minority Within a Minority?

Torres Strait Islander culture has a unique identity and associated territorial claim, although their culture and people are often conflated with Aboriginal people.^{39,40} Torres Strait Islanders are not mainland Aboriginal people who inhabit the Torres Strait.⁴¹ The Torres Strait Regional Authority notes that the traditional people of Torres Strait are of Melanesian origin and speak two distinct languages.⁴² In the Eastern Islands (Erub, Mer and Ugar) the traditional language is Meriam Mir, while the Western and Central Island groups speak either Kala Lagaw Ya or Kala Kawa Ya, which are dialects of the same language. Another widely used language is referred to as Torres Strait Kriol.³⁸ Torres Strait English, a regional version of Standard Australian English, is also spoken by Islanders in the Strait and on mainland Australia.⁴¹ The array of languages and their variants means that many Islanders are multilingual and, while Standard English may be included in this repertoire, it is advisable to assess the extent to which it is understood and practised if that is to be the language of choice in any working relationship.⁴³

History

Early historical accounts point to the diversity of Islander people, reflecting both the differing conditions of the various island locations, and the social and spiritual material incorporated by them. Competition for resources would sometimes override long-standing trade and familial ties between islands, producing relationships that were at times cordial and at other times tense.⁴⁴ Torres Strait Islanders have close contact with both Papua New Guinean communities to the north and with mainland Aboriginal communities around Cape York Peninsula.⁴⁴ This might be characterised as a predominantly separate yet neighbourly relationship between Torres Strait Islanders and their neighbours to the north and south.

The economy of the Torres Strait was based on subsistence agriculture and fishing. An established communal and village life existed, revolving around hunting, fishing, gardening and trading. Inter-island trading was of food, weapons and artefacts and represented a key aspect of intergroup relationships.⁴⁰ Some islands were better able to support gardening and crops and, for others, fishing provided the main food source. Other islands, due to their size and vegetation, provided wildlife and game. Thus Islanders were, and continue to be, gardeners, fishers and hunters, as well as warriors. They were also expert sailors and navigators, with reference to this important traditional and contemporary skill of using the stars for navigation, symbolised in the flag of the Torres Strait.

Much of the early recorded history between Europeans and Islanders suggests that the interaction was punctuated by attacks and reprisals.⁴⁵ Mosby posits that Europeans' attitudes towards Islander territory and custom reflected their 'masters of the situation' mentality, disregarding Islander ways. Today, many resources aimed at facilitating good working relationships with Torres Strait Islanders focus on the need for visitors to respect *Ilan Pasin* and Islander ways of working, rather than assume certain privileges or levels of access.^{40,46-48} See also Chapter 15 (Dudgeon and Ugle) on communication and engagement.

The Coming of the Light

While the Strait was seen as a strategic waterway in terms of trade and natural resources, the population was also seen as valuable to the efforts of Christian missionaries, in particular the London Missionary Society which targeted Torres Strait Islanders and other groups in the area for conversion to Christianity.⁴⁹ Their arrival at Darnley Island on 1 July 1871 has become known as the 'Coming of the Light' whereby the light of Christ was brought into the 'heathen' darkness of the Torres Strait.⁴⁵

There are mixed opinions about the introduction of Christian religion and other influences to the Straits. While the conduct of anthropological, psychological and other research activities such as the Cambridge expedition (led by Haddon, 1912) (including the collection and removal of artefacts) were carried out as scientific imperatives of the time, recently authors suggest this period helped define the prevailing Islanders as 'souls needing to be rescued'.^{49(p15)} While there were many disadvantages of missionary influences, such as the destruction of traditional cultural practices, responses to its encroachment varied.⁵⁰

From the mid-19th century onwards, Torres Strait Islanders experienced momentous change from their increasing contact with Europeans. The emerging maritime industries of fishing, pearling and beche-de-mer (sea slug) collection were attractions. Islanders adjusted to the new lifestyle being introduced to the region through maritime industries, religion and government administration. The development of trade and industries also brought an influx of workers whose cultural diversity has helped shape Islander culture and identity.

