



'Will the Real Aborigine Please Stand Up': Strategies for breaking the stereotypes and changing the conversation

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Abstract

This paper provides a background to issues discussed at a workshop held by AIATSIS in December 2009, and offers some of the outcomes in order to provide a basis for further debate and dialogue and to inform future forums. The workshop focused on a matter of growing concern to many Aboriginal people – the prevalence of an erosive mindset of deficit which pervades many Aboriginal communities and its attachment to notions of identity, which includes perceptions of authenticity widely adopted from similar views held about Aboriginal people by non-Indigenous Australians. The workshop discussed issues such as: the identification of perceptions of identity within and outside Aboriginal Australia; how perceptions of authenticity arise and why they persist; the social impact of such perceptions; and the impact of legislation and policy that links entitlement to identity. Disengaging the language of disadvantage (or pathologising discourses) was identified at the workshop as fundamental to effecting change. As methods of producing change, participants identified the need for creating safe spaces for discussion, challenging mindsets, habits and conversations and co-creating transformative pathways.

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What’s going on out there? — there’s black people fighting black people. As soon as you start to get good education, then somehow you begin to be ‘less black’; the colour of our skin in some areas seems to dictate how black we are and how black we’re not. It seems we are buying into what mainstream is imposing on us. Also language — if you don’t speak language then you’re not black. There’s the ‘where we live’ bit: remote areas are where the ‘really black people’ live, whereas in urban areas you’re not ‘really black’. It impacts on policy, relationships and dollars — [the perception that] ‘money goes to the north’. We always push the blame out there to others, we need to take responsibility and own this situation. For me it’s about how we talk to each other, how we talk about each other and how we talk between each other. We need to take a lead on this instead of sitting back and chopping each others’ heads off. We have to change the conversation from one of deficit to one of strength (SG).²

Introduction

In December 2009 AIATSIS supported a workshop of solely Aboriginal participation to discuss a matter of growing concern to many Aboriginal people. This concern centres around the recognition that an erosive mindset of deficit pervades many Aboriginal communities and that this includes perceptions of authenticity widely adopted from similar views held about Aboriginal people by non-Indigenous Australians. The impact of negative perceptions of identity and notions of authenticity range from effects on health and wellbeing and its use as a component of lateral violence to the constraints it places on social and economic development.

Issues surrounding identity and the ways in which negative stereotypes are used *by* Aboriginal people *against* other Aboriginal people are a matter of great sensitivity, with candid and rigorous debate stifled by valid fears of reprisal, which include being perceived as negating the presence of real disadvantage and exposing people and communities to further misrepresentation and outside attack. To the contrary, identifying these issues *does not* mean denying the real need of many Aboriginal people, nor the continuing racism which people experience, but provides mechanisms which may effect change in these areas. And if left undiscussed, issues of negative stereotypes within the Aboriginal community will continue to escalate. Those who brought the workshop to AIATSIS were convinced that discussion about these issues was timely, and that only Aboriginal-led initiative could navigate effective change.

The workshop aimed to provide a process and forum to unpack the issues surrounding negative perceptions of identity within Aboriginal Australia, to help navigate away from a mindset of ‘deficit’ and to develop tools to facilitate this shift — to ‘create a new conversation’.

This paper provides a background to the issues discussed at the workshop and offers some of the outcomes in order to provide a basis for further debate and dialogue, and to inform future forums.

