Title: Whose Capacity Needs Building?
Open hearts and empty hands: Reflections on “capacity building” in remote communities

Author: Deirdre Tedmanson – Lecturer, School of Social Work and Social Policy
Member, Social Policy Research Group
University of South Australia
Tel: 08 83024311 Mobile: 0439990889
deirdre.tedmanson@unisa.edu.au

Introduction
The term ‘self determination’ denotes recognition of the basic human right of Indigenous peoples to determine and control community futures and the management of economic, social and cultural life. But management itself is a constructed concept predicated on dominant cultural values of hierarchical control. The changing policy context of Aboriginal Affairs in Australia has created many issues for the realisation of ‘self determination’ in the management and delivery of services. This paper explores the difference between capacity building and capacity sharing. It advocates greater reflexivity on the “whiteness” of managerial and self determination discourses and greater respect for the depth of wisdom, strategic capacity and cross cultural ability of Indigenous communities. It critiques self determination and community capacity building as potentially ethnocentric notions; and discusses potential for productive engagement in ‘both ways’ learning and reciprocity of respect for cultural diversity in governance and management practice. It will reflect on the conceptual issues arising from a funded research project on “capacity building” in a remote Australian Aboriginal community struggling to overcome the disempowerment of chronic petrol sniffing amongst its young people.

The Anangu Pitjantjatjara peoples of central Australia were the first Indigenous Australians to be granted full land rights as a basis for economic, social and spiritual self determination through the provisions of the South Australian Pitjantjatjara Land Rights Act 198. However in 2002, the South Australian Coroner reported into the increasing deaths of many Anangu Pitjantjatjara people from chronic petrol sniffing. Reflecting a managerialist approach to “the problem”, both State and National Governments responded with meetings about ways to improve the effectiveness of their interventions. Researchers were commissioned to reflect on the Coroner’s Report, talk with and listen to Anangu and identify factors that would build the capacity of Anangu communities to deal with social problems. Two markedly different perceptions of the process of “building capacity” emerged. Dominant agencies positioned Anangu as THE problem. This lay at the heart of bureaucratic discourses about “capacity building” which legitimated entrenched racism. By contrast Anangu demonstrated the capacity and willingness of their organisations and leaders to improve community management. Anangu perceived the vagaries of dealing with remote, indifferent, unreasonable, dysfunctional, well meaning and often ignorant policies and organisations of the dominant culture as THE problem.

Community capacity building or is it bleeding?
The capacity of communities to respond to the pressures of social change is a theme has emerged as a theme in the international development literature over the past decade as the impact of globalization has become a central factor in people’s lives, (World Bank, 2001).
Notions of how to strengthen the functioning and cohesion of community life – the horizontal links between people both within a spatial but also a functional context has become an area of preoccupation. (Brehm and Rahn, 1997; Collier, 1998; Colletta, 1997; Giddens, 1998). The term “community capacity building” itself was coined for the cluster of community and social development actions which promote a more active civil or community engagement of people towards both greater interdependence and interconnectedness and stimulate entrepreneurial local creativity in a communitarian context. The World Bank (2000:25) asserts:

…..the capacity of communities can be built by strengthening… management mechanisms within communities and improving the strength and quality of linkages among communities—

This new capacity building jargon signifies an entrenchment of notions of what constitutes capacity, who defines capacity and what constitutes the relationship between the dominant culture capacity builders and those identified as capacity deficient. The word ‘community’ itself is used in a dominant culture context and cloaks several meanings and covert embedded assumptions. The term community capacity building will have little if any meaning to for example Anangu peoples’ of central Australia where concepts of such as Yerra, Ngapartji Ngapartji and Yungayungaworta are cited as encompassing reciprocity and community obligation. Supporting, helping, sharing, giving of time and resources, cultural affirmation and taking care of country are responsibilities not viewed as special individualised effort but as cultural competencies. (Kerr, Savelsberg, Sparrow, and Tedmanson, 2000:8). Ahmet (2001) makes the point that discussions of community capacity building in Indigenous contexts must avoid the paternalistic construction of a ‘deficit’ in the Aboriginal domain:

…..to restore capacity in our people is to be responsible for our own future. Notice that I talk about restoring, rather than building capacity in our people. After all we had 40 to 60,000 years of survival and capacity! The problem is that our capacity has been eroded and diminished. …I want to say some words of caution about the concept of “capacity building”, which has become the new buzzword of Aboriginal policy and social policy generally. The problem is that the concept of “capacity building” comes to be based on the idea that Aboriginal people are innately deficient, or incapable, or somehow lacking. There is a danger of fostering a hidden bureaucratic racism and prejudice against our people...yes: our people may lack certain skills, knowledge and experience - and may need training and education. - but our people do have skills, knowledge and experience! And our people are not imbeciles. We are fully-fledged human beings who are quite capable of looking after our own children and fighting for their future. So when we talk about capacity building – keep this in mind.