In 1879, the Torres Strait was annexed and as such was considered part of Queensland when the islands became Crown land. At Federation, Islanders became Australian citizens although, like mainland Aboriginal people, they experienced restricted access to many of the rights their fellow Australians took for granted.⁴¹

Indeed, there are numerous examples of Torres Strait Islander peoples' endeavours and achievements, as well as symbols of solidarity and unity.⁴¹ Some of these have had repercussions that extend beyond the Islanders involved, such as the case of Mabo. This has affected the very foundations of the nation's story. The historical significance of the High Court decision in the case of *Mabo and Others v the State of Queensland* lay in the recognition, for the first time, of the common law rights and interests of Indigenous people in their lands according to their traditions, law and customs. This in effect exposed the legal fiction of terra nullius—that Australia was an empty land belonging to no-one. The repercussions of this fundamental change to how the early story of the Australian nation was told continues to be felt not only in the subsequent claims to Native Title that have ensued, but also in how prior Aboriginal occupation and management of the land challenges the previously competing claim of their non-relationship to it. Actions pursued by Islanders have had repercussions beyond the Torres Strait.

While Torres Strait Islander history and culture is characterised in many ways by cultural adaptation and migration, the essence and origins of Islander identity—the psychological and the geographical—are still fought for, defended and celebrated with pride today.⁴¹ Into the future, along with an increasing awareness of the circumstances of Torres Strait Islanders based on conduct respecting Islander needs and aspirations, it is likely that the label of 'voiceless minority' will become a less accurate description of Torres Strait Islanders.^{46,47,49}

SIGNIFICANT CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

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

THE STOLEN GENERATIONS

Colonisation has had many negative consequences. One of the most profound has been the removal of Aboriginal children from their families. Most Aboriginal families have experienced removal of children or displacement of entire families into missions, reserves or other institutions. As many as one-in-ten Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were forcibly removed from their families and communities in the first half of the 20th century. Various reports such as *Bringing Them Home* have shown that in certain regions at different times the figure may have been much more. In that time, not many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families escaped the effects of forcible removal, and most families have been affected over one or more generations.³⁰ Drawing on her research in the Northern Territory, McGrath described these policies for the removal of children as 'the ultimate racist act'.⁵¹ Her statement can be generalised to the rest of Australia. (See Chapter 29, Peeters and colleagues, for a comprehensive discussion of the impacts of colonisation on the Stolen Generations.) Haebich describes the removal of children as a process stretching from colonisation to the present.⁵² This process and its consequences are part of Aboriginal identity and have wide-ranging implications that are discussed in several chapters in the book.

Forcible removals of children and their subsequent effects have been, and still are, a profound part of the Australian Aboriginal story. The removal of children of 'part-Aboriginal' descent from families and communities to give them an opportunity to assimilate into the white world, and later for reasons that included welfare of the children, was common practice from the beginning of the 20th century even until the 1980s. As well as internment children, in many instances they were housed in various institutions according to the predominance of white blood they were thought to have. Sister Kate's Home in Perth is an example of children being referred to a home on the basis of being light-coloured.⁵³ This practice was widespread in

the global colonisation project. Sissons (2005) states that, in settler nations such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the USA, the practice of removing Aboriginal children from families and communities was not only driven by an aim of assimilation, but also aimed to achieve the disintegration of Aboriginal communities, and to transform the relationship between Aboriginal people and their environment.⁵⁴

The transgenerational effects of the policies of forced removal of Aboriginal children on Aboriginal emotional and social wellbeing are profound and enduring, and are discussed in Chapter 29 (Peeters and colleagues) and Chapter 17 (Atkinson and colleagues).