Background

Persistent perceptions of deficit, difference and conflict have characterised and constrained the history of relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians since contact. The success of their saturation is apparent in a continuing approach that commonly presents the response to Aboriginal needs in terms of health and education ‘gaps’, ‘the Aboriginal *problem*’, ‘mainstreaming’ (making *them* more like *us*) and ‘the intervention’ (with the lack of agency that such a word implies). Despite the use of such language within programs to address very real health, economic and social need, the underlying approach continues to carry (and replicate) an implicit assumption of deficit and a positioning of the locus of control away from Aboriginal people. Instead of being value neutral, the use of this type of terminology frames Aboriginal identity in a negative way and acts, therefore, as a component of negative stereotyping. This may not necessarily express itself as active or overt racism but, instead, as a subtle and underlying prejudice that constrains relationships and engagement — whether between ‘white’ and ‘Aboriginal’ governance structures, or service providers and clients, or just between individuals — and is therefore a barrier to equity and change. Reducing bias requires positive identification of constraining language and attitudes, decisions to abandon them, and adoption of a different type of conversation. Accompanying the construction (and representation) of a ‘deficient’ Aboriginal identity by non-Indigenous Australia is an associated introduction of persistent and erosive concepts of ‘authenticity’. These concepts are now, paradoxically, embedded within the negative stereotype armoury, leading to the derogatory designation of some people as less ‘Aboriginal’, less ‘real’ or less ‘valid’ than others.

There is a significant and growing body of work that examines the associations between racism and health (e.g. Larson et al. 2007; Paradies 2006a; Paradies et al. 2008; Pascoe and Smart Richman 2009; Williams and Mohammed 2009). There are also studies that examine the effect of internalised racism and the phenomenon of the ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’ and what has been termed ‘stereotype threat’.³ This last factor is explained by Fischer (2010:20):

The basic idea of stereotype threat is that persons who belong to a group for which there is a negative stereotype about them may be vulnerable to underperformance in the domain to which the stereotype pertains, particularly if this domain is an important part of their identity. The person does not have to believe the stereotype him/herself. Rather the effect of stereotype threat is related to the extent he or she believes that others subscribe to the negative stereotype.

Exploring the effect of stereotype threat on education outcomes⁴ for black and Hispanic university students in the United States, Fischer (2010:19) concluded that:

while there are large initial differences in the likelihood of graduating on time for black and Hispanic students relative to whites, these differences are completely explained by assessments of campus racial climate, social life satisfaction, and grades. The findings suggest that interventions to reduce stereotype threat and improve the racial atmosphere on campus may go a long way towards reducing — and in some cases eliminating — disparities between racial/ethnic groups in college outcomes.

Agency

These types of studies can help us to understand and explore the effects of racism, prejudice and stereotyping by non-Indigenous Australians against Indigenous Australians. They are important in the context of this document and the recent AIATSIS workshop, as they also provide insight into the nature of the impact of the adoption of perceptions of deficit, authenticity and additional prejudicial stereotyping *about* Aboriginal people *by* Aboriginal people. However, such work is also intrinsically embedded in an approach centred around outside *imposition* of perceptions onto passive recipients that the workshop convenors were additionally focused on identifying and confronting.

As well as providing a forum for discussion about issues arising from negative perceptions of identity, the workshop was also concerned with assertion of Indigenous agency and responsibility as the means of driving a primary shift away from continuing engagement with imposed perceptions of deficit.

People are blaming things like Native Title for the trouble that is happening in our communities, but it's got nothing to do with Native Title. It's to do with us, about us taking responsibility around the way we talk and relate to each other (SG).

Identity and authenticity

White Australia has got it so wrong. But we shouldn't try to change white Australia, we should be strong in ourselves. What white Australia thinks is inconsequential really (CS).

While these perceptions may have arisen first within non-Indigenous Australia, introduced concepts of deficit, difference, authenticity and validity are also prevalent among Aboriginal people and are having an effect on relations between the many different nations, groups, communities and individuals that now constitute 'Aboriginal Australia'. Words which undermine Aboriginal identity are commonly used as insults and tools of social exclusion (such as 'coconut', 'text book black' or 'air-conditioned black'), as are accusations of supposed privilege and favouritism applied to those perceived as (or even accused of being) 'real blackfellas'. In doing so, a sense of division is created between individuals, groups, communities and even geography — thus the language/no language, remote/urban or north/south 'divide' (see also Paradies 2006b).

December 2009 workshop

Issues surrounding identity produce destructive relationships in the Aboriginal community — there are tensions. This is a dialogue that needs to be had. Remote communities don't have a public output for these tensions (JR).

