'What they gonna do to hear the outstation people?': Inequality of voice in remote Indigenous Australia

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Introduction

When Australian governments talk about Indigenous inequality they provide statistical differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians against Council of Australian Government (COAG) development targets. Policy is pitched around closing these gaps, with the current emphasis on getting children into school and people into work. Missing in policy analysis and delivery of services to remote Indigenous Australians, however, is consideration of the inequality of voice. In this vacuum, policy has sought to control Indigenous choices and coerce their participation in the programs meant to benefit them.

This paper argues that without a voice, Indigenous peoples lack the capability to participate in discourse about what is important for their development. Without voice it is impossible for Indigenous peoples to influence decisions about the design and delivery of development opportunities. While the importance of local voices is recognised in international development efforts through support for deliberative democracy and participatory development approaches, there is scant attention to this critical capability in the Australian Indigenous policy domain.

The study context

This paper elaborates the conditions for voice from the perspectives of a group of Western Aranda people living in Ntaria and on nearby outstations. Ntaria is a small Aboriginal township, originally established as a Lutheran Mission settlement, lying 125 kilometres southwest of Alice Springs in the remote Central Australian Desert. Established during the 1970s as part of the return to country movement, the Western Aranda outstations are small kin-based settlements, which use Ntaria as their service hub. Altogether the Indigenous population for the area is approximately 700 people.

The paper draws first from an ethnographic study. This was undertaken between 2007 and 2009 during the early years of the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER), which is more commonly known as the Northern Territory Intervention (Kennedy 2013). The study's findings have since underpinned the implementation of a community-driven program delivered in Ntaria since early 2014. The researcher involved in the original study is currently managing this initiative. Reflecting on how the study's findings have been implemented in practice provides insights into how Indigenous capability for voice can be fostered in remote settings.

The Intervention was announced in June 2007, following the release of the 'Little Children are Sacred' report (Wild and Anderson 2007). At that time Prime Minister John Howard's Liberal National Government exercised its powers over the Northern Territory and declared a national emergency in remote Aboriginal communities (Brough 2007). Stating it would act against high levels of dysfunction and child abuse, the Federal Government rapidly passed five bills. This package of legislation representing the most significant changes to Indigenous policy in over 30 years.

Among other measures, the reforms included the compulsory acquisition and effective takeover of Aboriginal townships on Aboriginal land; the banning of alcohol and pornography; the management of half of all Centrelink payments to Aboriginal clients, and the dismantling of the Community Development and Employment Programme. A barrage of troops, doctors and bureaucrats suddenly arrived in remote Northern Territory communities to save Aboriginal peoples from

Voice, choice and collectivity

themselves. Seeking to understand the notion of Indigenous engagement the Kennedy study made extensive use of Western Aranda outstation family narratives. These detailed people's engagement with the reforms as they unfolded and as told from a Western Aranda experience of events.

While the troops have gone the measures introduced in 2007 remain, continued under the Closing the Gap and Stronger Futures policies of the incoming Labor Governments and the current Liberal National Government's Indigenous Advancement Strategy. The Federal Government's most recent Closing the Gap report indicates that while the past decade has seen progress against some indicators such as infant mortality, gains in employment and school attendance rates have stalled (Commonwealth of Australia 2016).

Understanding how culture shapes Indigenous voice

Australia prides itself as a democratic nation. Most Australians assume all citizens share the freedom to speak out. The Western Aranda study found that during the Intervention, however, Indigenous voices were silenced. Western Aranda people spoke again and again about their deep despair, anger and frustration at not being heard and their inability to have a voice in the events taking place under the Intervention. The study showed that the absence of voice is deeply embedded as a feature of remote Indigenous lives. The study also found that Indigenous voices are muted and silenced by our failure to understand and accommodate the conditions that permit remote peoples to have a real say in deliberations.

While successive Australian governments have spoken of closing gaps and expanding Indigenous capabilities, the capability for voice and the conditions that give rise to it continue to be largely ignored. If this is to change, what do Indigenous people say needs to happen? Under what circumstances might they have a voice through which to decide on and influence the development opportunities the Australian government sees as critical to their futures?

In the Western Aranda study people spoke to four key factors that influenced their engagement with the Intervention. First was whether external initiatives reflected core Western Aranda values and aspirations for their futures. Second was their ability to comprehend the aim and scope of the reforms. Third was the influence of relational considerations on their freedom to speak and articulate their position in the public domain. Fourth was whether decision-making processes used by the state were culturally appropriate.

