



Australian Government

Australian Institute of Criminology

Domestic-related homicide:
keynote papers from
the 2008 international
conference on homicide

AIC Reports
Research and
Public Policy Series

104

© Australian Institute of Criminology 2009

ISSN 1836-2060 (Print)

1836-2079 (Online)

ISBN 978 1 921532 42 9 (Print)

978 1 921532 43 6 (Online)

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Published by the Australian Institute of Criminology

GPO Box 2944

Canberra ACT 2601

Tel: (02) 6260 9200

Fax: (02) 6260 9299

Email: front.desk@aic.gov.au

Website: <http://www.aic.gov.au>

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Domesticating violence: Homicide among remote- dwelling Australian Aboriginal people

*David F Martin
Anthropos Consulting, and Visiting Fellow,
Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research*

An ancient charter

Long ago, ‘before-time’—and thus in a sense before time—when the world was as yet unformed and not as people know it now, the Two Pungk–Apalacha Brothers travelled south together down the central western coast of Cape York peninsula singing, dancing, creating the totemic centres and apportioning the country between the different clan groups and languages of the region.

Eventually, they came to Okanych–konangam, south of the Kendall River. Here they speared Shovel Nosed Ray, dragged it up on to the shore and made a large fire. One brother went to get tea tree bark in which to wrap the ray while it cooked, the other stayed behind but, overcome with hunger, quickly cooked and ate the meat himself. When his brother returned, the two argued and then fought bitterly over this failure to share the meat and the younger brother nearly killed the elder, eventually forcing him back northwards. The younger brother continued south, creating and leaving Wanam ritual for the peoples of that area, while the elder created Apalach ritual for those to the north, each ritual cult with its distinctive body paint designs, dances, songs and calls.

This is an abbreviated version of part of the foundation myth of the Apalach ritual cult of Wik Aboriginal people from the coastal region of western Cape York Peninsula. In it, ancestral beings create landscape, society, culture and ‘Law’ as an interrelated whole in that distinctive way to be found in various forms across traditional Aboriginal Australia. There are particular cultural themes around conflict and violence in this myth of relevance to this paper. It will be argued that while ‘culture’ may not provide a causal explanation for such phenomena as violence or homicide, it does provide an essential grounding to understand them—and thus to develop responses. ‘Culture’, that is, does not of itself provide a causal explanatory framework, but it is an essential component of any interpretive one.

To return to the myth—here, conflict, competition and violence are not established as aberrant and nor is any moral evaluation made of them. Rather, they are an intrinsic aspect of the order of things laid

down in the ancestral time. The disputation, and ultimately the violence, arose from competition over resources and the failure of one ancestral brother to share meat with the other—that is, from a failure to adhere to an ethic of sharing between close kin which any Wik person hearing this myth would immediately recognise and understand. They involve conflict between an older and a younger brother, in a society where structurally senior people have authority over their juniors. Further, a key incident in the myth centres on a near domestic homicide, which nonetheless results in the creation of regional religious cults; that is, in the ancestral charter, conflict and violence lead to creativity and regeneration. Finally, the myth exemplifies an important principle of Wik social life, to be found across Aboriginal Australia; the right of individuals to take direct action, including the use of violence, to redress perceived wrongs done to them.

Cultures, continuities, transformations

In this paper, certain of these themes will be outlined, drawing on some 10 years of living and working as a community advisor and subsequently researching with the Wik Aboriginal people of Aurukun in western Cape York Peninsula over the past three decades. During this period, a set of interrelated social problems such as widespread alcohol abuse, violence and general community disorder have dramatically escalated. The aim of this paper is to place phenomena such as violence and homicide in a cultural context—how people themselves understand them and the values and meanings which inform them. At the core of the analytical framework being advanced here is an anthropological concept of ‘culture’. ‘An anthropological concept’ is said because it is a contested one across different theoretical paradigms within anthropology, and indeed beyond it. For the purposes of this paper, however, ‘culture’ refers to the sets of ideas, understandings, values, norms and meanings (many of which will be held unconsciously or tacitly), together with the practices that they inform, which are more or less shared by members of a particular social group or society.

Culture, in this formulation, encompasses not simply how members of a particular social group or society think, but also how they act. Nor is it to be confined to such features as aesthetics as expressed for example through art and dance, or religious beliefs, or the language spoken and so forth. These indeed are aspects of a culture—but so too are a host of other values and practices. Culture includes such matters as the meanings and values which people attach to relationships between themselves and others including with kin and the appropriate means through which those relationships should be expressed, the ways in which members of the group understand and implement hierarchy and authority and the values and practices around personal autonomy. It encompasses what it means for members of the particular group or society to be male or female, young or old and the repertoire of behaviours, roles and knowledge appropriate to each; how children are raised and socialised; and what arouses hurt, rejection and anger and how these emotions can and should be expressed. The culture of a group then can be seen as comprising its way of life and its ethos, and its members' more or less shared ways of being and acting in the world as they perceive it. Whether or not people live on their traditional homelands, or speak a traditional language, cannot be seen as proxies for this more complex notion of culture (cf Snowball & Weatherburn 2008).