The facilitated workshop was held on the 7th and 8th of December 2009 at the Ipswich campus of the University of Queensland. It was attended by 16 Aboriginal people from around Australia and from a variety of backgrounds. In developing the AIATSIS workshop, the convenors aimed to create a safe place and process for dialogue to discuss issues raised by perceptions of identity within the Aboriginal community and to chart a way forward that does not engage with stereotypes or the language of deficit and authenticity but is, instead, navigated by a strength-based approach.

All participants agreed that issues surrounding identity were of fundamental and increasing importance and had a real impact on community and individual relations. Participants also agreed that such issues were very sensitive and difficult to talk about, but believed that their growing impact required Aboriginal-led initiative to encourage safe discussion and facilitate change.

However they chose to define it and from whatever Aboriginal and/or non-Aboriginal cultural domains this derived, participants discussed pride in identity and heritage. And these definitions were not necessarily the same. Discussion around Aboriginality is commonly framed in a binary format (i.e. there is common viewpoint that you are either black or you are not). However, such binary framing can produce tensions both within an individual and between individuals (whether in families, groups or communities), as it not only constrains but carries with it the inherent tools of social exclusion. Neither does it allow for multiple identities or, rather, the multiplicity, wealth and diversity of everyone's identity (and see Paradies 2006b).⁵

It is important to clarify that the workshop participants were not talking about the *realities* of identity, but common *perceptions about* identity that are used in a damaging and detrimental way.

Workshop aims

Matters for consideration at the workshop included:

- the identification of perceptions of identity within and outside Aboriginal Australia
- how perceptions of 'authenticity' arise and why they persist
- how such perceptions effect the behaviour of Aboriginal Australians towards each other and inter-generationally, and what impact this has
- the role such perceptions play in, for example, lateral violence, internalised racism and social exclusion
- the impact of legislation and policy which links entitlement to identity
- developing strengths-based, collaborative approaches in order to overcome the challenges which perceptions of identity raise
- developing tools to help change behaviours and shift the conversation to one that is unconstrained by concepts of deficit, difference and 'authenticity'.

The workshop adopted facilitation techniques that included check-in, circle work, group work and a number of exercises to encourage safe discussion and awareness of issues surrounding identity, and to demonstrate the effectiveness of a strength-based approach. The workshop method was influenced by an Aboriginal framework called *Engoori*, which comes from the Mithaka people of the channel country in the far south-west of Queensland and which has proven successful for groups engaged in enabling change around identity issues within their own communities (see Ipswich case study, below). The *Engoori* process focuses on (1) *remembering and reconnecting* (who we are and what makes me/us strong), (2) *re-examining and re-learning* (what behaviours/thinking do we need to take forward/leave behind) and (3) *recreating and renewing* (how we ritualise the behaviours/thinking that we take forward).

The ‘identity of disadvantage’

If people are brainwashed to think they’re inferior then there is a collapse and people begin to act in negative ways and this is served up as proof of ‘inferiority’. This gets handed down to our kids who hear it all around. [We] need to remember how great we were and go forward from a position of strength (PM).

The work noted above surrounding the effect of imposed negative stereotypes reflects observations made by many participants at the workshop. Chris Sarra described his research which observed the regular and dominant use of negative words used by non-Indigenous Australians to describe Aboriginal people (see also Sarra 2005). These included ‘drunks’, ‘boongs’, ‘got it good’, ‘well kept by government’, ‘lazy’, ‘welfare dependent’, ‘aggressive’ and ‘disrespectful’. Perceptions of Aboriginal students were similarly laden with negative language; for example, ‘lazy’, ‘under achievers’, ‘cheeky’ and ‘defiant’. But Sarra also found that such language was echoed in the words used by Aboriginal people to describe themselves, and noted that this underpinned damaging and self-limiting behaviours:

The greatest tragedy is that young black kids make choices about these perceptions as well. Too many aspire to be these negative things thinking that they are supporting their Aboriginal identity. So those who do well get picked on by other kids who say ‘you’re a coconut’ etc. These kids think that the negative stereotype is a cultural identity but of course it’s not. At Cherbourg I was determined to smash this perception of Aboriginal identity, but we had to replace it with something — which brought us to the ‘Strong and Smart’ philosophy (CS).