Indigenous aspirations and voice

As the Intervention unfolded Western Aranda people consistently viewed the reforms through the lens of how the changes impacted on their relationship with country and with each other. Perspectives on the impact of the reforms differed. But at the heart of Western Aranda concerns were the questions: Would their children be able to continue to exist as a Western Aranda person? Would they be able to continue to pursue life connected to their country and

kinship groups? Central to Western Aranda social life and identity, Kennedy's study found these core values influenced Western Aranda choices and positions about their engagement in the reforms. The reforms were supported if they were assessed as enabling families to feel well, to be well, and act well as a Western Aranda person. People rejected the changes when they believed the reforms acted against these interests.

Nobel Prize winning economist and mathematician Amartya Sen provides insights to this critical link between people's values and development (Sen 1999). His capability approach situates wellbeing in an individual's freedom to pursue valued ways of being. Freedom is derived from capability opportunities. These are the opportunities available to a person to generate outcomes that are valued by them. The aim of development should therefore be the expansion of freedoms through provision of opportunities, which promote the development of capabilities enabling people to pursue valued ways of being. Further, Sen sees culture as central in the formation and evolution of individual and communal values. Culture shapes individual choices about how the ends and means of social and economic policy arrangements are viewed (Sen 2004).

In Indigenous policy, the Australian government focuses on capability opportunities such as work, education or training. It ignores, however, the link between these capabilities and the ways of being valued by Indigenous peoples. In doing so policy effectively ignores those values and aspirations giving development opportunities meaning to Indigenous peoples.

Implicit in Sen's capability approach is voice (Alkire 2010). Voice has a direct link to inequality. Without voice it is impossible to understand the values, social functioning and local circumstances driving people's choices. The ability to express oneself is therefore essential to the capacity to influence the environment within which capability opportunities are designed and delivered.

Voice in the context of language differences

Perhaps visitors to remote Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory should all carry passports and have them stamped when they enter Aboriginal lands. This would be a reminder they are in a different country, where English is not the first language and different norms govern the conduct of social relationships. This doesn't happen of course. As a consequence visitors often fail to notice the impact language and culture have on people's capability for voice. When Indigenous people are silenced they cannot be heard. They subsequently struggle to have their choices understood.

For most Western Aranda people, English is a second, third or fourth language. Despite this, most visitors to Ntaria during the Intervention assumed English was understood; that conceptual understandings were shared; that a nod of a head signified agreement. Meetings were peppered with acronyms or terms like lease, trauma, intervention, or children's development for which there is no Western Aranda equivalent. Yet an understanding of these concepts sat at the heart of agreements and programs that Indigenous peoples were expected to adhere to (Kennedy and Seemann

2012). Although English literacy and comprehension is often poor, almost every fact sheet, letter or verbal communication used by governments and their visiting staff during the Intervention employed complex language, used small fonts, and assumed English proficiency.

During the period of the study interpreters were rarely used. On the very few occasions when the need for an interpreter was thought necessary, someone considered to have good grasp of English was pulled in to help. On only one occasion was the person briefed prior to the meeting. Government staff assumed the interpreters shared the conceptual understandings of the speakers, had sufficient English fluency to convey the meaning of any Western Aranda response, and an understanding of specialist technical language (Eades 2009). While we might assume outsiders know how to use interpreters and do so, evidence suggests few do (Commonwealth Ombudsman 2011). For Western Aranda people today little has changed.

Voice in the context of silence and shame

When time poor outsiders visit remote communities they tend to ask a lot of questions. During the Intervention meetings were hastily called, people sat and listened, and at the end there would be a call for questions. The response was usually silence. Understanding silence is crucial. Meeting a stranger, Western Aranda workers would usually remain silent as Western Aranda people need time to understand, or to get to know the speaker. They may also be silent in response to Western Aranda social etiquette governing the right to speak in particular situations. This shows respect for others' authority or social standing (Eades 2007). As is the case for many Indigenous peoples in Australia, questions and answers are structured around perceptions of social relationships (Cass et al. 2002). Silence also provides an opportunity to consider a position.

Silence can also be linked to shame—a feeling to be avoided. The dynamics of shame mutes or silences Aboriginal voices. Shame or shyness causes embarrassment or discomfort. It is characterised by 'a hesitation to speak out' (Myers 1991:123). It arises when meeting strangers or in unfamiliar situations. Here there is fear of making a mistake—of saying the wrong thing or conducting oneself outside the rules. Shame or the fear of shame therefore shapes an individual's behaviours.

Voice and the dynamics of relatedness in Indigenous decision making

The study also found that these behaviours also reflected consideration of who had authority to represent a particular position within a recognised family group. Further, those speaking or representing had to be considered as being the right person for the job. Decision making was further complicated by the consensual and family based nature of decision making. Authority, representation and decision making were therefore not one and the same.

