

Understanding Cultural Differences at the Frontline of Social Housing

Fiona Proudfoot, University of Tasmania

Fiona.Proudfoot@utas.edu.au

Mainstream housing service providers are increasingly involved in the provision of housing services to Indigenous clients but there has been little investigation of how housing staff experience and manage the intercultural dimensions of this. This issue is important because of the considerable discretionary power that tenancy managers and frontline staff, exercise in their role. This paper develops a theoretical model for exploring how housing practitioners construct and understand cultural differences and/or similarities and the role this plays in shaping their professional interactions with Indigenous tenants.

Thirty-one semi-structured in depth interviews were conducted in metropolitan and regional Queensland with housing practitioners working with Indigenous clients, in state, community and Indigenous-specific social housing services. Early findings suggest practitioners' understandings can be located along a continuum of *Racialised Dichotomy, Homogeneity and Recognition*. This combines with their experiential knowing of Indigenous people and their cultural practices, and may help to explain how practitioners utilise their discretionary power at the interface of service provision.

Culture differences and social housing

Indigenous people are disproportionately represented in social housing with increasing numbers of the Aboriginal tenant population in the mainstream social housing system, including the community housing sector (ABS: 2011). Recent research on urban Indigenous housing suggests low levels of satisfaction with housing services is one of the contributors to high levels of tenancy failure and recommends the development of an intercultural approach to the delivery of social housing (Milligan et al. 2011; Burke 2004). While there is some knowledge of the tenancy management experiences of Indigenous clients there has been little investigation of how housing practitioners experience provision of culturally appropriate services or the meanings, understandings and values they attach to this. Many practitioners have limited knowledge of Aboriginal culture and this may hinder culturally appropriate communication and service delivery. Memmott et al. have observed that:

Aboriginal lifestyle norms, household formation and use of internal and external living spaces are recognised as potential source of conflict with [housing providers], landlords and neighbours (2011:6).

Indigenous housing research emphasises the lack of fit between Indigenous cultural practices and social housing provision and the impact this has on housing insecurity and homelessness (Habibis 2012; Memmott et al 2012; Milligan et al. 2011). This study's concern is to investigate how practitioners' understandings of cultural differences and /or similarities shape intercultural interactions at the interface of service delivery with Indigenous tenants.

Methodological approach

To explore how cultural difference may impact on service delivery a qualitative research strategy was adopted. Thirty one 31 semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with metropolitan and regional housing practitioners working with Indigenous clients, across all social housing sectors (see Table 1).

Table 1: Respondent Profile (N = 31)

<u>Housing Sector</u>		<u>Role</u>		<u>Gender</u>		<u>Cultural Background</u>	
<i>State</i>	2	<i>Senior Managers</i>	8	<i>Males</i>	6	<i>Indigenous</i>	4
<i>Community</i>	27	<i>Operational Supervisors</i>	5	<i>Females</i>		<i>Euro-Aus</i>	22
<i>Indigenous-specific</i>	2	<i>Frontline Workers</i>	18	25		<i>CALD*</i>	5

* *Culturally and linguistically diverse*

The study is situated in an interpretive social constructionism epistemological framework. By broadly locating this research within the 'interpretive' social constructionism paradigm it becomes possible to elucidate how housing practitioners' perceptions and delivery of services are informed by the production and reproduction of diverse understandings and differing versions of reality, 'which are linked to...[racialised]...institutional and structural forces' (Clapham et al. 2000: 70). This conceptualisation challenges binary constructions of housing officers as 'passive ciphers of structural forces or mere prisoners of their own background and upbringing', allowing for analysis to explore how housing officers 'actively... [construct]... their roles on a day-to day basis and... [react]... to the conflicting and changing pressures and expectations of them from their tenants...their own organizations and colleagues' (Clapham et al. 2000:74).