The need to replace negative perceptions with strength-based approaches was a fundamental point arising from the workshop (see below).

Notions of ‘authenticity’

Perceptions of ‘authenticity’ may have arisen first in non-Indigenous Australia but are found today in the Aboriginal community. Participants noted that such perceptions are associated with a number of factors (or scenarios) which are often placed in opposition to one another:

- skin colour (dark or light skin)
- inequity in learning (i.e. degree of ‘traditional’ versus ‘Western’ education)

- degree of ‘retention’ or ‘loss’ of language
- degree of ‘connection to’ or ‘loss of’ ‘culture’ (‘doesn’t know where he’s from’)
- whether people live in ‘remote’ or ‘urban’ areas
- degree of ‘possession’ versus ‘dispossession’
- ‘Traditional Owners’ versus ‘historical people’ (‘you’re not from here’).

Social impacts

As noted above, internalisation of negative perceptions of Aboriginality has a wide range of consequences. For example, it impacts on health and wellbeing, constrains relations and aspiration, restricts agency and continues to limit the rules of engagement with outside interests. Perceptions of authenticity are also intrinsically linked to the weapons of lateral violence.

Lateral violence describes a range of damaging behaviours expressed by those of a minority oppressed group towards others of that group rather than towards the system of oppression. Although the behaviours result from experience of oppression, they are expressed sideways (laterally) towards peers and, in particular, use accusations of inauthenticity as a mechanism of social exclusion. Lateral violence is prevalent among many Indigenous groups, although it is not exclusive to Indigenous people.⁶ The significance of lateral violence for Indigenous groups is increasingly recognised, with much work already undertaken in this area in Canada, and there is increasing focus on its prevalence in Australia (e.g. Boladeras 2002; Dudgeon et al. 2000; Lamb 2007; Langton 2008; see also CRAH 2008). Allen Benson (Chief Executive Officers of Native Counselling Services of Alberta, Canada) remarks:

With lateral violence the oppressed become the oppressors. We’ve internalised the pain of colonisation and our oppression and we’ve taken it into our communities in the factionalisation and in the gossip and talk of blood quantum, ‘you’re half-blood’ etc (Creative Spirits n.d.).

Workshop participants considered the very real impact of lateral violence on individuals and communities. While recognising the role of past trauma in lateral violence, the workshop considered that such behaviour was also one symptom of, and intrinsically linked to, negative perceptions of identity and notions of authenticity. Addressing these issues would therefore tackle a range of consequences, and would be an effective method of combating the destructive nature of lateral violence at a community, family, workplace and individual level.

Lateral violence comes from identity problems. Identity is the sleeper. If you have a strong spirit all the rest of you is supported. When we don’t know who we are, something else jumps in to take that place (PM).

Why do negative perceptions emerge and persist?

Participants observed that in certain environments issues of identity and authenticity were particularly likely to emerge and flourish. These included situations in which entitlement, privilege or finance were linked to identity (such as Native Title), the interests of big business or the dispersion of royalties, and where determination of an outcome may depend upon enactment of what is

perceived by outside ‘providers’ as a more ‘Aboriginal’ identity. Participants felt that there was an inherent danger of engaging with, or ‘buying in to’ (or ‘selling out to’), identities created by others, particularly in relation to negotiations with big business and government.

Lack of effective (and courageous) leadership and an assumption of eldership solely by virtue of age were also identified as significant issues which carried with them an intrinsic complexity of how to challenge those who asserted ‘eldership’ on such grounds due to the strong cultural imperative of respect. Inappropriate consultation processes were identified as exacerbating tensions, as was the dispersal of misleading information or gossip, highlighting the need for appropriate communication processes when negotiating with outside interests. The historical reality of the displacement of many from their own lands and their relocation to other places has also constructed an environment where issues of identity, power and marginalisation can arise:

In recent history lots of people were brought together. Although it may be appropriate for only one group to speak or make a decision, government wants to bring everyone together [to consult], and this actually erodes or marginalises someone’s powerbase (JR).