Furthermore, cultures are not static; they do not somehow exist out of history. They are impacted by wider structural features of the natural, social, political and economic environments within which they are situated and in turn feed back into those environments. That is, cultures are inherently recursive, being impacted and often transformed by their environments through time and in turn impacting on and potentially transforming those environments. From this perspective, the dichotomy often drawn between structural and cultural factors underlying social phenomena is a false one, for each informs and is deeply implicated in the other. Of themselves, both structural and cultural accounts of social phenomena—particular manifestations and patterns of violence, or homicide, or substance use and abuse for instance—can only ever be partial ones.

Neither can cultures be understood as isolates. While this is more generally true in an era of ever

increasing globalisation, it is particularly the case for Australian Aboriginal social groups or societies; nowhere in Australia do (or indeed can) Aboriginal people live in self-defining and self-reproducing domains of meaning and practices (Martin 2005; Merlan 2005). This is not to deny the realities of cultural difference and distinctiveness. It is, however, to recognise that the contemporary values and practices found within even the most remote Aboriginal communities have been produced, reproduced and transformed through a complex process of engagement with those of the dominant society which has established what Merlan (2005) terms an 'intercultural' social field. This process has involved not just the domination of Aboriginal people by the wider society through processes such as state-instituted discrimination and forced assimilation, but also Aboriginal people's active appropriation and incorporation of many of the wider society's forms, values and institutions into their own ways of being and acting. For example, the author's own research in Aurukun has demonstrated the ways in which the welfare-based cash economy and the use of alcohol (to identify just two phenomena), have been incorporated into Wik society and culture in distinctive ways, but simultaneously profoundly transformed them.

All too many of Australia's remote Aboriginal communities are currently in a parlous situation. Aurukun in particular has been constantly in the national media for at least two decades now over alcohol problems, large-scale brawling, assaults and homicides, and more latterly the abuse of children. Yet the portrayal of such communities in the media and by public commentators as being essentially defined by their dysfunction ignores other aspects of their complex realities. Many of the most seriously affected communities continue vibrant practices around initiation, mortuary and other ceremonies, connections to traditional lands and use of Aboriginal languages. Indeed, as has been argued elsewhere (Martin 2005) while the causes of dysfunction cannot be reduced to culture, there is a complex interrelationship between the two with important policy implications (eg Sutton 2001).

More generally, the concept of culture, outlined here as constantly transforming and transformative sets of more or less shared values and meanings, practices and so forth, allows us to develop more

nuanced analyses of Aboriginal social groups and societies, including phenomena such as violence and homicide within them, than those which focus on such structural features as socioeconomic disparity with the general Australian society. For Aboriginal lifeworlds and values cannot be properly understood in terms of statistical deficits—what they lack or do not exhibit in comparison with the society around them (see also Taylor 2008: 115). As an example, objective health data on the comparatively high levels of Indigenous morbidity in no way help in understanding the finding in the 1994 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Survey that some 88 percent of the people surveyed identified themselves as being in good, very good or excellent health—health being an archetypically ‘culturally dense’ concept (Anderson & Sibthorpe 1996; Peterson 2005).

There is now a very substantial body of ethnographic research, the author’s included, which certainly demonstrates both profound and indeed accelerating changes in Aboriginal societies but also extraordinary continuities, even for those groups who may be generations away from their traditional forebears and no longer in regular, or any, contact with their traditional lands (see eg Brunton 1993, Cowlshaw 1998; Elkin 1951; Folds 2001; Martin 2001, 1998, 1993; Pearson 2000; Stanner 1979; Sutton 2001). Phenomena such as the high levels of violence and homicide which are seen in remote societies in particular have arisen through an ongoing process in which Aboriginal people have brought particular values and practices of an exceedingly ancient origin (Sutton 2001) to bear on their responses to the demands and opportunities of the colonising society, which in turn has impacted on and transformed those values and practices. This is the case not only in remote Aboriginal Australia, but beyond it. In summary, my argument is that in contemporary Aboriginal societies, both long-term cultural continuities and cultural transformation exist simultaneously and interdependently. I will turn now to a more specific outline of the values and meanings attributed to violence among the Wik people of Aurukun.

