

The Indigenous Sector: Social Capital on the Margins of Power

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Abstract

The potential benefits of social capital theory have been under-utilised in attempts to understand Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-run organisations. This paper explains how social capital theory can be useful to understand the uniquely positioned Indigenous Sector in contemporary Australian settler colonialism. These organisations constitute a position of inter-cultural broker between two authorising environments of community and government, with bonding capital a source of strength for many Indigenous populations. However, they must also negotiate within deeply unequal political structures of the settler-colonial governance environment; a situation which leads to exclusion on the basis of racism. This makes the possibility of maintaining essential bridging and linking social capital with government problematic – continuing following the announcement of the Abbott Coalition Government's 'Indigenous Advancement Strategy'. Social capital theory can put the power of networks and relationships for Indigenous community organisations in the analytical spotlight. It provides a way to explore inclusionary and exclusionary power which sees the Sector having to deal with deep power asymmetries while making 'bridges' while simultaneously positioning themselves as meso-level, intercultural brokers.

Keywords: Indigenous Sector, organisation, social capital, agency, settler colonial.

The Indigenous Sector practices both service delivery and pushes for political and civil rights through organisational means for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations across Australia. The estimated 8000-9000 community-run of this sector are evidence of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander civil society. This paper asks how social capital theory can be used to understand the organisations of the Indigenous Sector existing within the Australian polity. To explore this question, this paper defines the Indigenous Sector; outlines social capital theory, extracting a perspective that focuses on power and its contexts for relationships and networking; and finishes with analysis of how three Indigenous community organisations use networks and social capital to their benefit while existing in a largely exclusionary settler colonial governance environment. Settler-colonialism is defined here as when a territory is invaded by outsiders whom create, and stay in operation of policy mechanisms to the detriment of the original indigenous populations' sovereignty and self-determination. These processes produces pervasive power imbalances between Indigenous peoples and settlers both institutionally and day-to-day in the

present. Social capital highlights the inclusionary power for Indigenous community organisations and the people that make up those organisations on a meso- and micro-level through bonding and collaboration. However, an exclusionary power prevailing from social structures of Australian settler colonialism hinders bridging and linking social capital by organisations, requiring the practice of resistance, agency, and negotiation with the Australian state in accruing resources.

The Indigenous Sector

The Indigenous Sector is made up of community-run organisations mostly funded by government to deliver public services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations. In the self-determination era of the mid-1970s, legislative space was created by the Commonwealth for Indigenous populations to incorporate (Rowse 2005:213). Today, Indigenous community organisations provide services in a wide range of domains including healthcare, legal representation, arts and media, education, housing, land councils, cultural centres, and environmental management. As of 2014, 2536 Indigenous-controlled organisations have registered under the Commonwealth Office of Registrar of Indigenous Corporations, although recent estimates of 8000-9000 organisations have been made (Bauman et al. 2015). The majority of these organisations are not commercial in objective and largely operate on government funding (Holcombe and Sullivan 2013: 494).

The voluntary association model makes up the majority of organisational structures in the Indigenous Sector, whereby governing councils are elected by the constituency they serve. Structural focus on advocacy and community development can be maintained in the intention to create positive social change in Indigenous material wellbeing. Several others are created under statute: while not explicitly part of the third sector, they embody many characteristics of community organisations in existing at independent distance from government (Sullivan 2010:3). Authority within the Sector is also varied, including control over physical resources, employees, “voice” as representatives to government, and authority over who has access to organisational resources (Rowse 2005:217).

The sector also has a particular set of political functions. First, organisations seek to represent their client base through advocacy. They allocate resources on behalf of their constituency, and make claims of government for their needs. Second, they can also be established to provide communal legal entity holding title over property. Third, since the 1970s both Indigenous communities and Australian governments have assessed that some service delivery functions “are best administered through...publicly funded Indigenous organisations” in ways government seemingly cannot (Rowse 2012:102-103). These functions and authorities give the Indigenous Sector a unique political position in the Australian polity.

Distinction of the Indigenous Sector

The Indigenous Sector is a unique institution in the Australian polity. It is not a formal part of the state apparatus, despite a majority of organisations operating within legislative frameworks and supported by government funding. Nor is the sector solely positioned within Australian civil society, despite its advocacy role and overlap with the goals of the mainstream not-for-profit sector (Sullivan 2010:1). They deliver a range of services normally provided by government agencies in other circumstances (Rowse 2012:201). Additionally, they act as the key relationship between mainstream, non-Indigenous Australian governmental institutions and Indigenous citizens (Holcombe and Sullivan 2013:502). Indigenous community-run organisations are distinct because they are manifestations of continued attempts to negotiate and transform the power relations between the settler-colonial state and Indigenous peoples, in providing opportunities for political expression by the small and varying populations of Indigenous Australia (Martin 2003:5). The push for empowerment and social change at the local level, and the ability to

govern for one's own community are key facets of the Indigenous self-determination movement in addressing experiences of continued exclusion by the Australian government. They are how many Indigenous peoples make themselves visible and heard as citizens, where 'mainstream' institutions largely ignore their perspectives (Rowse 2005:210).