The commodification of culture was also identified as a significant contributor:

Once white people came in then culture has become a commodity — we have allowed this to happen because of the cash. We are forgetting who we are. As people we are saying — that person can’t speak, that person can dance, that person can do welcome to country — which is due to dollars (SK).

Linked closely to environments that foster issues surrounding negative perceptions of identity and ‘authenticity’ are those which allow it to persist. A number of contributory factors were identified by the workshop participants. One of the difficulties of disengaging from the language of deficit is that it is the established narrative of government policy and is constantly expressed (whether implicitly or explicitly) both within Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia. Breaking away from this saturating narrative is challenging and requires the installation of a new type of language in its place.

Participants observed that supporting social behaviours also required assessment. For example, the ‘tall poppy’ syndrome led people to shy away from striving for more than what was perceived to be the aspirations of their peers, and the seductive nature of self-fulfilling prophecies provided a similar challenge. Focusing on successes and social capital rather than preoccupation with failure and low capacity was considered an effective method of counteracting persistent notions of deficit, as was changing a common assumption that success was due to luck rather than hard work and discipline.

Participants also discussed the importance of spiritual connection and establishing structured pathways to cultural learning. The absence of these was considered to be a significant factor that could counteract the growth of resilient Aboriginal identity, and thus allow negative perceptions to persist.⁷

It was also observed that either aligning or colluding with an identity of disadvantage could provide benefits, which might also partly explain its persistence. It could be used, for example, to gain acceptance from some sections of non-Indigenous Australia, as well as to receive money,

and in a government system focused on Aboriginal disadvantage could be a necessary strategy for obtaining organisational (and other) funding. Participants noted, though, that in the current environment it was also a challenge to talk openly and robustly about the victim without being perceived as ‘booting the victim’. Learned helplessness and welfare dependency were also important factors in the persistence of enduring negative perceptions of identity — and are, critically, themselves part of a disadvantage *narrative* (‘helplessness’, ‘dependency’).

Have you noticed how infrastructure is often around negative stuff — women’s shelters, drug rehab centres — these could be seen as rewards around deficit. Can’t get money for playgrounds, swimming pools etc. (KA).

Former Chief Executive Officer of the Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health, Mick Gooda recently noted that while the unarguably high level of disadvantage experienced by Indigenous people has been effectively used in the past to gain just entitlements and facilitate recognition of rights, there are inherent dangers in continuing to use this narrative today. To do so bolsters notions of failure and, Gooda (2009) notes, in doing so ‘we are constantly playing to and highlighting what are perceived to be our weaknesses — we are always playing catchup. I would prefer to play to our strengths as Aboriginal people.’

Workshop participants also observed that negativity itself was self-replicating and that establishing positive mechanisms could often require considerable determination:

The lifestyle of the community is a very positive attitude towards the negative. It’s something I feel. If I call a meeting that’s designed to help, and you’ll find maybe 20 if you’re lucky. But if you call a meeting about a [negative] issue, then everyone comes to watch! (ML).

Naming the elephant in the room

I was scared that I was going to get belted for [raising the topic] — that my elders would hit me with the respect stick. I don’t think one person can do this, we should all do it (SG).

A fundamental factor identified in the persistence of negative perceptions of identity and notions of authenticity was the sensitivity of the issue and how difficult it was to talk about it. Many participants called it the ‘elephant in the room’ and said that they had been waiting for the opportunity to discuss these matters with like-minded people for years. Breaking the silence surrounding these issues (and thus not giving them permission to escalate) required courage (including overcoming fear of reprisal) and came with dilemmas similar to those faced by ‘whistle blowers’. Part of the complexity lies in the confronting (sometimes one or all) of self, friends, family and colleagues with the necessity of exposing and/or taking responsibility for behaviours rather than continuing to blame others, as well as the danger of exposing sensitive community issues to outside scrutiny and attack. In this regard, providing community leadership and workers, as well as role models, with support was seen as a very important component of moving forward.

