Can Theory Disempower? Making Space for Agency in Theories of Indigenous Issues

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Abstract
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are often presented by the media and academics as marginalised, dispossessed, and downtrodden. Historical narratives and statistics are used to strengthen this position. While this historical and ongoing reality must be acknowledged in order for meaningful reconciliation to occur, it must not come at the expense of Indigenous agency. Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people exercise considerable control over their own circumstances. Activists and other advocates for Aboriginal rights exercise agency "as resistance", demanding changes to current structures. Other people engage in agency "as project", adopting different tactics to achieve their goals. These tactics are often productive – creating Aboriginal services, for example – but agency is sometimes expressed in more 'repugnant' ways, such as crime or riots, such as the event following the Palm Island death in custody in 2004.

This paper argues that a sociology of Indigenous issues must incorporate agency to ensure that our theories do not deny Aboriginal people a voice. Aboriginal people have the ability to make changes and resist norms, and this should not be ignored in favour of structural causes of dysfunction. Drawing on the work of social movement theory, supplemented by Giddens, Ortner, Cowlishaw, and Scott, I explore the "two faces" of agency and suggest that research which privileges agency should be a key feature in a sociology of Indigenous issues.

Keywords: agency, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, resistance, sociological theory

Introduction

It is common to hear about Aboriginal disadvantage. News stories focus on the health gap, the poor living conditions in remote communities, the violence, and the substandard education outcomes experienced by Indigenous peoples. Even positive events can be seen through this negative lens, as exemplified by the ABC's *7.30* report into the dysfunction in Toomelah, QLD on the 29th of May – in the middle of Reconciliation Week (Meldrum-Hanna, 2012). The focus on these negative stories is important to bring about awareness of the problems, and eventual change. Those who highlight them likely do so out of concern for the communities, and a desire to spark positive transformations. However, the continual focus on dysfunction without an acknowledgement of the actions undertaken by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to initiate change shapes public perceptions of Indigenous people as being without agency, incapable of making their own decisions and directing their own lives. This definition of agency refers to an individual's or a group's ability to influence their own social world; that the choices they make, whether positive or negative, are in fact purposive. Using Ortner's (2006) explanation, agency can be expressed proactively (as project) or reactively (as resistance). The media is not the only culprit of focusing on structural explanations – sociological work which only focuses on the structural explanations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disadvantage can also disempower these communities, which is often the exact opposite effect we hope for.

I began reflecting on the potential for sociologists, and theory more generally, to disempower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through my supervision of a postgraduate student. Strongly committed to social justice and anti-racism, this student is working on a project about Aboriginal agency in Townsville. While writing about the local context, he included a brief summary of the Palm Island riots of 2004: a police officer unlawfully arrested and killed a man; the community was poorly informed of the process; the police investigation privileged the officer responsible for the death; the state would not press charges; in response to the riot the police responded with excessive force. There was nothing incorrect about any of these descriptions. However, missing entirely from this account were the actions of the community: the meetings that were organised by the community to come together and share their grief, the anger expressed at the lack of justice, and, the riot itself, were all ignored. I talked with my student about the implications of this write-up, that, although he was trying to avoid placing blame on the community or contributing to any moral panic, he may also be removing all the power and responsibility from the Aboriginal people involved in the event.

This conversation made me reflect on my own work. Because my research focuses on Aboriginal activism, agency seems embedded in these discussions. It should be difficult to talk about social movement activity without thinking about the individual choices and actions which lead to them. However, there are social movement theories which focus their analysis on the structural causes for movements. Activism becomes the result of an equation, which balances risks and opportunities, political processes and the strength of opposition. Gould (2010) and Goodwin et al. (2001) argue that these develop in reaction against earlier movement theories, which pathologised participants and their 'unruly emotions'. Some areas of social movement theory, in particular relational theory (McAdam, Tarrow & Tilly (2001) makes space for agency, as well as structure, in explanations of movement activity. Nonetheless, my own line of research does not make me immune to the risks of disempowering Indigenous people through my own work. Thus, I have written this paper to think through these ideas for myself in terms of my own teaching, research, and writing. As

someone who identifies as a 'critically engaged activist researcher' (Petray 2012), I have a tendency towards the same style of writing as my postgraduate student: focusing on the state dominance over Aboriginal people and how that leads to negative statistics and poor outcomes. However, to do so exclusively comes at the expense of their agency, so I argue that Indigenous theories need to make space for agency.

