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## Mutual Incomprehension: The Cross Cultural Domain of Work in a Remote Australian Aboriginal Community

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# Mutual Incomprehension: The Cross Cultural Domain of Work in a Remote Australian Aboriginal Community

## Abstract

This article is set within the context of concerns about Indigenous workforce participation disadvantage. It discusses conflicting life-worlds relating to work of both Aboriginal and non- Indigenous residents in Ngukurr, a remote community in South East Arnhem Land in Australia's Northern Territory. It contrasts an Indigenous social culture of kinship and relatedness to a Western one where employment is central to identity and its formal rules shape behaviour. We investigate how these different social ideologies affect cross-cultural relationships and shape the formal employment domain in Ngukurr. Given that governments have moved to more assimilationist policies in recent years, there are important policy implications following from this mutual cultural incomprehension.

## Keywords

Australia, Aboriginal, Indigenous, employment, economic, policy

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## Introduction

In Western nations the Indigenous population usually exhibits lower rates of workforce participation than the mainstream average. This is true for Australia (Biddle et al. 2008; Rudd 2010), New Zealand (Department of Labour 2007) and Canada (Statistics Canada 2006), as well as for other nations (UNO 2009:22; Eversole et al. 2005 *passim*) and even the United States (Cornell & Kalt 1992). This paper examines this phenomenon in a remote Australian community with an overwhelmingly Indigenous population.

Conventional microeconomic explanations for employment disadvantage in this Aboriginal settlement reflect those of similar remote or rural Indigenous populations in Australia (Taylor 2006) and elsewhere (Eversole et al. 2005). There are limited employment opportunities with a significant gap between the size of the labour force and the number of jobs generated in the local economy as well as inadequate physical infrastructure for many economic development proposals. Low levels of education, limited opportunities for training, poor health, transport difficulties, and issues of alcohol and drug abuse are also factors affecting employment capacity. While recognising the importance of these contextual supply-side factors in explaining employment disadvantage in Ngukurr, we do not focus on these specifically but, rather, discuss cross-cultural differences in the desire to be part of a capitalist orientated workforce. These cross-cultural differences have important implications for the effectiveness (again in conventional microeconomic terms) of the workplace supervision and task mobilisation assumed to be required for successful economic outcomes.

This case study challenges the argument advanced for the USA by Cornell and Kalt (1992:270) that culture is not an insuperable barrier to Indigenous economic development. We conclude that “culture”, as daily-ways-of-being in the world, is an important, almost sufficient,

barrier to Indigenous integration to some non-Indigenous mores and social requirements, such as working for a living. Ward (1998) has similarly suggested that culture is a formidable barrier to labour force participation amongst American Indians in Montana.

Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2005 and 2008, this article aims to capture the social complexity of work in the township of Ngukurr, in Australia's Northern Territory, and its interaction with official policy contexts. The paper will first discuss employment as a central manifestation of non-Indigenous culture and policy in Ngukurr and will then explore the intersection between that and the life-worlds of Aboriginal residents. Finally, we draw out some policy implications of that intersection.

Ngukurr has a population of approximately 900 residents (ABS 2006). Formerly the Roper River Mission (1908-1968), Ngukurr, like most remote Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory, was established primarily as a means of administering Aboriginal welfare policies. Its development included no modern economic base and the settlement has subsequently not acquired one. At present Ngukurr is not economically sustainable beyond the provisions of the welfare state (Taylor et al. 2000). Consequently, for over three decades, Aboriginal employment experiences have been principally shaped by the government employment initiative known as the Community Development Employment Program (CDEP).

The CDEP is a government scheme that provides a community organisation the monetary equivalent of its participants' unemployment benefits (plus fluctuating funding for equipment, training and administration), in order to create work positions within the community. Individual participants forego their unemployment benefit entitlements and work a prescribed number of hours (16 hours a week) in a defined work activity for the equivalent income as salary (Sanders 1988; Altman et al. 2005). This program has been the primary source of Aboriginal employment

in Ngukurr for over three decades. It both shapes the employment domain and the employment experiences of both Aboriginal and non-Indigenous workers in the community. Recent official policy debates around the CDEP (Commonwealth Government 2009) have questioned the program's future value in facilitating the transition of remote communities into 'economically viable' (in the orthodox microeconomic sense) settlements. However, moving to non-CDEP based employment structures and policy comes up against the current realities of life in Ngukurr.

### **The Centrality of Work for Non-Indigenous People**

When the main author (McRae-Williams) first arrived in Ngukurr it was arranged for her to take up a position as editor and facilitator of a local newspaper, the *Ngukurr News*. One of the first insights gained by having this defined employment role was that she became an embodiment of the typical relationship dynamic between non-Indigenous and Aboriginal people in the community. At this time in Ngukurr there were approximately 60 non-Indigenous employees in the community (ABS 2006). They principally worked in administrative/supervisory positions or in positions related to health, education, policing, or the local store. As in other remote Aboriginal communities, the non-Indigenous workforce in Ngukurr was very transient (see also Taylor et al. 2000: ch. 3). It was rare for non-Indigenous persons to reside in the community for more than three years. Cowlshaw (1999) refers to this 'nomadism' of white staff and proposes that it is legitimised through discourse around career paths and the value of professional development and experience.

Employment was the common reason for non-Indigenous persons to be living in Ngukurr. A significant proportion of these non-Indigenous employees stayed without their partners or family. A minority of individuals, however, had come to the community with their partners, who subsequently also found employment (whether on a full-time or casual basis).