Having the courage to ‘call’ behaviours, as well as to take new pathways and make different choices, was seen as critical to the mechanism of ‘changing the conversation’. Again, this required not only raising awareness of the current situation, the language of deficit and the behaviours that can result, but also recognition that other options were possible. Such recognition would be

encouraged by ‘naming the elephant’, engaging role models and champions, community group work and ‘spreading the word’ (and see Paradies 2006b).

The challenge is, without white people in the equation, we have choices. We can choose to collude with victim status, or collude with ‘blaming the victim’ (it’s amazing how quickly you can get white support if you kick black people). Or we can choose to go ‘beyond the victim’ and just reject the whole stereotype (CS).

Aligned with the difficulty of raising the issue for discussion and the role this played in its persistence was the need to create safe spaces and processes for open dialogue. As conflict is frequently exacerbated because of a lack of opportunity to talk through the issues at hand, so is creating safe spaces integral to dealing with the sensitive issues of negative perceptions of identity and authenticity and their social consequences. The need is to create spaces that are open and safe enough for very serious talk about very serious issues; as one participant noted, ‘this is not a love in’. Constructing appropriate and safe spaces and processes is required to get useful traction for change.

It is important to create a safe and robust environment to talk about lateral violence in our communities...I like that concept of a space to talk. Construct a space to have a rational discussion. This isn’t any different to what was done for thousands of years (JR).

Changing the conversation

We need to have the challenging conversations otherwise it’s going to be going on over and over again. We need to start doing our own processes (JA).

If you take out the identity of disadvantage, you have to put something in its place (LB).

After unpacking the issues surrounding negative perceptions of identity, their effects and why they persist, the workshop focused on how to facilitate change and navigate people away from a mindset of deficit. Many participants noted the need to focus on solutions rather than problems, including increasing awareness about successful programs in this area and, most importantly, how we need to have the conversations. Noting the complexities and challenges previously described, participants identified three crucial components to enable change:

- create safety
 - enable a place and process for robust discussion
- challenge mindsets, habits and conversations
 - take responsibility
 - find courage (name the elephant in the room)
 - lead by example (be the change)
- co-create transformative pathways
 - engage with community groups to develop change
 - spread the word and engage in a national dialogue.

Fundamental to these components is developing a process that disengages people from a language of disadvantage and replaces it with an approach based on strength. Part of the workshop delivered

exercises to show how to facilitate a shift to a strength-based approach, and participants heard from a group working in their community at Ipswich that had been undertaking a program to deliver change in this area over the past three years.

Case study: the Keeping Families Strong Group in Ipswich⁹

In 2006–07 the Ipswich Community Brokers Report, funded through the Brisbane Indigenous Coordination Centre (Spillman and Gorrige 2007), identified a need to establish a family support service for the Ipswich Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. This report (and others) was part of the Federal Government’s Shared Responsibility Agreements, which were meant to help establish stronger relationships between Indigenous communities and government departments. During the Ipswich Community Brokers project, organisational representatives and community members identified key challenges (Figure 1) which embodied aspirations, priority issues and initiatives already instigated by some organisations and groups and those initiated through the life of the project. The focus of the report was on the following initiatives: Working Together (Building Leadership Capacity), Skilling Up for Life (Education and Training) and Doing Things Proper Way (Renewing Cultures and Traditions).

In 2007, following delivery of the Community Brokers report, the already established Ipswich Community to Action (IC2A) project engaged members of the community to workshop its findings to identify how these could be implemented, including consideration of the development of



Figure 1: Key challenges identified by Ipswich community while participating in the Community Brokers project (source: Spillman and Gorrige 2007)

future organisations, their structure and purpose. From these conversations the Keeping Families Strong Group (KFSG) was created and at a later stage merged with other groups, including the IC2A project.

The KFSG is a group of Indigenous people in Ipswich who are motivated in the process of creating an Indigenous family support service which is developed using their own cultural processes. The organisation is inclusive of Traditional Owners, historical descendants, members of the Stolen Generations, different language groups, Elders, youth and women, as well as family kinship structures, all of which/whom were considered central to creating a stronger community. Through a development process, the KFSG constituted this request in its community membership and governance structure.