Importantly, the Sector presents a distinct challenge to the continuing dominance and exclusion of Indigenous peoples by the settler-colonial apparatus, through manifestations of agency and self-governance in organisational claims for social rights and self-determination. However, the decision to incorporate under legislation is a political one: choosing this may result in greater resources, but increases government auditing and intervention, possibly constraining Indigenous community organisations and their effectiveness. Social capital theory provides one way to explore the benefits and drawbacks of social networks of community-run organisations forced to grapple with this continuing political dynamic.

Social Capital: Power and/through Networking

While much research has been undertaken on Indigenous community organisations since the mid-1970s, the potential benefits of social capital theory have been under-utilised (Walter 2015:71). Social capital directs our attention to social networks as valuable assets in society. With it we can explore how connections between people who cooperate can be used for both mutual advantage and exclusion (Cox 2007:509; Field 2008:14). Social capital is the processes and forms of connection between people, the values and norms which characterise these relationships, and how these "non-monetary forms [of capital] can be important sources of power and influence" for mutual benefit (Portes 1998:2).

Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992:119) highlight the benefits of active participation in social networks in their definition of social capital as the "sum of resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition". Social capital is combined with an individual or groups economic, symbolic, and cultural capital to create and reproduce social hierarchy in particular fields. Inequality and the exclusion of people from certain privileged groups is due to the creation and reproduction of unequal economic and cultural capital in a given society (Bourdieu: 1986:248). People's positions are dependent upon their ability to mobilise with others through networks to position themselves accordingly (Field 2008:18). Bourdieu's (1986:249) discussion of power inequity argues social networks are actively created and reproduced for the benefits of their members and the maintenance of power by dominant groups to exclude and retain control.

However, exploring the potential benefit of social capital to marginalised groups can further its theoretical effectiveness. Coleman's (1990) position on social capital is a resource allowing individuals or collectives to use the social structures and networks around them in order for greater action to occur (Coleman 1990:300). The "trustworthiness of the social environment" (Coleman 1988:102), the obligations held between individuals, and the sharing of norms and beliefs characterise the strength of that social capital. Individuals who cooperate provide benefits to the broader social environment in the creation of this public good and this process is amplified for those who are disadvantaged economically or lacking cultural/symbolic capital (Coleman 1988:113). Although, Coleman (1988:108) relies on individualism and classical economics in constructing social capital as inadvertently created for all through the pursuit of rational self-interest, rather than a purposively sought investment by reflective agents. By focusing on social capital through this lens as a 'public good', Coleman is limited in discussing active altruism and cooperative efforts.

Putnam's (2000) definition argues that high levels of civic engagement, through organisation and collective action, foster greater democratic relations and governance. Social capital here is through organisation, and the "trust, norms, and networks" that can be of benefit more broadly (Putnam 1993:167). A high level of social capital allows people to work together towards goals, and thus alleviate some of the physical or economic capital associated with such a task done individually. The central theme is "that social networks have value" (Putnam 2000:19); the connections between people and "the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise" can create positive *and* anti-social outcomes for many. While lacking precision, specialisation is a key attribute of Putnam's (2000:22-23) contribution. Social capital can vary on a continuum of 'bonding' – benefits of people's immediate networks which reproduces and bolsters specific identities and groups – and 'bridging' – how groups reach outside of their immediate networks allowing greater access to more access to people and resources and further reciprocity (Putnam 2000:22-23). 'Linking' social capital describes the ability of people to network with formal institutions outside of a community, for greater access to resources (Woolcock 2001:11).

Social capital allows us to critically explore power and the inclusive and exclusionary nature of social networks. It can be useful in understanding how Indigenous community organisations use relationships and networks to deliver services and undertake political advocacy, by highlighting power across various levels of social relations, when contextualised within specific power dynamics and cultural environments. The next section discusses this capacity relative to several Indigenous community run-organisations.

The Indigenous Sector: Social Capital on the Margins of Power

An analysis of Indigenous community organisations via social capital theory creates an illustrative metaphor to explore power and relationships in broader social and political contexts, though must to be challenged on its "ahistorical" (Field 2008:45) presentation. Dismissing historicity risks ethnocentricity when not considered in specific cultural contexts (Brough et al., 2006:398). Minimal research explores social capital and its meanings amongst differing Indigenous populations and community organisations in Australia (Brough and Bond 2009:249). Exploring the "texture" (Brough et al. 2006:397) of social capital relative to Indigenous community organisations and their unique political position is needed to maximise usefulness as a theoretical tool.