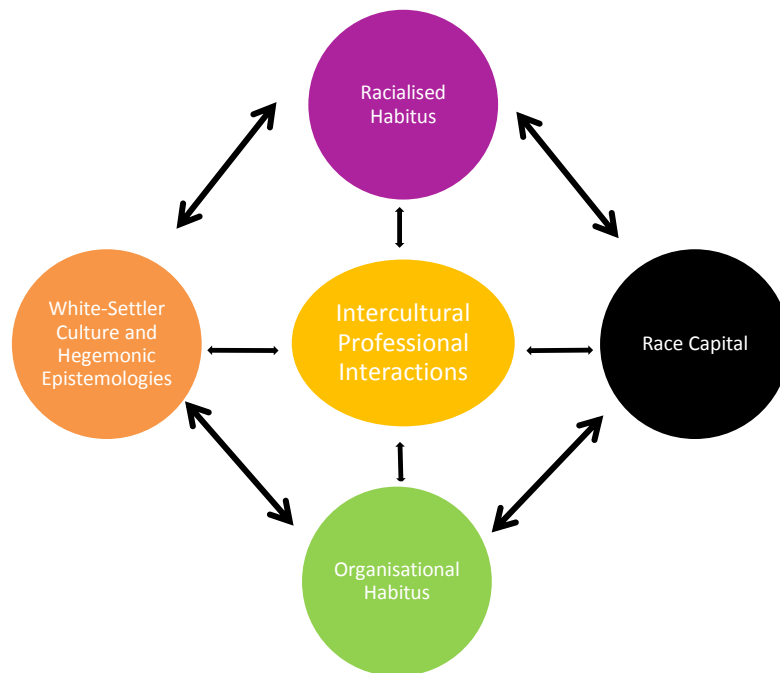
A central tenet of the social constructionism paradigm is that 'reality is constructed by people through interaction' and it is through the process of interaction that people define themselves and the world they inhabit (Clapman 2004:94-95). Criticisms of social constructionism suggest through the micro focus on meaning-making and privileging of agency, the influences of macro structures are ignored, however it is posited here that 'the interaction [and meaning-making] itself owes its form to the objective structures that has produced the dispositions of the interacting agents' (Bourdieu 1990: 59). This approach challenges the dichotomous positioning of agency and structure, suggesting one does not operate in isolation from the other, thus avoiding the reduction of human meaning-making to the binary dialectic of '...external constraints or subjective whims' (Swartz 2002: 616).

Theoretical frameworks and conceptual model

The combination of two theoretical paradigms have been utilised within the methodological paradigm of this research; Critical Race Theory (CRT) specifically whiteness theory, and Bourdieu's social theory '[(habitus) (capital)] +field = practice' (Bourdieu 1984: 101). The concern of this study to understand practitioner's subjectivities and the social construction of cultural differences within service delivery necessitated the use of whiteness theory. Whiteness is viewed as a social construct in which Euro- Australian racialised identity and cultural knowledge appear as raceless categories that invisibly afford privileges to Euro- Australians and legitimate certain ways of knowing, seeing and being Australian (Nicoll, 2004; Proudfoot & Habibis 2013). For Frankenberg (1993) whiteness is defined as a location, a standpoint and a set of cultural practices that affords white people race privilege. It is 'a place from which white people look at [themselves], at others, and at society' and involves a 'set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed '(Frankenberg, 1993:1; Proudfoot & Habibis 2013). The racialised hegemony of whiteness legitimates the values and behaviours of Euro-Australian culture and experiences and deems them normative and universal, and in doing so creates the invisible standard in which all other values and cultural practices are judged (Nicoll, 2004). This gives rise to benefits that form a taken-for-granted, everyday reality (Bailey, 1998 cited in Pease, 2010: 112; McIntosh, 1988). 'By focusing on the dominance of white social constructs, whiteness theory shifts attention from marginalised disadvantaged groups to the investigation of the behaviours and experiences of those that are dominant' (Bonilla-Silva, 2009; Frankenberg, 1993; Habibis and Walter, 2009 cited Proudfoot & Habibis 2013:4).

Whiteness theory is a useful tool to expose racialised privileges and their effect on social positioning but neglects in the main to contextualise how and why these privileges are maintained and reproduced, other than suggesting the racialised status quo suits the beneficiaries of whiteness. Therefore it was critical to incorporate Bourdieu's (1984: 101) social theory '[(habitus) (capital)] +field = practice' within the empirical research strategy. By combining aspects from whiteness theory each formulaic component of Bourdieu's social theory becomes inextricably racialised, allowing for the systematic analysis of race within each dimension of habitus, capital, field and practice. This amalgamation strengthens the study's analytical capacity to provide detailed analysis of the racialised intersectionality between macro structures and institutions, professional interactions and individual understandings. To systematically apply both theories and to support the analysis a heuristic tool, titled the Racialised Labyrinth of Subjectivities and Professional Practice was developed to demonstrate the intra-relational, multilayered constructions of housing officers' racialised subjectivities (see Diagram 1).

Diagram 1: Racialised Labyrinth of Subjectivities and Professional Practice



The first three dimensions – *White- settler culture and hegemonic epistemologies* ; *race habitus* and *race capital* help to establish and interpret participants’ epistemological , axiological and ontological standpoints, whilst the other two dimensions- *organisational habitus* and *Intercultural professional interactions* offer insights into how the inter-relational aspects of these standpoints shape and influence the organisational and interactional space of service provision.