In order to maximise its success, KFSG set out to create an organisation in which its culture and structure were ‘matched’. KFSG members were aware that many community organisations adopt (or are prescribed) a ‘pre-set’ structure that is not matched to the culture of the community, and can consequently be exposed to cultural impositions driven by external agendas and people that often undermine their success. ‘Cultural Match’ was identified by researchers on the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development as one of the key ingredients to creating effective governing institutions.¹⁰ It has been defined as ‘the match between governing institutions and the prevailing ideas in the community about how authority should be organised and exercised’ (Cornell and Kalt 2003:18). The legitimacy of governing bodies is based within local cultural-based values, priorities and behaviours, but to optimise success this requires that governing arrangements are able to operate, respond and take action within the contemporary environment.

Defining or identifying the ‘culture’ of a collective is challenging, as there is often a considerable difference between the ‘ideal’ (i.e. what people say are their values and behaviours) and what is ‘real’ (i.e. the actual values and behaviours they display). The KFSG undertook a process to identify *ideal* values and behaviours and to then create a means of establishing these as the *real* values and behaviours followed by the organisation. For the KFSG, an important part of this process was recognising that the way that the Ipswich community described itself needed to be challenged, and that the conversation (and the group) needed to start from a place of personal and collective strength as opposed to one constrained by a focus on deficit. When asked in the consultation phase, ‘what makes you strong’, a common response was laughter and a comment such as, ‘nothing strong here, mate, have a look around you’.

The process was started by asking the questions, ‘who am I?’ and ‘what makes me/us strong?’, with the answers providing the foundation framework from which the group and its individual members could then make informed ‘grounded’ decisions about how to move forward to solve the complex challenges faced by the community. The KFSG challenged its members to shift away from a standpoint characterised by a ‘lack of’, ‘needs to’ and ‘what we want’ way of thinking to a ‘what makes us strong’, ‘what we have’ and ‘what can we do’ attitude. As both a part of this process and as a way of enabling it, the group created an environment built upon trust, openness and a willingness to learn and apply. Negative behaviours that had been common at group meetings in the past (such as walk-outs and verbal abuse) began to change. The KFSG created a model of service that matched the newly emerging culture of the collective — which itself was based upon what was shared within the culture(s) of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community in Ipswich.

The KFSG used the *Engoori* process to guide the conversations held by the group members as they worked towards developing the cultural framework of their organisation. The group identified that the most important values and practices that should be fundamental to the governance structure of the new organisation were those passed down through family, parents and the many friends that had shared their lives and journeys — one that was embedded in indigeneity. In terms of process, this played out in creating space for people to remember and reconnect with themselves, their country, and other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people within Ipswich. It had to ‘sit well’ or ‘feel right’ for the Ipswich community. These conversations provided a commonality and created a bond to which everyone felt connected. In providing this positioning, the group did not seek to be ‘expert on all things Aboriginal’ but to speak from a standpoint that reflected their lives, their realities and their knowledge/experience as Aboriginal people.

As a founding principle, and as a way of enabling and encouraging a shift away from a deficit mindset, the culture of the organisation was established as ego-free and as an equal playing field characterised by mutual information sharing and input, real trust and co-creation of power. In this way, the KFSG defined the organisational culture by naming the values, the processes and procedures, and the behaviours expected, and were explicit in identifying the ways these were to be demonstrated and lived. By turning away from the language of deficit and starting from a position of strength, the way that the KFSG was established and developed helped create a real sense of hope for the future, individually and collectively. Community members attending regular meetings have stated publicly that, because of the processes set in place, they feel valued and honoured, they feel listened to and they feel safe. Since its establishment, the KFSG has been asked to share its experiences with many other groups with similar needs and continues to work positively with community members.