Culture and violence, and the abnormal enculturation of violence

First, the issue of domestic violence and homicide among Aboriginal people needs to be placed into a broader perspective. In considering phenomena such as domestic violence and homicide among remote-dwelling Aboriginal people, it is important to note that there are a number of definitional and cross-cultural issues which arise. For instance, there are potentially significant conceptual and practical problems around what is to be understood by ‘family’ and ‘domestic unit’ for kin-based societies in which virtually everyone is in some sense family albeit closer or more distant, and in which it is normal for people—especially children and young men—to be highly mobile between households and communities. Similar conceptual and practical definitional issues are confronted in the work of the Australian Bureau of Statistics in its census of Aboriginal people living in remote communities (eg see Morphy 2007, 2004).

Nonetheless, recent data from the National Mortality Database, consistent with patterns over many years (eg Martin 1988) demonstrates that for Indigenous Australians, the annual death rate due to assault is significantly higher than for non-Indigenous Australians. Across Australia, Indigenous females were nearly 11 times more likely to die due to assault than non-Indigenous females and their male counterparts were nine times more likely to die due to assault (Al-Yaman, Van Doeland & Wallis 2006 cited in Davies & Mouzos 2007; see also Memmott et al 2001). Indigenous Australians are overrepresented both as victims and perpetrators of all forms of violent crime. The rate of victimisation through family violence for Indigenous women could be as much as 40 times the rate for their non-Indigenous counterparts and despite Indigenous people constituting only around two percent of the total Australian population, Indigenous women accounted for 15 percent of homicide victims in 2002–03 (Mouzos & Makkai 2004). Many remote Aboriginal communities are particularly impacted by high levels of violence (eg Martin 1993, 1992). As one example, my own data indicate that in the latter 1980s, there was a homicide rate in Aurukun

equivalent to 400 per 100,000—extraordinarily high by international standards. Are such phenomena largely or entirely explicable in terms of ‘structural’ factors such as ongoing social exclusion, disadvantage, exclusion and racism? I suggest not.

It was seen that in the Apalach myth segment, conflict and violence were treated as intrinsic features of the order of things. Rather than establishing a moral code for everyday life however, myth places the principles and practices of that life in a transcendent and axiomatic framework. Certainly, conflict and violence are omnipresent features of everyday Wik life. Disputation, public harangues and swearing, ritualised provocation through a particular form of women’s dance, physical threats and violence, and indeed homicide, along with accusations of sorcery (Martin 2008), constitute a repertoire of direct action within a society in which there is a high stress on individual and local group autonomy, a powerful ethos of equalitarianism and a strong commitment to the right and obligation of people to take action themselves to address real or perceived wrongs done to them. This willingness to take direct, and if necessary violent, action on their own and close kin’s behalf is inculcated in Wik children from earliest infancy.

As was reflected in the Apalach myth, violence can arise as result of a failure to act in accordance with accepted norms of sharing. A failure or refusal to give positively valued tangible or intangible resources—food, cash, alcohol, help, respect—or equivalently the proffering of negatively valued ones—insults, public shame, gratuitous references, injury, infringements of ritual or territorial property—is a rejection of one’s own or one’s group’s autonomy and status in a society where all assert they are equals. As such, a response is demanded, for to not seek redress is to accept inequality and compromise one’s autonomy. This principle of retributive action in kind (often referred to by Aboriginal people as ‘payback’) pervades all dimensions of Wik life, from relations within the familial domain, to those between kin groups and other collectivities.

At the same time, among Wik, retaliation is itself a particular instance of a more general underlying principle—that of reciprocity and equivalence in the transactions of both material and symbolic items—

through which the crucial principles of autonomy and equality are realised (Martin 1993). Wik see retaliation as an intrinsic part of the way they have always dealt with the world. ‘This thing going to continue forever. This payback, it part of our culture’, I was told by one senior man. Like the flows of material goods, the symbolic exchanges of retribution serve to structure and reproduce not only the relationships between individuals but between groups.

Sexual relationships and jealousy are another major source of disputation and violence among Wik people. I have observed and recorded numerous fights between women over ‘jealousing’ from boyfriends or husbands, between men—mainly young men—over girlfriends and between partners over actual or alleged sexual relationships involving the other person. Many large-scale brawls are precipitated by fights involving aggrieved partners or male kin of young women. Heated argument or violent retribution arising from a partner’s infidelity is not the sole prerogative of either gender; I witnessed both men and women being assaulted by their spouses over sexual affairs, women fighting one another over boyfriends and men over girlfriends. However, while both men and women angered by their partner’s affairs frequently sought retribution through violence, men’s assaults were usually the more dangerous and potentially lethal.