Historical Context

Australian history has undoubtedly played out in a way that has left the original inhabitants of the continent extremely disadvantaged in relation to the settler population. I will assume, for this paper, that readers are familiar with this history and I will not expand on it here. What is important to note, however, is Australia's relationship to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as a settler-state. The historical trajectory here is not unique – similar stories have played out in New Zealand, North America, and Africa. As Bratton (1979) points out, settler-states aim to control the movement, and especially the political activities, of the original inhabitants. They do this through appropriation of land for farming and mining, and disrupting traditional practices. This explanation of state control effectively ignores the ability of the colonised to influence their social world; it views society from the top down, and misses the nuance that happens at the "grassroots" level. The practices of the settler-state in Australia have occurred in various guises for most of colonisation. The effects of settler-state practice are easy to see – statistics about health, lifespan, unemployment, housing, imprisonment, and education are startling. To take just one example, Palm Island has 95% unemployment, an average life expectancy of 50 years, and an average of 17 people living in each house. An explanation of this situation which relies on historical and structural causes avoids 'blaming the victim', but may also remove the power that people have to work within those structures, to reinforce and to challenge them.

The situation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia is inarguably dire. However, there have been significant changes in the two centuries since colonisation. Advances such as the 1967 Referendum and the introduction of Native Title are the direct result of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander activism (along with non-Indigenous supporters). The settler-state, despite maintaining its economic interest in controlling movement, has shifted to accommodate these changes. It has offered scholarships, health programs, and employment schemes for Indigenous people. Public opinion has also shifted, as illustrated for example by the Sydney Harbour Bridge Walk for Reconciliation in May 2000, when over 300,000 people showed their support. Even in the most oppressive situations, Aboriginal people continue to exert agency, by resisting government intervention and by creating their own alternatives – for example, the Ampitwatjala Walk Off in 2010 (Murdoch 2010).

Agency

Adequate coverage of the proactive responses of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to the settler state must be included in sociological theories of Indigenous issues, and to do so requires an appreciation of agency. Classical sociology rests primarily on notions of structure, and the influence of structure on individuals remains an important focus in contemporary sociology. However, developments by contemporary theorists such as Bourdieu (1989) and Giddens (1984), complemented by ethnographic accounts from Cowlishaw (2003), Scott

(1985) and Ortner (2006), have all challenged the top-down view of structure and its influence on agency. In this paper, as in these previous theories, an 'agent' can be an individual or a group, which is a useful concept when thinking about Indigenous communities.

Giddens' ideas on agency, encompassed within his 'structuration theory', are useful in thinking about agency without ignoring the still-important influence of structure. In Giddens' (1984) theory, an agent is purposive, has reasons for their actions and can, if asked, explain those reasons. Agency is the *capability* of social action – the potential to make a difference to one's own social life. Agency is also characterised, according to Giddens, by reflexivity – that is, "the continuous monitoring of action which human beings display and expect others to display" (Giddens 1984). To focus on agency exclusively, though, is unhelpful – social actions are embedded in contexts, and are undoubtedly influenced by structures. Structuration recognises a social cycle, whereby agents are influenced by structures, but at the same time social structures are changed and influenced by agents. Agents' actions either reinforce or challenge structures. As Ortner (2006:130) explains, social agents "are always involved in, and can never act outside of, the multiplicity of social relations in which they are enmeshed". It is important that a sociology of Indigenous issues makes space for agency and recognises the relationship between the structure and the agent.