When a decision needs to be made, the study revealed it is common for Western Aranda to defer to individuals recognised as having particular expertise or knowledge

relevant to the matter under discussion. These same people, however, may not be the people sitting at the table during externally-driven consultations or negotiations. In these kinds of contemporary environments, family groups may choose to put people at the table who have English proficiency or some understanding of how external systems and structures work.

Outsiders traditionally focus their attention on involvement of traditional owners and family elders in decision making. While these people are important it is critical to recognise the centrality of consensual processes of decision making within Indigenous family groups. Further, Western Aranda families during the study spoke to the need to seek the people with the right knowledge while also considering people who are respected, can listen, represent others' views, and feedback ideas to and from families. In practice, representatives can be younger people, men or women.

Underpinning the dynamics of talk, silence and social discourse of desert peoples is the relationship between oneself, others, objects and places. This is derived through people who share the knowledge and resources of place. Everyday life is centred on the sustenance and maintenance of these relationships. In describing the sociality of the Central Desert Pintupi, Myers uses the term relatedness. This describes the emphasis on, 'extending one's ties with others outward, on being able to lay claims by others, on showing sympathy and a willingness to negotiate' (Myers 1991:22). Relatedness is therefore primarily a function of kinship networks, forged over time through shared knowledge or exchange of material goods.

The obligations of relatedness subsequently impact on local decision making and its perceived legitimacy. During the study, Western Aranda views on negotiations over the Ntaria township lease revealed there must be a recognised relationship between a kin group and the person representing an issue. In the case of the lease negotiations the government-appointed Western Aranda representative lacked legitimacy in the eyes of many families. Kin based systems of governance are therefore essential if decisions taken are to be supported at the local level.

The history of self-government in Ntaria also shows that externally driven governance structures need to understand how relatedness plays out. Kin representatives are first obliged to satisfy expectations from kin—not from outsiders. This presents considerable challenges to external accountability. A lack of understanding of these aspects of Western Aranda sociality meant missionary efforts to support self-governance in Ntaria during the 1960s and early 1970s failed (Sommerlad 1973). During the study the desire to maintain relatedness was also reflected in Western Aranda calls for people to come together to reach a consensus, which is a feature of many remote Indigenous societies (Liberman 1985). People needed time to talk with family members before reaching a position.

Normative codes of behaviour reflecting relatedness have other impacts on interactions in the public settings. To maintain harmonious relationships during government meetings, people carefully positioned themselves, avoided direct eye contact, nodded agreement, remained silent, or concurred on what was said. Their views outside of these

meetings often revealed positions or explanations that were not evident during discussion.

Many imposed governance structures assume a committee member can represent all people in a particular area or group and make decisions on their behalf. Outsiders may also focus on establishing a community group to provide the point of entry and legitimacy for a particular initiative. As people made clear during the Western Aranda study, it is a mistake to assume that a decision or position put forward by one person has legitimacy in the eyes of another simply because they are Aboriginal or come from the same community. Local legitimacy and buy in is at stake. It is therefore critical that sufficient attention is paid to processes of talk, the conditions for decision making, and the qualities of those representing decisions.

Creating opportunities for Indigenous voice

Although the policy positions of Liberal–National and Labor governments since 2007 have given little heed to remote Indigenous voices, a small, community-driven program funded by the Federal Government is doing so. Emerging in 2013 during the dying days of the Labor Government, the Stronger Communities for Children (SCfC) program provides an annual grant to Aboriginal organisations in 10 remote communities in the Northern Territory. Focusing on giving children the best start in life, local groups determine strategic priorities, approve project submissions, and advocate on behalf of children in their respective communities. In the context of remote Indigenous communities, SCfC represents a rare opportunity for hands on decision making about Federal Government funding by Indigenous peoples.

In Ntaria the SCfC program has been contracted for five years to the Tjuwanpa Outstation Resource Centre, a local Aboriginal Corporation. Under delegation from the Corporation's board a local group called the SCfC Leaders Group makes decisions about how they will invest $350,000 a year of Australian Government funds. In Ntaria, the structure of the program is built around the findings from Kennedy's (2013) earlier research.

Work from local values and aspirations

As SCfC has the overarching aim of giving children the best start in life, there was strong interest in Ntaria in engaging in the program—particularly on the part of women. As the Western Aranda study found government reforms had resonance when they incorporated Western Aranda values, the Ntaria SCfC program has built on local concerns for children and their Western Aranda identity.

Once the local decision making group had been formed, members drew their vision for their children's futures. Discussing the meaning in the drawings helped members define seven outcomes for the program, including children's safety, education and youth engagement. Written up in plain language these priorities continue to be referenced at almost every meeting and are used to monitor project impact. This has maintained children's and youth futures as the central focus of the Leaders Group's deliberations.