Indigenous community organisations are manifestations of agency, created and maintained by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations as culturally specific projects in an attempt to achieve goals and social change (Ortner 2006:144). The Indigenous Sector is constituted by specific individuals and communities on the micro, day-to-day level, many of whom are likely to be from the constituency that the organisation operates for (Sullivan 2010:2). Yet, these organisations intertwine and position themselves within macro political and cultural structures. They exist as "inter-cultural mediators" (Merlan 2005:168) between Indigenous population expectations, wants, and needs on the one hand, and the legitimising through recognition by the state on the other (Page 2015; Sullivan 2010:187). In this middle-ground, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals and populations create and maintain the networks on a meso-level negotiating these two "authorising environments" (Smith 2005:20).

An example of such negotiation is evident in the Yarnteen Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Corporation in Newcastle, New South Wales, which actively mediates between notions of community and family in the region, while also ensuring business stability and adaptive governance structuring (Smith 2008:207-208). Through a range of profitable business ventures, Yarnteen is motivated to achieve economic development for the "complex urban Indigenous community environment" of Newcastle advocating a greater use of the private economic sphere for social change (Smith 2008:216). Yarnteen manages their own structure as one which does not claim to represent all Indigenous peoples in Newcastle, yet maintains its position as an Aboriginal

community organisation by focusing on broader community development (Smith 2008:213-215). Having to position the organisation between individual families, and notions of “whole-of-community” used by governments as a measure of “good governance” (Smith 2008:218) means that existing in this intercultural domain takes a balance of relationships and negotiation of different levels of social networks.

It is essential to further explore the notion that there are “distinctive patterns of Indigenous social capital” (Walter 2015:74) relative to Indigenous identities and worldviews used in and through organisational networks and relationships (Lahn 2012:301). A sense of bonding capital of immediate family and wider Indigenous community which contains “a strong cultural and political meaning” (Brough et al. 2006:404) has been shown to be a vital source of strength due to its supportive and beneficial nature through shared resources: symbolic, economic, cultural, and political (Hunter 2000:36-37).

This can be seen vividly in the direct community action of the Fitzroy Valley women, who successfully challenged the Western Australian government to limit alcohol supply of Fitzroy Crossing to “escape the destructive impact of alcohol” that had caused much trauma for the community for several decades (Oscar and Pedersen 2011:92). A lack of funding from the state government, and an unhelpful relationship between the Fitzroy Crossing hospital and the Valley community led to decisive action being taken founded upon a “depth of cultural and social capital that has survived violent dispossession, decades of colonial oppression and post-colonial large-group settlement” (Oscar and Pedersen 2011:85). It was the creation of the Nindilgarri Cultural Health Service in the 1990s, and later the Fitzroy Valley Alcohol Action Group in 2006, which facilitated multiple organisations and their “senior men and women” to come together and support the Fitzroy Valley women’s campaign for change. This led to eventual support from the Police Commissioner and changes to sale of alcohol (Oscar and Pedersen 2011:93-95). Both cultural authority and the bonding capital of the Fitzroy Valley women were used as key sources of strength to challenge real world conditions in locally specific ways to achieve social change.

Relationships of reciprocity, shared norms, and trust are greatly beneficial in achieving goals such as in development and maintenance of civil society organisations (Putnam 1993:167). This strong bonding capital which gives organisations strength could also create tensions and constraints in the development of bridging and linking social capital (Brough and Bond 2009:251; Lahn 2012:297; Walter 2015: 79-80). The exclusion by outsiders can create tensions for attempts to create new external ties, claims made of those within the group can be excessive, and freedom of individuals may be restricted by strong norms and obligations (Hunter 2000:37). Understanding a broad spectrum of social then would assist with exploring the complexities, both positive and negative, of how Indigenous community organisations form relationships with the state.

Continuing Structures of Settler Colonialism and Exclusion

It is vital that an analysis of networks and relationships of Indigenous Sector is contextualised within its structural environment of the Australian state, in considering enablers and constraints of the various organisations social capital may be. Powerful groups have the ability to limit or damage the social capital of those less powerful, a mechanism which can create further inequities (Field 2008:83) as social capital can bolster groups and exclude others in inequitable hierarchies: ultimately “sociability cuts both ways” (Portes 1998:18).