Public policy context or is it contest?

The gaze within public sector strategies about the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Lands however, remains fixed on the alien, dysfunctional, primitive “other”. Living as traditionally oriented, language speaking Aboriginal communities independently managing cultural and community affairs in a remote region is equated not with capacity but unquestioningly with deficiency and incapacity. What capacity is lacking? Capacity to be serviced? Capacity to be passively delivered to on bureaucratic terms? Capacity to be “cured” of addictive behaviours? Capacity to overcome the social “disorder” as defined by the dominant culture? Distance from the decision making city “centre” is encoded as representing the “problematics of remoteness”. A vibrant local political context where debate, discussion and time to include all views is interpreted as exemplifying “chaos, discord and lack of consensus”. The need for “leadership capacity building” is a key focus of government angst to overcome “inefficient” decision making about, for example, the issuing of permits for mining exploration. Blankets are gathered together to be transported to the Lands (max temperatures reach 45c) by concerned community members wanting to help!

In this way cultural difference is viewed as weakness not strength, a capacity deficit to be rebuilt or a problem to be “solved”. If poverty and organizational responses are complex and multi-dimensional problems in mainstream Australian society, how much more complex and multi-

---

1 Our thanks go to Lewis O’Brien, Bill Edwards and Rob Amery for advice on the use of terms.
dimensional are organizational responses to socio economic needs for Indigenous Australian's locked into intense ambivalent relations with the Australian state? The effects of traditional Anangu pathways from birth to adulthood being disrupted by invasion, protection, intrusion and continuous interference and disempowerment as well as changed economic and social externalities such as the global organisation of capital have stressed Anangu communities. But is this a question of lack of capacity to “manage” or a question of resistance, disempowerment from hybridity and contestation over strategies for readjustment? As Linstead identifies the tendency to universalise what constitutes “best” practice approaches as applicable across cultural contexts reproduces the hegemonic control of the privileged:

At any point in time certain discourses and modes of representation assume positions of authority, dominance, veracity and legitimacy...by claiming a privileged position – epistemologically, ontologically and often morally. (Westwood and Linstead, 2001:246)

Organizational activity and management on the Lands has become the focus of attention as internal disputations are defined and promoted by the dominant culture as illustrative of dysfunctional or “corrupted” organizational practice. Yet management itself is a social science construction predicated on dominant culture values of hierarchical and white normative -and indeed patriarchal - control. Management theory and administrative practice is an intensely political process.

It is also political knowledge in the ways that its theory legitimates some practices while it marginalises others. (Clegg and Palmer, 1996)

The preoccupation with organizational capacity and effective ‘legitimate’ voice on the AP Lands has led to a decision to replace the current self determination legislation over the next 12 months to bring it more into line with “Western contemporary governance approaches”, a forced election including a proposal to authorize “white” electoral officials to mark the bodies of Anangu voters so they do not cheat by returning to vote more than once. In keeping with Bhabha’s (1994) notion of the “on-going colonial present” the frustration of public agencies spilled over to end perceived “self determination” on the APLands, close to the 20 year anniversary of its proclamation:

“Times up AP Council!.......this crisis has simply gone beyond the capacity and control of the APY Council...... This government has lost confidence in the ability of the executive of the AP Lands to appropriately govern their lands”. South Australian Government Deputy Premier and Treasurer reported in The Advertiser News paper March 22nd 2004

This paper will proceed to locate the themes itemised below through locating them in recent developments in the APLands and referring to relevant community capacity building and critical management and cultural studies literature:

- capacity building vs capacity sharing
- “whiteness” of managerial and self-determination discourses
- Indigenous standpoints on wisdom, strategic cross-cultural capacity

References:


Faculty of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (FATSIS) and Centre for Indigenous Natural Resource Management (CINCRM), NTU 2002. ‘Submission’, to the HORSCATSIA Inquiry into Capacity Building in Indigenous Communities, September 2002.


Stokes, J. and Clegg, S. *Power, knowledge, management and bureaucratic reform*, School of Management, University of Technology, Sydney.


Westbury, N., 1999, Feast, famine and fraud: considerations in the delivery of banking and financial services to remote indigenous communities CAEPR Discussion Paper No 187


Young, T., 1995, ‘Ethical issues in health research among circumpolar indigenous populations.’ *Arctic Med Res.* 54(3)


McBride, G., 2000, *Adelaide’s recipe for life: wisdom of the Kaurna*, Working Paper Series, University of South Australia, Hawke Institute, No. 11, Magill, SA


National Health and Medical Research Council, 1991 Guidelines on Ethical Matters in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research, NH&MRC.


O’Donohue, L., 1998, Inaugural address: CRC for Tropical Health, Menzies School of Health Research, Darwin


Sanders, W., 1999, Unemployment Payments, the Activity Test and Indigenous Australians: Understanding Breach Rates, CAEPR Research Monograph No. 15