Ortner (2006) contributes to the discussion by identifying two "faces" of agency. The first of these is agency as resistance to power and to domination (Ortner 2006:143). Expressing agency as resistance to power can take many forms, and is not limited to overt protests. In fact, Scott's (1985) *Weapons of the Weak* highlights a number of forms of 'everyday' resistance, such as "passive noncompliance, subtle sabotage, evasion, and deception" (Scott 1985:31). For some Aboriginal people, crime, homelessness and alcoholism – as well as other 'repugnant practices' (Cowlishaw 2003:111)—may in fact be expressions of agency as resistance. Cowlishaw (2003) also looks at less 'everyday' expressions of agency as resistance when she examines a riot in Bourke, NSW in 1997. This fight, between police and Aboriginal pub patrons, was not a "symptom of historical injury stemming from colonial dispossession", according to Cowlishaw (2003:115). She recognises, in addition to social distress, the prevalence of "passion and intent, satire and humor, and … organic intellectuals" (Cowlishaw 2003:115). Thus, we can view this riot, and other acts of violence like it, as a collective exercise of agency as resistance: "that these people *are* responsible for actions that deliberately challenge the hegemony" (Cowlishaw 2003:115). Focusing only on the structural causes of riots like this one and the Palm Island riot effectively removes agency from the story.

Agency as resistance, though, is most obviously expressed through protest and activism. In the study of social movements, as previously mentioned, there can be a tendency to focus on structural causes of protest – political process theory, for example, explains the likelihood of protest not in terms of the agency of activists, but in terms of the political structures in which they operate (Goodwin & Jasper 2003; Crossley 2002). More useful is the recent shift by social movement theorists to relational theory, or the 'dynamics of contention' model. Formulated by McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly (2001), relational theory is interested in the dynamic interactions between agents and their opponents which happen within a "fluid, and socially constructed, 'field of contention'" (McAdam & Tarrow 2000:149). In contrast to the dominant study of social movements in North America, Resource Mobilisation Theory, relational theory moves away from a focus on structures and looks more at interactions. Likewise, in contrast to the New Social Movement focus on identities in isolation, relational

theory recognises identities as socially constructed, continuously renegotiated, and consequential (Tilly 2002:xiii). Thus, the theory asks how agents and structures interact in the production of those identities. Likewise, it allows researchers to focus on the dialectic between power and resistance, to tease out the relationship between the two.

The second face of agency is the agency of projects. This expression of agency is centred on intent, and the ability to engage and enact specific activities (Ortner 2006:143). Ortner (2006:144) points out that agency as projects is both culturally constituted and constrained by structures. Moreover, the powerful in society attempt to disallow this expression of agency by the subordinate. This face of agency is epitomised by the establishment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-specific services in areas like health, legal aid, housing, and education. However, these examples also illustrate the difficulty in separating the two faces of agency, and the importance of thinking of them as two sides of the same coin, rather than as two discrete expressions. Indigenous-specific services were started in protest of the failures of the mainstream, and were strongly influenced by the US Black Panthers movement (Lothian 2005). Their establishment, then, is both an act of resistance as well as a project.

The proactive face of agency as projects is another important focus for social movement studies. In particular, it parallels discussions of prefigurative movement actions (Petray 2012 *in press*). These actions are those which, rather than resisting and protesting the mainstream, sidestep the system and create small-scale versions of their ideal communities. They are often limited in time and/or space, but they are of interest to social movement studies because they are one of the most concrete expressions of agency as project exercised by movements. Rather than resisting the state verbally, prefigurative actions offer meaningful alternatives to the state. This form of agency as project, again, cannot be unbound from the resistance of the movement, but prefigurative spaces like Black Community Meetings and Indigenous-specific education are an explicit attempt by movements to influence their social world (Petray 2012 *in press*). Theories which take into account the power held by such movements are important, not just to social movement studies, but to a sociology of Indigenous issues more generally.

Conclusions:

It is important for a sociological theory of Indigenous issues to incorporate agency by focusing on both the proactive and reactive expressions of agency by Indigenous peoples. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander agency should be theorised in meaningful ways, rather than included tokenistically. Perhaps there is not space in every paper or study to do so, but if we seek to develop an overarching theory, agency must be part of this. We can do this by genuinely valuing the stories our research participants tell about themselves, and by juxtaposing those stories against the structural realities. It is easy, as researchers committed to changing the negative circumstances facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, to focus only on the structural causes of dysfunction and disadvantage. We talk about the Palm Island riot by telling the story of injustice and state domination. We critique the settler state and its failure to effectively engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. But using this history to explain and effectively excuse Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander "repugnant practices" actually takes away the agency expressed by Indigenous people. We need to begin to recognise the choices that Aboriginal people make in the shaping of their own social contexts, and take seriously their ability to both resist domination and enact projects.

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