In discussing these priorities, members also determined that all initiatives supported by the group benefit all children. This has managed the risk that individual members put forward proposals benefiting their families rather than the broader community.

Accommodate differences in language and conceptual understandings

Recognising the need for a representative who can manage English communications, most families have nominated someone with a degree of English fluency. A bi-lingual, local staff person also assists with language differences when needed. Over time as people have settled into the group meeting discussions often revert to Western Aranda.

As written Aranda is not used outside church services, the Ntaria program also pays considerable attention to written communications. Although meeting minutes and papers are necessarily written in English, planning documents have one-page summaries in plain language. Visuals and graphics are also used to depict key findings or issues. In addition, SCfC has invested in digital media workshops with the aim of building Western Aranda capacity to tell their own stories of the program.

Dealing with differences in conceptual understandings remains harder. In Ntaria, the SCfC group has approved funds for study tours. This allows members to see programs in action on the ground in other Aboriginal communities or attend relevant conferences, expanding their understanding of issues and possible strategies. In addition, the Leaders Group have set aside funds to test ideas for new projects before making longer-term commitments. This involves participatory action research approaches. When combined with research and local data, these findings provide an evidence base for group decisions about longer-term investments.

Challenges remain, however, with cross cultural understandings of concepts and ways of being. In a project focusing on children's safety, SCfC in Ntaria is attempting to deal with this by bringing elders and services staff together to identify conceptual differences in communications about children's safety. While the term safe is readily translatable, how safety is conceptualised and enacted in everyday life may differ. When working with external advisors, SCfC staff discuss language and concepts before workshops take place and co-facilitate sessions to ensure meanings are understood.

Several design elements in the SCfC program in the Northern Territory provide additional opportunities to build conceptual understandings about children's development. Semi-annual seminars, involving community representatives from the 10 SCfC sites, provide decision-making groups with opportunities to learn about other Indigenous, child-focused programs around Australia. These seminars, a Facebook page, and regular phone hook ups also enable SCfC members and coordinators to share information about what is happening in their respective communities. These mechanisms have seen project ideas and lessons learned during implementation picked up and supported by other sites.

Mitigate the risk of shame

In a relational society, no group can operate without recognising relationships within which people feel comfortable and safe. Knowing the other person, their skin relationship and history mitigates the risk shame. Rather than this being externally defined, Ntaria's families have directed who should be approached to sit on the Leaders Group. There is subsequently a degree of control over the difficult terrain of social relationships. In addition, the non-Indigenous co-ordinator has invested considerable time building relationships with group members so as to overcome potential shame incurred when communicating in English.

As most SCfC group members are employed monthly meetings are limited to three hours. Briefing people ahead of meetings avoids the unexpected and the risk of shame experienced in not knowing or understanding what is taking place. Each member is therefore approached informally to discuss agendas, share and sound out ideas, or get perspectives about the work of the group that may not be articulated in the less safe space of a meeting. Although this requires significant time, briefings ensure people feel comfortable with the matters under discussion and have time to consider their position and that of their family group.

Incorporate relatedness in decision-making structures

As Western Aranda authority is vested in family and through family relationships, the Ntaria SCfC program sought to establish a kin based decision-making system. This system had to recognise that no one group has influence over others. It also meant finding members who were recognised by family as having the right knowledge or aptitude for the job. Without this they would lack legitimacy.

Setting up the SCfC Ntaria Leaders Group took several months of talking to family elders and local Western Aranda services staff. As names were suggested and these individuals approached, people added further criteria for membership. This included the ability to speak up in meetings, get along with others on the group, and act as a link between the Leaders Group and their family. Over time, members have suggested names of additional people whose family group was not represented. Currently, representatives from 16 locally defined family networks form the SCfC membership.

Rules for decision making also reflect customary practice. Set by group members during their early meetings the rules incorporate consensus. This reflects Western Aranda interest in maintaining relatedness. In practice it is rare for decisions to be contentious, but when differences have arisen or members are unsure of their position, the matter is held over.

Conclusion

In summary, overcoming inequality in remote Indigenous Australia may rest on the ability of people to have a voice through which to shape the programs and services that are meant to benefit them. Indigenous voice allows us to hear what it is that Indigenous people value, to shape program outcomes within their aspirations, and plan approaches that work within Indigenous ways of being. For Indigenous voices to be heard, however, we need time within which we can establish relationships, a clear understanding of the dynamics impacting on voice in the public domain, and experienced people on the ground able to translate this into action.

Always, however, there is the threat that governments and external organisations fail to understand and value local voices and decision making. Even in a community driven program like SCfC, there is a need for ongoing vigilance and significant tenacity to hold government to its promise that they will give Aboriginal people a voice over their children's futures.

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