HEALTH AND SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL WELLBEING

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are the most disadvantaged group in Australia.⁵⁵ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and adults:

- experience poorer health outcomes than others;
- have twice the mortality rates for Aboriginal children (less than five years of age) and adults are twice that of non-Aboriginal people;
- have a shorter life expectancy than others (11.5 years less for males and 10 years less for females).

In mental health and substance abuse:

- Aboriginal people report experiencing psychological distress at two and a half times the rate of other people;
- Aboriginal people are hospitalised for mental health and behavioural disorders at around 1.7 times the rate of non-Aboriginal people;
- Aboriginal people are hospitalised for non-fatal self-harm at two and a half times the rate of others;
- Suicide death rates for Aboriginal people are twice that of other people;
- Hospitalisation rates for alcohol related conditions for Aboriginal people are two and a half times those of other people;
- 71 per cent of Aboriginal homicides involved both the victim and offender having consumed alcohol as the time of the offence.

In education and employment:

- Only 50 per cent of Aboriginal students completed year 12—30 per cent less than other students;
- Only 25 per cent of Aboriginal students in 2008 received a year 12 certificate;
- The Aboriginal employment rate remains 20 per cent lower than for other Australians;
- The average Aboriginal income is lower than others.

In the justice system:

- The rate of child protection notifications are rising faster for Aboriginal people than for others;
- Homicide rates are six times higher for Aboriginal people;
- Hospitalisation rates for injuries caused by assault are much higher for Aboriginal people (seven times as high for men and 31 times as high for women);
- Aboriginal people experience higher rates of family violence, particularly in remote areas where family violence is 36 times higher;

- Both Aboriginal men and women experience more than double the victimisation rates of others;
- Aboriginal people were imprisoned at 14 times the rate for other Australians, with imprisonment rate increasing by 59 per cent for Aboriginal women and 35 per cent for Aboriginal men between 2000 and 2010;
- Aboriginal juveniles were detained at 23 times the rate for non-Aboriginal juveniles in 2009.⁵⁶

The *Health and Welfare of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples'* report⁵⁸ offers several insights into issues relating to Torres Strait Islander social and emotional wellbeing, including the prevalence and impact of stress and discrimination. According to the *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage Key Indicators* report from 2011,⁵⁵ in 2008:

- The proportion of Torres Strait Islander people aged 18 years and over who had completed year 12 or post-secondary education (44 per cent) was higher than for Aboriginal people (34 per cent), but much lower than for non-Aboriginal people (62 per cent);
- The proportion of Torres Strait Islander people who were employed (65 per cent) was higher than Aboriginal people (56 per cent), but lower than for non-Aboriginal people (78 per cent);
- The proportions of Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal people who lived in a home owned by a member of the household (29 per cent) were much lower than for non-Aboriginal people (65 per cent);
- There was no statistically significant difference between the individual median weekly income for Torres Strait Islander people (\$550) and non-Aboriginal people (\$608), but incomes for Aboriginal people were lower (\$400).

While Torres Strait Islander people have their own distinctive culture, they share many of the same disadvantages as Aboriginal people.⁵⁷ The *Ways Forward Report* (1995) reported that Torres Strait Islander people:

- suffered the same disadvantages and racism as Aboriginal people;
- experienced lack of recognition of being a separate and unique cultural group;
- experienced lack of appropriate representation;
- experienced exclusion and hostility from Aboriginal groups in accessing services; and ignorance of their culture from mainstream Australia.⁵⁶

Further the report recommended that there was a need for:

- research into Torres Strait Islander mental health;
- recognition of Torres Strait Islanders as a distinct cultural group; and
- recognition of their healing methods and healers.⁵⁶

This list of impoverishment and disadvantage in an otherwise wealthy nation is shameful and unacceptable. The situation has many causes and no easy solutions, but it is clear that decades of colonial exploitation and a prolonged systematic attempt to destroy Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and culture lie at the core of the causes. As noted in the *Overcoming Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Disadvantage Report* (2009), racism at individual and institutional levels continues to reproduce the impoverishment and disadvantage experienced by most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.⁵⁵

RACISM

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

Popular understandings of racism portray it as an overt rejection of other groups and their members, as hostile and malevolent, as underpinned by a belief in the superiority of one's own group over others, and as a feature of individuals. These aspects certainly characterise racism, but there is much more to racism that is omitted from this popular view. Jones (1997) proposed that contemporary racism should be considered at three different levels: the individual, institutional and cultural. These are distinguished by the interactions among psychological, behavioural, institutional, structural and cultural dynamics in the processes of racialised beliefs and practices.⁵⁹ While these occur interactively and simultaneously, they may manifest differently as society changes.