Older Wik made it clear that conflict and violence over the control of sexuality was no recent phenomenon. Although they often made complaints about today’s young girls ‘running around’ too much, in the past, major arguments, fights and homicide had resulted from woynpiy or maarrich, the non-sanctioned lovers’ relationship. Both men and women had died in the past as the result of retribution from affairs, but to my knowledge at least, always at male hands. Sutton (2006) has compiled from various sources a list of some 65 homicides involving Aurukun people over the course of the twentieth century. In all but three cases, the perpetrator(s) were male and in just over 40 percent of cases, the victim was female. The data indicate that a significant proportion of these homicides (two-thirds of the total) took place up until the late 1930s when the total population was considerably smaller and well before alcohol and the cash economy were significant factors. There were

relatively fewer homicides in the 1940s and 1950s, less than 10 percent of the total, with virtually none then until a peak in homicides in the 1980s and 1990s—significantly, following the increasing availability of alcohol and the welfare-based cash economy.

Wik children, both boys and girls, when refused money or lollies or a coveted toy from the store, will display their outrage and rejection through spectacular tantrums, screaming, rolling around on the ground and sometimes biting and kicking their mothers. However, men—adolescents and young men in particular—are more likely to express their anger at rejection through violence than are women. Like the children, young Wik men too will frequently go into paroxysms of rage at being denied such items as food, money, or alcohol by spouses or kin. Their rage is manifested through such means as attacks on kin and destruction of their property, stealing vehicles for high speed and often life-threatening rides and discharging firearms as they run through the village. One young man for instance, when his non-drinking girlfriend failed to purchase him beer at the canteen, went berserk. He systematically smashed the walls and louvers of his parent's house, strewn the contents of their drums of flour on the ground, attacked and punched his father and nine year old brother and belted his small sister with a broom handle. Such public berseks by young men were commonplace occurrences when I lived and worked in Aurukun in the 1970s and 1980s and continue to this day.

Reser (1990), in a research submission to the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, argues that there is a significant difference between Aboriginal and the general Australian cultures in the domain of the emotions and in particular in the socialisation of emotional expression and coping. In his view, this is markedly so in the case of anger; he suggests that the 'substantial cultural elaboration of expressed anger' is a general phenomenon among many Aboriginal people (Reser 1990: 29). This was certainly true of Wik, for whom the forceful expression of anger provided both a central dimension of the individual ethos and a constituting dynamic of social life. There was a very strong emphasis on expressing one's grievances and anger, rather than restraining them. People would often say in English that they 'fight for satisfy'—fight until they

felt that their anger had been assuaged. The following is a translation of a response to my question as to why:

It's like this, let's say there are two people fighting. All right, his heart, that anger in his heart, in English you call it temper...it is as if his heart were crying. He feels as if he could do damage to that other person, he thinks to himself; what did that person say to me, he treated me as if I were timid and frightened when he confronted me...He has to settle that heart, he has to keep on fighting (Martin 1993: 146).

Anger for Wik people is also closely associated with grief; both are expressed by kin following deaths and at certain stages of subsequent mortuary ceremonies, when seriously ill relatives are being sent out to Cairns on the aerial ambulance and when men are sentenced to long prison terms following convictions for serious crimes. Both grief and anger are emotions which demand a response from other Wik, what Lutz and White (1986: 417) term a 'primary idiom for defining and negotiating social relations of the self in a moral order'. As such then, they are structurally akin to the demanding of food, money and other material goods; that sought, whether tangible item (money) or symbolic one (sympathy), serves to substantiate and indeed define the individual's connections to others.

In a background paper prepared for the Aurukun hearings of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (Martin 1988; see also Martin 1993), the author analysed incidents recorded in the Aurukun police station charge sheets for the sample year of 1987. These demonstrated that close to 45 percent of males between 15 and 19 years, and virtually all males between 20 and 29 years, were arrested at least once during the sample year, as shown in Figure 1 where the number of those arrested for each age and gender cohort is plotted against the total Aurukun Aboriginal population for each cohort. In Figure 2, the data has been disaggregated, classifying the various incidents in the charge sheets into five categories; alcohol related, property, assaults, firearm and other. This last category included sexual offences (such as rape and sexual offences against minors), resisting arrest and sundry other offences.

A noteworthy point is that overall, arrest rates for women for all categories of offences including