In the creation and maintenance of social capital, Indigenous Sector organisations contend with the structure of Australian governance as settler-colonial, with exclusion playing a significant role. Despite a continuous engagement with these relations by Indigenous peoples over two centuries, the various apparatuses of the Australian state do not put much faith in Indigenous self-governance or agency (McCallum 2006:609; Veracini 2015:88). The racialization process involved in state

identity maintenance processes means that Indigenous peoples' "race capital" (Walter 2010:47) is largely marginalised, affecting organisation's ability to develop greater bridging and linking ties with government. Existing in this environment means Indigenous organisations must develop reflexive practices to ensure survival and continue creating community benefit.

A key example of this can be seen in the Redfern Aboriginal Medical Service (AMS), established in 1971 in inner-city Sydney. As a result of continuing racism, discrimination, and exclusion of Aboriginal people from mainstream healthcare in Sydney, the Redfern AMS was created to deal with both the everyday health issues of the population, and to respond to these structural conditions (Khoury 2015:472-475). In continuing to exist for over 40 years the Redfern AMS has challenged government accountability and responsibility for delivering appropriate and accessible healthcare in the process (Khoury 2015:478). The governmental response to this success has been varied: from "numerous bureaucratic obstructions that beset the service from its inception" (Khoury 2015:476) through to continually fractured and under-resourced funding problems. This has required local donations to cover some of the operational costs of Redfern AMS, constraining their ability to achieve outcomes, and making linking capital with governmental bodies essential but strained. This environment puts the Redfern AMS in an "ambiguous duality" (Khoury 2015:488) between succeeding in delivering appropriate and effective healthcare, and complying with government control and attempts to maintain domination. Yet, in surviving and delivering their services the Redfern AMS continues to challenge this process and their right to autonomy in "the improvement of their economic [and] social conditions" as Indigenous peoples (United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples).

The creation of new bridging social capital by organisations to government institutions constantly affected by power inequity and the inevitable expectations that arise with this state relationship. The bonding capital of Indigenous community organisations which instils a sense of collective, unique identity and strength (Brough et al., 2006:407) as seen in the examples above is devalued by a systemic promotion of whiteness, requiring settler nationalism to survive (Walter 2015:82). Creation of an Aboriginal identity by the state by in formulated policy, fashions an expectation to perform an 'authentic' Indigenous character non-threatening to settler sovereignty and domination. If organisations are too politically-focused in representing their constituency to government, and challenge this conception, this can lead to the severing of vital links to government and to economic resources of which many organisations rely for services to one of the most marginalised groups in the country (Povinelli 2002:6). This was seen in the current Attorney General's attempted cuts to Aboriginal Legal Services nationwide earlier this year (Doran and Yaxley 2015; Perkins and Lee 2015) – due to the direct challenge they make to government accountability, responsibility, and control via the legal system.

This can also be seen in increasing auditing requirements of the sector, damaging the potential benefits of organisations for their constituencies (Dwyer et al. 2009). Thus, when the Abbott Coalition Government implemented its 'Indigenous Advancement Strategy' (IAS) in 2014, this was noted as increasing the possibility of essential service delivery closure for many Indigenous populations nationwide (Medhora 2015; Oscar 2014; Viner 2014), and pointed to as directly resulting in closure of several major Aboriginal service providers nationally in 2015– including the Tasmanian Aboriginal Legal Service and the Aboriginal Medical Service Western Sydney. Ultimately, the building of trustworthy, stable, and mutually agreeable relationships with partners outside of the immediate network is going to be challenging for any Indigenous community organisation in this political environment if the benefits of such relationships only occur the state's terms.

Conclusions and Future Research

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community organisations are constituted by specific Indigenous populations existing in a meso-level, inter-cultural space between community wants, needs, and expectations on the one hand, and state legitimisation and control on the other. A sense of bonding capital, through family, community, and other organisations, can provide a shared sense of resources and reciprocity used to achieve group goals. However, the development of bridging and linking relationships and networks outside of the immediate environment of organisations, particularly with governments for key economic resources, may be more difficult to achieve. As power inequity on the basis of race is deeply embedded within processes of continuing settler colonialism, this means that Indigenous community organisations may be hindered by a largely exclusionary (or conditionally accepting) environment of governance. Building trustworthy, reliable, and stable relationships with governments is going to be a constant struggle for the Indigenous Sector and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations who seek culturally relevant services and governance mechanisms. The benefits of social capital theory for illuminating networks and relationships of Indigenous community organisations will have much greater value if Indigenous perspectives and understandings of these concepts can be highlighted and explored further relative to specific socio-historical contexts in future research of the Indigenous Sector. Such an approach is essential to highlight the often marginalised voices and the strength of Indigenous resilience to the ramifications of government policy, such as the on-going IAS.

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