While debate about 'race' as a scientific concept has waxed and waned over the last few decades,⁶⁰ the term is also used as a way of organising our thinking about people and the groups they belong to.⁶¹ Thus, race can be seen to be socially defined, sometimes on the basis of physical criteria. Race has been used to separate groups defined by physical and cultural difference and to assign supposed superiority and inferiority to members of those groups. Power and control were the modes by which racial definitions have been imposed to maintain and enforce the view that whites were inherently superior and correct and that blacks were inherently inferior and wrong. Race as a 'common-sense' construct persists because it 'has meaning for us in everyday life because it provides a good way to value our own group over others; to encapsulate social conflicts, and rationalise our way of handling it; and to talk about group differences, values, and social hierarchy'.^{59(p364)}

While individual people are the agents of racism, it is important to appreciate how racism operates at a cultural and an institutional level.⁵⁹ Cultural racism is a part of the atmosphere of a society through tacit, assumed ways of doing things. Culture comprises all the ideas, values, beliefs and shared understandings that together allow members of a society to interact with one another in recognised and accepted customs. It refers to what is taken for granted. Cultural racism comprises the cumulative effects of a racist worldview, based on belief in essential racial differences that favour the dominant racial group over others.^{59(p472)} These effects are suffused throughout the culture via institutional structures, ideological beliefs, and personal everyday actions of people in the culture, and these effects are passed on from generation to generation.⁶²

One does not have to look far in contemporary Australia to find evidence of cultural racism. The public chatter in taxicabs, pubs, football matches and barbecues is replete with evidence of assumed essential racial differences, and of victim-blaming attributions for poor health, educational and employment outcomes and misconceptions about 'government hand-outs' and 'reverse racism'. Whereas cultural racism refers to the established 'common sense' that is shared by most or all members of a society, institutional racism refers more specifically to the practices and structures of a society's institutions or organisations. According to Jones they are:

those established laws, customs, and practices which systematically reflect and produce racial inequities in American [or in our case Australian] society. If racist consequences accrue to institutional laws, customs, or practices, the institution is racist whether or not the individuals maintaining those practices have racist intentions. Institutional racism can be either overt or covert ... and either intentional or unintentional.^{59(p438)}

An institution can engage in racist practices without any of its members being individually racist. This situation can have damaging health and educational outcomes affecting Aboriginal people. The *de jure* and *de facto* rules of an institution, the aggregation of individual behaviours,

and institutional culture can all achieve racist outcomes in the absence of a deliberate intention to do so by any individual within the institution.

Individual racism is the form of racism most easily recognised by members of Western culture. A racist individual believes that black people as a group (or other human groups defined by essential racial characteristics) are inferior to whites because of physical (i.e. genotypical and phenotypical) traits. He or she further believes that these physical traits determine social behaviour and moral or intellectual qualities, and ultimately presumes that this inferiority is a legitimate basis for that group's inferior social treatment. An important consideration is that all judgments of superiority are based on the corresponding traits of white people as norms of comparison.^{59(p417)} It is also possible for individuals to suffer from internalised racism which can both compromise their own sense of self-worth as well as leading to forms of racism such as lateral violence.^{17,63-65}

Often people think that individual racism must be overt and blatant; that if it's not obvious then it's not racism. If only that were the case! Individual racism is more often than not subtle and covert, dressed in a veneer of tolerance and acceptance, but no less invidious in its consequences. Australian research has supported the conclusion from research in North America and Europe that, in the last 50 years or so, racism has progressively become less blatant and overt, and more subtle and covert.⁶⁶⁻⁶⁸ Subtle racism can be just as damaging as blatant racism for people who are the targets of racism—and conceivably it could be more damaging in that it is harder for such people to attribute negative outcomes to racism, and harder to avoid attributing such outcomes to qualities about themselves.⁶⁹⁻⁷¹ Subtle racism is also much harder to change, as it is rarely recognised as racism, by the perpetrator and/or by the wider community.