Figure 1 Those arrested at least once by age and gender

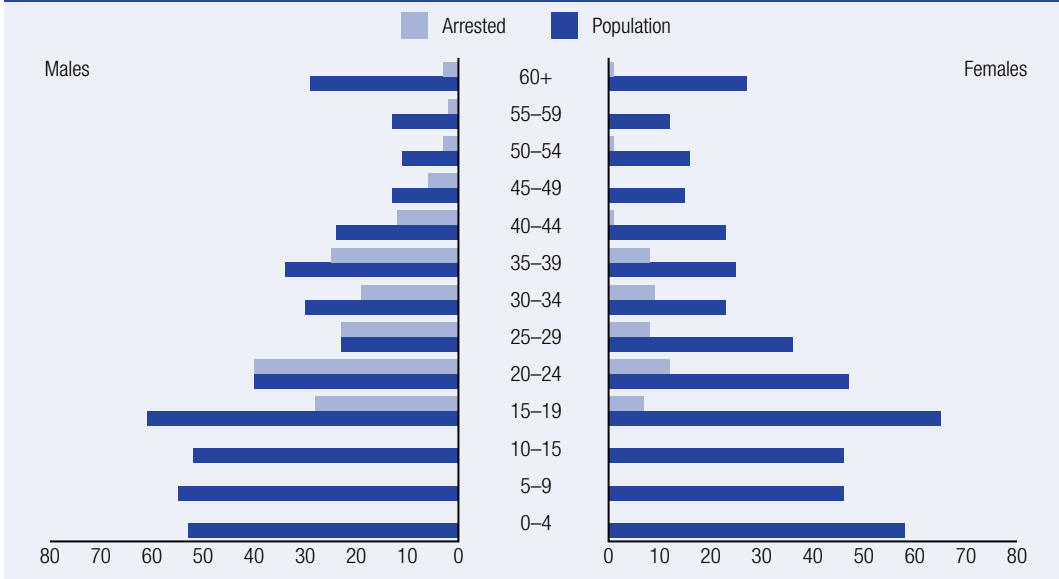
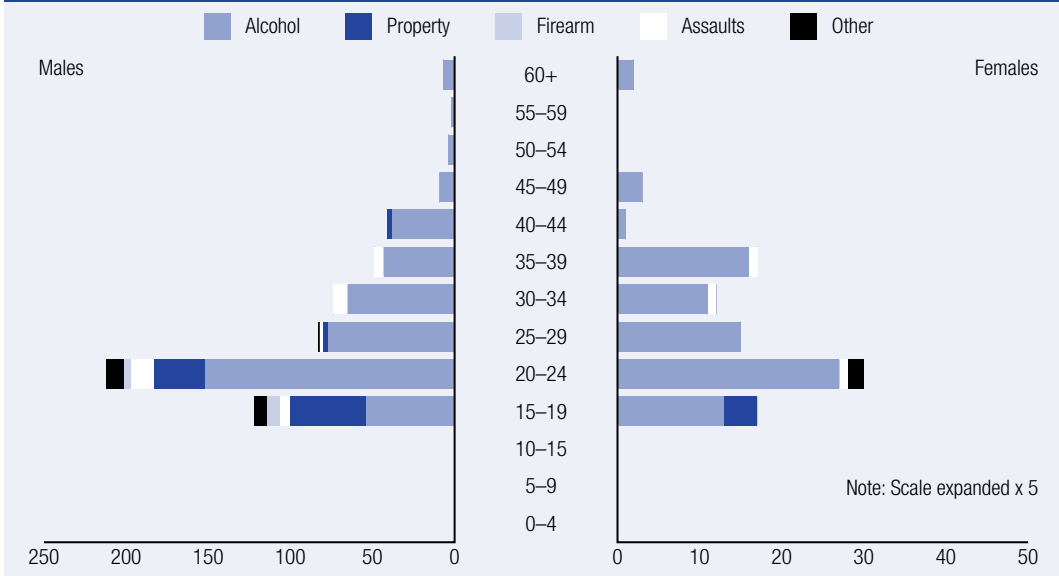


Figure 2 Offence categories by age and gender



drunkenness were less than a fifth that of men. Drunkenness, however, was overwhelmingly the most common reason for being arrested for both men and women, with the only exception being for young men between 15 and 19 years old, for whom property offences were equally common. Young men aged between 15 and 24 years, comprising some 16 percent of the population at that stage, were responsible for virtually one-third of all incidents

recorded. Those from this cohort were by far the most frequently arrested for drunkenness, property damage and assaults and for all the incidents categorised as 'other', including sexual offences. These data should not be surprising of course. They illustrate what Egger (1995) refers to as the striking relationship between masculinity and violence in Australia, further observing that the overwhelming majority of violent offences are committed by males.

Furthermore, in terms of the reproduction of social problems, it is this cohort of young men aged between 15 and 24 years in 1987 who now comprise a significant proportion of the fathers, and some of the grandfathers, of today's equally troubled young men aged between 15 and 19 years.

These data paint a suggestive picture in terms of the propositions being put in this paper. They indicate that there are major differences in the way Wik men and women have responded to the changes in structural circumstances in the previous decade or so. They also indicate that particular forms of behaviour—firearms offences, property damage and assaults—are associated with particular groups of Wik. No women were arrested for firearms offences for instance and assaults were largely the province of men under the age of 30 years. Such practices then do not simply arise through the collective and undifferentiated responses of Wik people to imposed and alienating changes. They are enculturated, engendered and specific practices of particular subgroups of Wik, subcultures we might say, which are both responses to the objective circumstances of their lives and contributors to these circumstances. For Wik growing up in this period in Aurukun and since then, endemic conflict, chronic violence and heavy drinking have become naturalised, assimilated to the rightful order of things.