Conclusion

This paper has reflected on the issues discussed at the November AIATSIS workshop and the outcomes presented as a basis for future dialogue. Introduced by colonisation, negative perceptions of Aboriginality and notions of authenticity are now commonly found in Indigenous Australia. Impacting on health and wellbeing, as well as on social and economic development, negative stereotyping and its effects are of increasing concern to many Aboriginal people. They contribute to damaging behaviours such as lateral violence, and are entangled with (as well as foster) notions of helplessness and lack of agency. Negating their effects requires assertion of control and changing the conversation away from deficit towards one that is based on strength. The workshop considered that the language of deficit is pervasive and persuasive and requires Aboriginal-led initiatives to effect change. Processes such as those undertaken in Ipswich provide one means of effecting change at a community level. However, participants considered that there is also a need to have a national dialogue about these issues and thus to engage leading Indigenous opinion makers.

Although not explicitly stated at the AIATSIS workshop, many of the issues and processes discussed have resonance with recent developments in the field of Indigenous mediation and conflict resolution.¹¹ Consideration of work in that area may also be useful in informing further discussion about perceptions of identity.

AIATSIS and the workshop participants warmly invite your comments on this issues paper. For example, do you agree or disagree with its contents? Can you add further insights? Have you had similar discussions? Do you have examples of the issues outlined? Do you know of further work in this area by community groups and/or researchers? Is there informative literature that you can advise us about? Is your organisation pursuing similar or other strategies?

It is intended that a further meeting will be supported by AIATSIS in early 2011. If you would like to comment on this paper, attend the future meeting or are interested in finding out more, please contact Cressida Fforde (cressida.fferde@aiatsis.gov.au).

Notes

1. This paper is drawn in the majority from work conducted by participants at the AIATSIS workshop and their contribution is acknowledged here: Toby Adams, Darryl Andy, James Atkinson, Jack Bulman, Louise Bye, John Davis, Mick Dodson, Scott Gorringer, Sharon Kinchela, Marcus Lacey, Jason Mifsud, Peter Mulcahy, Joe Ross, Chris Sarra, Leah Tratt and Olivene Yasso. The facilitator was Kerry Arabena and secretariat support was provided by Nova Batman and Cressida Fforde.
2. Quotes in italics throughout this paper are taken from the written record of the AIATSIS 2009 workshop.
3. See, for example, Fischer 2010; Jagusztyń 2007; Roberson and Kulik 2007; Steele 1997.
4. For an additional study of the effect of markers of social identity on education outcomes in the United States, see Oyserman et al. 2006.
5. The issues discussed at the workshop also fit into broader debate about the problems of 'racialisation' which occur when one group is identified as inherently different from another. Once a group is racialised, a set of assumptions and stereotypes are attached to it, culture and biology become conflated, and identity becomes 'essentialised'. An essentialised identity (the 'real' blackfella) does not represent, nor allow for, the reality of the identity of the majority of people who identify as Aboriginal.
6. There have been, for example, a number of studies of lateral violence in the nursing profession — where it is sometimes also termed 'horizontal violence' (e.g. Curtis et al. 2007; Stanley et al. 2007).
7. There is a very real challenge in discussing these types of issues without engaging in a language of deficit or being perceived to reinforce some of the same processes that support stereotypes. This in turn is instructive about how stereotypes persist. Thus, for example, while for some people renewing cultural connection is important for tackling the issues at hand, others may view this as strengthening the perception of a 'real' link between 'being Aboriginal' and the degree to which someone has 'connection' to 'culture'.
8. Further reading on this issue can be found in publications which discuss the 'politics of recognition', a concept which explores the limitations, risks and opportunities for minority

- groups of establishing political power on the basis of difference and special need (e.g. Kymlicka 2009; Merlan 2009; Povinelli 2002; Rowse 2008; Starn and Cadena 2007).
9. Information about the Ipswich work and the Community Brokers report has particularly been provided at the workshop and during the writing of this paper by Olivene Yasso, Sharon Kinchela and Scott Gorringe. See also Yasso 2009.
 10. See the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development website at www.hks.harvard.edu/hpaied/ for further information.
 11. See, for example, Indigenous Dispute Resolution and Conflict Management Case Study Project 2009.

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