Institutionalised racism is different from the repressive laws of the past that served overtly to oppress marginalised peoples. For Aboriginal people in Australia there is ample evidence of active oppression in past government legislation and practices that controlled people's lives. In contemporary times, however, institutionalised racism persists in the institutions and systems that exclude and discriminate against Aboriginal people. In contemporary times, society's institutions have the power to develop, sustain and enforce specific racialised views of people. The way that a society's economic, justice, educational and health care systems are applied can disadvantage certain groups of people when these systems do not cater for, or consider the cultural values or marginalisation of, members of those groups and thereby become forms of institutionalised racism. Institutionalised racism is embedded in these systems. In the Australian context, the high rates of unemployment, lower average income, high rates of arrest and imprisonment, of poor health, low education and low life expectancy are, in part, indicators of the consequences of entrenched institutionalised racism.⁶⁴

The effects of racism on oppressed groups include responses such as low self-esteem, mistrust of the dominant culture, internalised racism, and denial. However, members of minority groups often, not always, have more positive self-conceptions.^{59,72} Jones proposed that, whether one is conscious of racism or not, most black people, particularly those working in mixed-group or white settings, have to cope with everyday racism. He cited three propositions within which people of colour describe the effects of lived racism that are relevant to Aboriginal people. First, racism in contemporary society is a lived experience; it is real and happens in many ways. Second, racism not only hurts at the time it happens but has a cumulative effect. It becomes part of the narrative of the community in an 'us and them' perspective. Racism at different levels is seen as a natural part of life. Third, repeated experiences of racism affect a person's behaviour and understanding of life; one's life expectations, perspectives of oneself and one's groups and the dominant group, and many ways of coping with racism contribute to the psychological reality of people of colour. Living with racism becomes a central and defining element in the psychology of marginalised people and/or people of colour. Even for those who have 'made it' and have overcome obstacles, different forms of racism emerge that need to be confronted.⁷³

We need to consider the different and interacting elements of how people are oppressed because of their racial background, in the past and in contemporary times. European ethnocentrism was an inextricable part of the colonising project; the belief that all things Western were superior and all things Aboriginal were inferior was initially imposed by military might and enshrined in laws specifically legislated to control the lives of Aboriginal people.³⁴ In turn, it has had a central influence on Aboriginal Australians' self-perceptions and, in one sense, a cultural renaissance is absolutely necessary for oppressed people to reclaim a sense of pride, dignity and self-worth as well as validating their own cultural histories and values.

Despite the considerable changes in Australian society, racism is still a reality for members of marginalised groups. Racism is invasive, pervasive and unrelenting. Racism imposes itself on daily living for people of colour. 'Race is about everything—historical, political, personal—and race is about nothing—a construct, an invention that has changed dramatically over time and historical circumstance ... race has been and continues to be, encoded in all our lives.'^{74(pix)}