To conclude this section, Wik people themselves give great prominence to conflict, violence and alcohol consumption in their own understandings and characterisations of their situation. While explicitly recognising a link between alcohol consumption and violence in contemporary society, Wik people assert that conflict and violence are 'from before', practices which they themselves see as part of their culture and as having a strong continuity with the past. I have argued elsewhere (Martin 1992) that while the nature and role of contemporary fighting and violence at Aurukun

... can be attributed in part to the effects of ever increasing intervention by the wider society, they are also deeply rooted in cultural values relating to such matters as the high stress on personal autonomy, on appropriate behaviour for each sex, on notions of morality, on how individuals are seen to be related to wider social groupings, on the appropriate expression of emotions such

as anger, and how individuals are expected to act upon the world in order to achieve their ends or redress wrongs done to them (Martin 1988: 16).

Yet, there are of course fundamental differences between the worlds of contemporary Wik and those of their forebears. Aggression and violence as such may well resonate with certain deeply sedimented cultural views and practices as suggested, but its massive scale and chronic nature, and its domination of community social, intellectual and emotional agendas are entirely contemporary phenomena. Over the past three decades or so, Wik life in Aurukun has been increasingly characterised by disputation, violence, trauma and chaos on a quite unprecedented scale. This is what Memmott et al (2001: 23–24) refer to as the 'abnormal enculturation of violence' in many Aboriginal communities, a growing acceptance and tolerance of quite extraordinary levels of violence as a normalised aspect of everyday life.

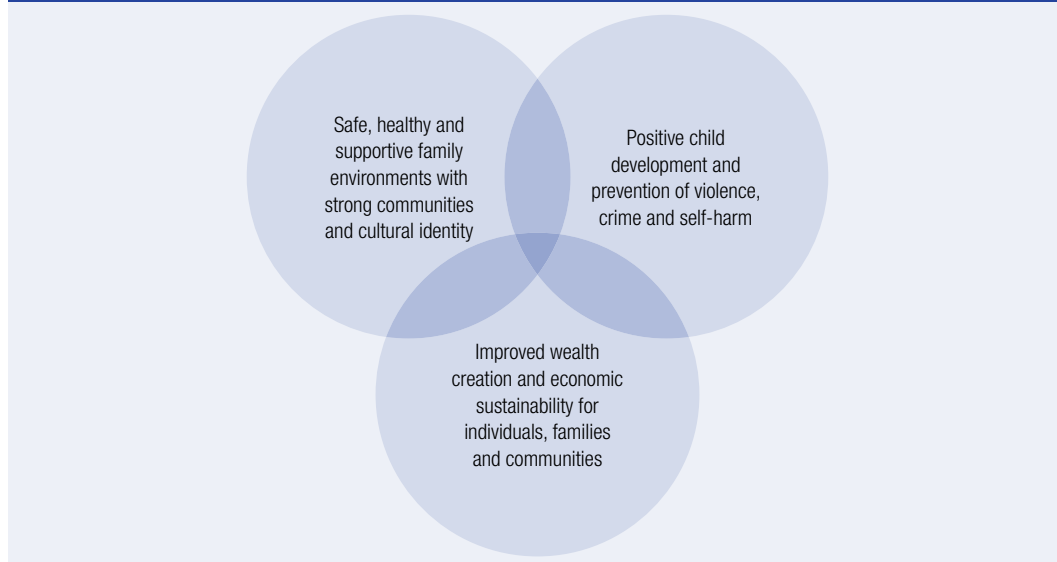
Implications for policy development

Finally, this paper will turn to a brief consideration of what the implications of this analysis are for the development of policies and programs to address the high rates of violence in remote Aboriginal communities. There are four general and interrelated points.

First, a caveat: this is in no way to accept that Aboriginal violence, let alone homicide, should be accepted because it is part of, or perhaps in complex ways linked to, Aboriginal culture. This issue has been explicitly raised in the recent report of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner (2006), in which it is stated that any attempts to recognise Aboriginal customary law in a manner inconsistent with human rights standards would place Australia in breach of its obligations under international law and activate a duty on the part of the Australian Government to nullify or override such breaches.