An intrinsic component of the labyrinth is the concept of *White- settler culture and hegemonic epistemologies*. It is suggested that *white- settler culture and hegemonic epistemologies* is the dominant racialised narrative that constitutes itself through monological systems of knowledge production that privilege and legitimate white settler-culture and marginalise Aboriginal knowledge systems and cultures. This racialised monopoly of knowledge production is created and maintained through the racialised hierarchy that constructs the idea of Australia as a homogenised white nation. Moreover, this re/produces macro structures that support or oppose individuals’ subjectivities and sensibilities, shaping how individuals understand and experience their values, practices, preferences and world views that make sense to them, in other words, their habitus (Walter et al. 2011). If their habitus is congruent with, and supported by, structural, institutional and societal mechanisms, cultural mores, behaviours and practices are deemed normative and therefore legitimated within the dominant society.

Racial habitus

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus is employed and adapted in the labyrinth to bring to light the inter-relational, embedded nature of race within habitus formation. Bourdieu's application of habitus is primarily centred on cultural tastes and their alliance with class; however the concern of this study is to understand how race as a social construct permeates the inculcation of dispositions that inform an individual's habitus, such as tastes, perceptions and their cognitive framework. Central to this study's analysis is the idea that participants' axiological standpoint, this being their deeply held values and worldviews, is racialised, which positions them within a racialised social system that also produces a habitus which is unique to different racial groups. However, human action does not emanate from habitus alone; in part it draws on forms and amounts of capital available, to enact practice.

For Bourdieu cultural, economic and social capitals are seen as predictors and determinants of an individual's social positioning, with Bourdieu suggesting that '... we live our life in a three-dimensional social space delineated by our social, cultural and economic capital positioning' (Walter 2010:46). However, Walter asserts that we live in a four –not three dimensional space with the social construct of race also demarcating structural and social position. She contends that race remains a powerful social category that can explicate 'why one group, distinguished by skin colour, culture, or place of origin differ in life chances to others' (Walter 2010: 47). This study aligns with the premise that 'an individual's habitus is permeated with racially aligned levels of social and cultural capital' however their position on 'the racial hierarchy simultaneously *and* independently of social, cultural and economic capital, affects social production and access to social power' (Walter 2010:47 *original emphasis*). It is argued that it is crucial that race is factored in as a capital that predicts and influences an individual's social position.

Race capital

To operationalise the concept of *race capital* within the parameters of this research, it is defined as an intrinsic racialised resource that is constituted through identification with, and knowledge of culture practices and mores. Race capital demarcates participants' ontological standpoint, this being their positioning within the dominant racialised hierarchy, and distinguishes how understandings of its perceived benefits or detriments can influence organisational and interracial practice. As Walter (2010: 47) contends '... [t]he value of a specific capital depends heavily on the social setting of the field'.

Organisational habitus

An individual's actions, generated through habitus, do not occur in a social vacuum; rather they are enacted in social structured contexts, which broadly aligns with Bourdieu conceptualisation of fields (Swartz 2002). Bourdieu's fields are re-conceptualised within the labyrinth as 'organisational habitus' whereby an assemblage of racialised perceptions, values and etiquette establish institutional standards, which privilege and legitimate Euro-Australian habitus over Indigenous habitus. This potentially requires that housing officers and tenants from Indigenous or minority racial backgrounds ... 'make tremendous social and cultural sacrifices in exchange for the organizational benefits they seek' (Horvat and Antonio 1999 cited in Perry 2012: 93). For example, housing practitioners' professional practice within mainstream service provision is constructed and scrutinised through the prism of white rationalities, mores and ideologies. This is by definition a conflictual habitus milieu for Indigenous and culturally diverse practitioners. The research concerns itself with how practitioners navigate and negotiate their positioning within the organisational habitus and its legislative regulations and practice requirements, especially if the organisational habitus is incongruent with practitioners' habitus. This potentially conflictual terrain may emphasise practitioners' alterity and compromise their position within community, resulting in social and cultural sanctions from members of their familial and kin networks. Conversely, if the principles and functioning of the organisational habitus align with and legitimate practitioners' habitus, undoubtedly their understandings of the habitus may be more familiar and their navigation of it somewhat easier.

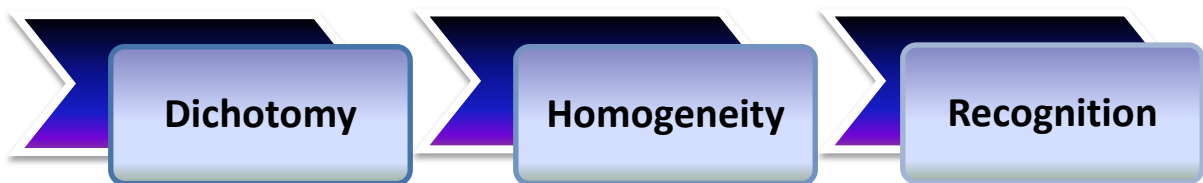
Intercultural professional interactions

All of the racialised relational elements of the labyrinth combine and manifest within the micro-relational component of practitioners' *intercultural professional interactions*. Analysis of practitioners' constructed discursal representations they employ to describe and understand their intercultural professional practice will illuminate the multifarious racialised understandings of cultural differences and /or similarities and the implications these have for their practice. This micro-analysis permits a glimpse into how practitioners' racialised subjectivities inform and construct their practice, the way in which they interact with, and delivery services to Indigenous populations.