Racism in Australia

Historical reviews of research trends suggest that prevalence rates of overtly racist views have steadily declined, but research at any time over the last six decades, including today, shows community views that could at best be described as strongly ambivalent.⁶⁸ Although relatively little research has focused on attitudes towards, and beliefs about, Aboriginal Australians, there is evidence of continued misconceptions that portray Aboriginal peoples as being welfare dependent, more likely to drink alcohol and as recipients of 'government handouts'.^{75,76} Moreover, about 13 per cent of non-Aboriginal respondents agree that 'non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians are superior to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians'.⁷⁷ Among 5,000 respondents in a 2001 NSW/Qld survey, 28 per cent expressed concern about a close relative marrying an Aboriginal person. This figure was 25 per cent in a similar survey of 4,000 Victorians in 2006. However, in the 2008 and 2010 Reconciliation Barometers, only 11 per cent and 13 per cent of non-Aboriginal Australians had concerns with their child marrying an Aboriginal person.⁷⁷ There has also been a range of qualitative research examining lateral violence in Aboriginal communities.⁷⁸⁻⁸⁰

Across a number of studies, the prevalence of self-reported racism among Aboriginal participants varies from 16 per cent to 97 per cent. This variation is due to a number of factors common to survey research, including the number of questions asked about racism, the terminology used, areas where the survey was administered, and characteristics of Aboriginal people responding to these surveys. Of the 1,073 children aged between 12 and 17 years in the 2001–02 Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey (WAACHS), 22 per cent reported experiencing racism (defined as being treated badly or refused service due to being Aboriginal) in the past six months.⁸¹ A 2001 survey found that about 30 per cent of Aboriginal peoples reported discrimination due to ethnic origin⁸² while a 2003 survey found that 40 per cent of Aboriginal respondents reported being physically or emotionally upset as a result of treatment based on their race.⁸³ Of the 9,400 Aboriginal respondents in the 2002–03 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey, 18 per cent reported experiencing discrimination as a personal stressor in the past 12 months.⁸⁴ About 16 per cent of the 5,757 Aboriginal adults in the 2004–05 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey who were asked about their experiences of racism felt they had been treated badly because they were Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander in the past year⁸⁵ while 32 per cent of 345 respondents in a 2006–08 survey reported experiences of racism.⁸⁶ Of more than 10,000 respondents in the 2008 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS), 27 per cent reported racism experiences⁸⁷ while almost all (97 per cent) of 755 Aboriginal respondents in the Localities Embracing and Accepting Diversity (LEAD) project reported at least one experience of racism in the past year.⁸⁸ This LEAD survey also revealed that nearly three-quarters of participants anticipated people saying or doing something racist sometimes, often or very often and nearly

two-thirds sometimes, often or very often tried to avoid specific situations because of racism. Almost 70 per cent of respondents reported sometimes, often or very often worrying about racism.⁸⁸

Although the prevalence of systemic racism is more difficult to establish, a range of studies highlight the widespread nature of such racism in domains such as national politics,⁸⁹ media,⁹⁰ education,^{91,92} employment,⁹³ the welfare system,⁹⁴ the provision of public housing,⁹⁵ in the legal/criminal justice systems.⁹⁶ For example, evidence from Victoria indicates that, when apprehended by police, Aboriginal youth are two to three times more likely to be arrested and charged with an offence than non-Aboriginal youth.^{97,98} Several chapters help to understand some of the issues surrounding the over representation of Aboriginal people in the criminal justice system—see, for example, Chapter 10 (Heffernan and colleagues); Chapter 21 (Milroy); and Chapter 22 (Walker and colleagues).

CONCLUSION

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

REFLECTIVE EXERCISES

1. This history and social issues chapter has been purposely written from a particular perspective. Is this different from other histories you have read about Australia? What are those differences and why do you think the authors choose to present Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in the way that they have?
2. From reading this chapter, what do you think are the main differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people?
3. What are the main characteristics of Aboriginal people's concepts about identity and perceptions about community?
4. The Stolen Generations is a topical issue in Australia now. Why is this so and why didn't the matter receive such attention before?
5. What approaches could be used to address racism against Aboriginal people in Australia? How would these approaches differ for individual vs. institutional vs. cultural racism?
6. Has this chapter made you re-examine some of your own experiences, perhaps as a target of racism, perhaps as a perpetrator, or perhaps as a bystander? When you mentally replay those experiences, what would you do differently, and why?

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