Second, the framework adopted for the analysis and interpretation of given social phenomena can have a

Figure 3 Priority Indigenous outcomes



Source: Productivity Commission 2003

major impact on the policy frameworks ultimately adopted by government to address these phenomena. This is more than simply a matter of the theoretical and technical underpinnings of a given interpretive paradigm being imported across into government. Despite the rhetoric, and often the best of intentions, concerning 'evidence-based policy development' there are inevitably ideological factors at work. This is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in the Aboriginal policy arena, which has been marked by competing and indeed diametrically opposed explanatory paradigms for Aboriginal disadvantage and social problems and consequently quite different means proposed to address them. A decade and a half ago, Brady (1992) observed that a completely different paradigm had been adopted to explain Aboriginal alcohol abuse in comparison to those used of Australian society more generally, with Aboriginal drinking patterns seen as resulting from the dispossession, discrimination and socioeconomic disadvantage suffered by Aboriginal people through the historical processes of colonisation. Under this paradigm, in contrast to prescriptions for members of the wider society, addressing the alcohol problems of individual Aboriginal drinkers is seen as requiring the historically-based social problems of Aboriginal society more generally to be addressed. I would

note in passing that Aboriginal intellectual Noel Pearson has forcefully challenged this view over the past decade or so (Pearson 2000).

Echoes of similar viewpoints can be found in the literature with regard to Aboriginal violence and homicide. Thus, Al-Yaman, Van Doeland and Wallis (2006) summarise other researchers as stating that the high rates of domestic and family violence in Aboriginal communities must be seen in the context of colonisation, disadvantage, oppression and marginalisation. As another example, Mouzos (2004) refers to the Productivity Commission's priority outcomes in its 2003 *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage* report, as an instance of policy frameworks developed to address the 'root causes' of Indigenous violence. Figure 3 reproduces the Commission's priority outcomes within its recommended reporting framework for government.

Each of these interlinked outcomes '... reflect a vision for how life should be for Indigenous people that is shared by Governments and Indigenous people alike' (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision 2003: xxi). These are clearly laudable goals for the citizens of a wealthy, pluralist democratic society such as Australia. However, for the Aboriginal residents of remote communities, realising these goals is going to require

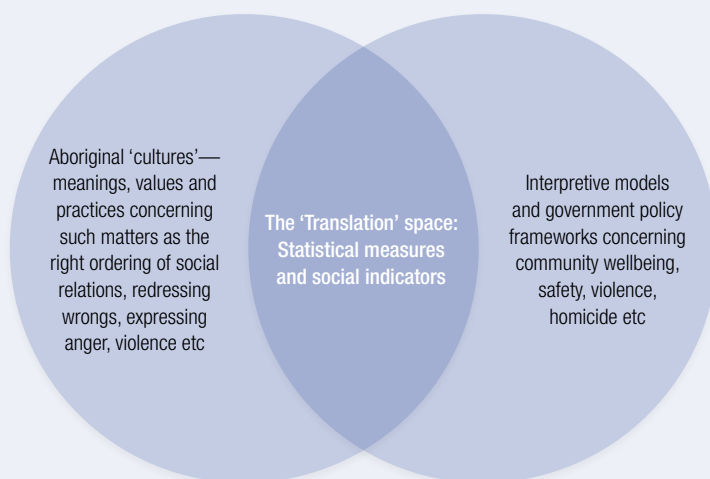
more than changes in the architecture of government service delivery; it will entail quite profound social and cultural change in those communities. To take one instance, if the propositions put forward in this paper are accepted, then a strong cultural identity (such as that of the Wik people of Aurukun) may actually entail a readiness to use violence to achieve particular ends. As another example, research demonstrates that involvement in the general Australian economy may be only one of a number of flexible and opportunistic livelihood strategies which Aboriginal residents of remote communities utilise to maintain core cultural goals such as retaining a degree of independence from the dominant society, visiting kin, maintaining connections to traditional country and taking part in ceremony (eg Martin 2008; Peterson 2005).

This leads to the third point—understanding and addressing issues around Aboriginal violence and homicide, especially but not only in remote regions, necessarily involves very complex cross-cultural issues. These have implications not only for Aboriginal people's own understandings and values around phenomena such as violence in the terms raised in this paper, but also for the data used both to develop explanatory or causal frameworks for such phenomena and to implement and monitor policy measures to address them. However, cross-cultural issues also go to questions of

what it is we are actually measuring through standard social indicators. As Taylor (2008) observes of indices of Aboriginal wellbeing, much of what constitutes different Aboriginal ways of life is not brought to the level of public and policy discourse and is not necessarily easily amenable to measurement. That is, adapting the heuristic device of Taylor (2008), statistical measures and social indicators can be understood as lying in a 'translation space' between the realities of Aboriginal lifeworlds on the one hand and interpretive models and government policy frameworks on the other. This is represented in Figure 4.

In this translation, there is always the possibility of varying degrees of incommensurability between the phenomenon concerned and the social indicator being used to measure or provide information on it. Particular care needs to be taken when it is not just the phenomena themselves which are being directly measured—levels of violence, numbers of homicides, alcohol consumption levels for example—but more complex analytical and administrative constructions such as the various components of socioeconomic status (employment status, education level, income etc). A failure to take into account cross-cultural considerations in these situations can lead to quite false assumptions being made about their import in and relevance to Aboriginal lifeworlds. On occasion, social indicators which have been developed for the

Figure 4 The recognition space between Aboriginal lifeworlds and policy frameworks



circumstances and culture of non-Aboriginal Australians (such as household compositions and family structures) can generate 'nonsensical outputs' when applied to remote Aboriginal populations (Taylor 2008 based on the findings of Morphy 2004). As the French sociologist and anthropologist Bourdieu (1977) admonished us, we should never mistake the model of reality for the reality of the model.