Findings

To explore respondents' racialised understandings of cultural differences and /or similarities one question posed within the interviews was *'What role do you think your own cultural / racialised background plays in your professional interactions with Indigenous clients?'* The discourses and ideologies underpinning the responses created three categories that were situated along a Continuum of Racialised Understandings (See Diagram 2)

Diagram 2: Continuum of Racialised Understandings



Racialised Dichotomy

This category was constructed by discourses and ideologies of 'us' and 'them'. This binary construction focussed on the alterity of 'them'- Indigenous Australians- and conversely the category of 'us' remained undefined, nameless and invisible, but it was clearly considered the norm by which all other cultures were measured. The following quote from an inner-city property manager provides insights into these dichotomously constructed cultural categories and how she negotiated cultural differences at the frontline:

I avoid housing a lot of Indigenous because I think they are not suited to our sort of housing at all from my experiences...you know they could be next door to you and me...I believe Indigenous should be housed in an area ...that they can just lose control...just do whatever they want in ...like a big complex that is obviously run by Indigenous ...they're the tenancy managers because obviously they can identify with them and they can just all mingle together.

Race Homogeneity

The construction of this category was defined by discourses and ideologies of equality and sameness. Underpinning this construction was the notion of a collective humanity with equal opportunities and access to the 'hierarchical distribution to social, political, economic and cultural resources' (Habibis & Walter 2009: 2). These discourses did not recognise racialised

privilege or conversely, marginalisation, which determined Indigenous experiences of discrimination and exclusion as an individualised problem rather than a racialised and societal one. This individualisation of exclusion and discrimination also maintained the invisibility shrouding racialised privilege. The following extracts are indicative of the discourses and ideologies present within this category:

Everyone should be treated equally, the same . Regional Housing Officer

Doesn't matter what culture you are, if you present yourself well, if you speak well, if you fill out your application well, you will get there Urban Housing Officer

We have the big thing about Indigenous and non-Indigenous people but I actually see everyone as human beings so ... it's not meaning to sound derogatory but to me it is a skin colour Inner-city Housing Manager

Race Recognition

This category was defined by discourses and ideologies that positively acknowledged racial diversity, appreciating the value and richness of cultural heterogeneity. In doing so many respondents drew upon personal and experiential understandings of the historic and contemporary imposition of white cultural norms on Indigenous lifestyles, and avowed a deep appreciation for the richness of Indigenous worldviews and cultural practices. Most believed social housing services needed to change to address the dissonance and lack of fit between Indigenous cultural practices and social housing regulatory requirements. Respondents proclaimed:

You are who you are and you end up how you are because of how you have been raised , where you have been raised and the cultural norms that surround you as you grow from child to adult...always good to remember not one way fits everyone Inner-city Senior Housing Manager.

Can we accept that there are different ways of doing things and different ways we can look at things... can we ever accept that? Inner-City Operational Supervisor

Two really rich cultures and somehow only one culture is spoken of... western culture in Australia is so diverse, very rich...if there is ever going to be some merging of cultures in

Australia we need to do it side- by-side...present Aboriginal culture, Torres Strait culture, western culture...We are all Australians...Come on people! Tenancy-Support Case Manager, Regional Housing Organisation

Discussion

All components of the labyrinth were ubiquitous within the formations of subjective understandings of cultural differences and/or similarities at the interface of service provision. Many of the respondents of this study relied heavily upon their experiential knowing of Indigenous people and cultural practices to inform and shape their intercultural interactions. The concern of this study is that many respondents have very little experiential knowledge of Indigenous people, and the only exposure to Indigenous cultural practices was deemed to be 'problematic' to tenancy sustainment. These findings suggest that there is a need to provide practitioners' with diverse understandings of the cultures at play within the intercultural terrain of service provision. More work is needed to identify how best to educate service providers so they have can improve their understanding of the factors influencing the behaviour of Indigenous clients (Proudfoot & Habibis 2014, forthcoming). It is argued that culturally responsive training (CRT) programs, developed with the help of Indigenous people, may be one way to foster deeper understandings of Indigenous cultural practices, and the interplay between Euro-Australian cultural practices and the structures that support them. These understanding have the potential to influence how practitioners operationalise their discretionary power, which may culminate in improved understandings at the intercultural interface and promote better housing outcomes for Indigenous tenants.

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