This, then, directly leads to the next matter I will briefly raise—that of establishing or implicitly assuming causal relationships between particular indicators and the social phenomena to which (it is presumed) they are related. This is of more than theoretical significance, since as discussed earlier, the interpretive frameworks for given social phenomena can determine the policy frameworks adopted to address them and the indicators selected for government purposes would appear to commonly reflect those interpretive models. This is clear in the report of the Productivity Commission (2003) referred to previously. As another example, in a model of Aboriginal violence which assumes it arises essentially through historical dispossession, racism and ongoing social and economic exclusion, indicators of socioeconomic disadvantage may appear to offer an appropriate measure against which to determine the success or otherwise of redressing both historical wrongs and social and economic exclusion.

Furthermore, failing to take account of Bourdieu's admonishment not to confuse the model of reality with the reality of the model, the next step in this chain of imputed causality can be to assume that policies designed explicitly to address socioeconomic disadvantage, such as reforming welfare and moving people to jobs in the 'real' economy, will also address problems of violence, excessive alcohol consumption and so forth. That is, unless it is clearly understood that social indicators lie in a 'translation space' between Aboriginal lifeworlds and government reporting mechanisms, and thus potentially provide more or less problematic measures of the subjective character of the actual phenomena within the Aboriginal domain, policies can be directed to impacting on the indicators rather than on the phenomena. If indeed culture is to be a component of an integrated theory of Aboriginal violence, as called for by Snowball and Weatherburn

(2007), then we will need more sophisticated proxies for and measures of relevant features of culture than have hitherto been available in surveys such as the NATSISS and in the census (eg see Peterson 1996; Taylor 2008).

Finally, what are the implications of this analysis for policies directed at reducing the high incidence of violence and homicide within many remote Aboriginal communities? The current Australian Government has adopted an overarching Indigenous affairs policy framework of 'Closing the Gap' — reducing current levels of Indigenous disadvantage with respect to life expectancy, child mortality, access to early childhood education, educational attainment and employment outcomes. This is a laudable, but hugely ambitious challenge for government, given the slow progress in these areas over recent decades (Altman, Biddle & Hunter 2008), and the longstanding failure of Australian governments at all levels to invest in the necessary capital and social infrastructure (eg Taylor & Stanley 2005). However, the issue of cultural difference and its import for the social and economic integration which almost by definition is necessary for socioeconomic parity is rarely given policy attention; culture, when it is raised in policy discourse, is either treated as the laudable exotic—as in Aboriginal art and dance—or the problematic and dysfunctional—mobility, lack of commitment to economic participation, violence and use of alcohol, for example.

However, there is always the possibility that health, educational, income and other socioeconomic indicators for particular Aboriginal groups or communities may suggest continuing discrimination and exclusion by the dominant society, whereas in fact they may be also be (in part) the entailments of preferred lifestyles and ways of being and acting in the world. A difficult philosophical, ethical and political question arises here as to what extent diversity should be accepted or even encouraged in a pluralist society, when it may be implicated in significant disparities in socioeconomic status (Martin 2008, 2005). Much of the subtext of this paper has been a call for full acceptance of the realities of cultural difference, especially in remote Aboriginal communities. Note that I am calling for acceptance of the realities of cultural difference, not necessarily for acceptance of specific different cultural values and practices.

In this paper, it has been argued that in dealing with violence and other such phenomena in Aboriginal communities, it is essential to recognise the cross-cultural arena in which government policies and programs attempt to impact on the phenomena at which they are directed. In devising policies to address social phenomena such as Aboriginal violence and homicide, for example, it has been suggested that more sophisticated and culturally informed analyses need to be developed which are not based on inferred causal connections between the phenomena concerned and social indicators established as 'proxies' for them. Finally, my analysis would suggest that cultural change in remote Aboriginal communities is essential to address violence. This certainly must entail significant changes to the structural circumstances of Aboriginal peoples lives—their access to education, appropriate housing, economic opportunities and so forth. But it must also involve profound transformations in deeply-held values and practices which are not necessarily seen as aberrant within Aboriginal groups but on the contrary, are part of the naturalised order of things. This is far from an issue particular to Aboriginal people, as evidenced for instance by the ongoing debate in Australia around the hard drinking and misogynistic culture to be found in many rugby league and other football clubs. As we know, such changes are never easy and success can never be guaranteed.

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