Non-Indigenous employees, commonly called ‘staff’ usually only interacted with Aboriginal people during work hours. In these work-based interactions, non-Indigenous people were nearly always in a position of relative power, whether as a supervisor (boss), nurse, teacher, or program administrator. Bern reveals that this bounded interaction is not a new phenomenon. He stated in the early seventies that, in Ngukurr “*most contact between staff and village people takes place in the work situation. This is invariably a relationship of inequality in which the European is in the super-ordinate position....*” (Bern 1974:98-99).

It was obvious that structures of employment shaped most non-Indigenous presence, behaviour, and experience in the community. This is unsurprising since work, understood as paid employment, is what distinguishes industrial societies from other forms of society (Anthony 1977). For members of such societies, work socialises them and shapes political, educational, and social institutions. The centrality of work also endows employment with important psychological functions: it is a source of pride, fulfilment and social identity formation (see: Furnham 1984, 1993; Miller et al. 2002). Regardless of whether they liked it or not, the lives of non-Indigenous people revolved around work.

The development of capitalism intrinsically linked the concepts of work and money, producing a dichotomy between work and leisure. The behaviour of non-Indigenous people in Ngukurr reflected an internalisation of this distinction. They primarily worked with (or for?) Aboriginal people but confined relationships with them to the work domain, protecting their non-work time from employment and Aboriginal social intrusions. This was not an unreasonable response, for without instinctively establishing and maintaining this work/life dualism non-Indigenous people would potentially ‘burn out’ (a term covering a variety of manifestations, from cynicism to depression) and leave the community or surrender to inertia.

Anthropology and its methods of participant observation provided an insight into the complexities and difficulties of relationships with individuals from different life-worlds and with different opportunities. Due to both the research focus and McRae-Williams' position with the newspaper, it was within the domain of employment that initial assumptions and expectations were first challenged. Drawing from a discourse of community participation and empowerment (Arnstein 1969), the assumption was that encouraging local employment with the newspaper would bestow authority on the locals and a sense of 'ownership' would result. This ownership over the employment domain was supposed to empower and build capacity, pride, and social identity. However, confounding these sensibilities, the Aboriginal people working on the paper seemed ambivalent towards the workplace empowerment patronisingly bestowed upon them. Their expectation was that McRae-Williams would lead the project, make the decisions, and direct their behaviour. Their presupposition was that, as a non-Indigenous person, McRae-Williams would fill the role of 'boss'.

This same assumption was made by the non-Indigenous CDEP Coordinator, who provided time-sheets. It became clear that McRae-Williams was expected to perform authoritative and managerial roles for both non-Indigenous and Aboriginal people in the community. Seemingly, the job was not about facilitating local participation, with its supposed benefits, but of supervising Aboriginal CDEP participants and taking responsibility for their adherence to the administrative requirements of the CDEP scheme. Paramount was filling in workers time sheets, or 'signing-off' on the exact number of hours they worked. Official policy was attempting to make these workers employment-ready in the capitalist workplace by making them work-time conscious.

This objective was constantly confronted by the social realities of employment in Ngukurr. On a regular basis non-Indigenous staff faced such challenges as: some Aboriginal CDEP participants not turning up for work, or not arriving at the right time, or not staying for the appropriate number of hours; or taking an unscheduled 'break'; or, simply, just disappearing from their designated work area. The behaviours, activities, and etiquettes associated with normal/mainstream work environments, while not entirely absent, were consistently being challenged by many Aboriginal people.

Non-Indigenous people's response amounted to a pre-occupation of encouraging conformity to their own expectations of work-time and the expectations inherent in CDEP administrative regulations. This situation demonstrated that adherence to workplace rules is both a moral imperative and a practice enforced through processes of surveillance in work-central societies. Shaped by this ideology, the state was trying to make the CDEP scheme impose conformity to norms and rules on Aboriginal participants. Finding themselves responsible for monitoring time-sheets, non-Indigenous supervisors became instruments of the state where employment and its links to citizenship are built into practice, institutions, and social philosophy.

Foucault (1977) suggested that the state is a principle of power that exercises control through the surveillance and discipline inherent in all modern hierarchical structures, including the workplace. In Ngukurr, this surveillance and discipline occurred at several levels. For example, non-Indigenous staff operated simultaneously as both 'prison guards' and 'inmates'. As prison guards, they attempted daily to curb aberrant Aboriginal work practices to encourage conformity to the rules of the state. Pragmatically they also did this to maintain their own positions within the workplace, necessary in a culture where life revolves around employment.

The power of the state with its fundamental dependence on employment had been embodied and internalised by non-Indigenous staff, including ourselves.

As inmates, non-Indigenous (and Aboriginal) supervisors in Ngukurr were not simply tools of surveillance but were also workers, who felt they were under surveillance. This ambience of surveillance had colonised the non-Indigenous mind. It was not uncommon to hear discussion and judgments being passed on another's work ethic, work commitment, or behaviour. This phenomenon was both a product of the centrality of work to the culture of these non-Indigenous persons and, also, a process by which it was reproduced. It was rationalised by arguments that, by conforming to state or program expectations, the possibility of maintaining or enhancing funding or other resources that may benefit the community was increased. This enabled non-Indigenous people to understand their work as positive and purposeful and maintain motivation in a challenging environment.

The point is that without understanding our own culture (mainstream Australian or Western culture) and how it shapes our world and life, we are unable to accord difference its proper recognition. Beder (2000:263) claims that it is the social order that results from such work centrality that has "*come to be seen as natural, desirable, morally right and inevitable*". Yet that employment and its attached values are essentially cultural constructs often evades notice. Consequently, non-Indigenous people in Ngukurr often viewed their Aboriginal workers as lacking a work ethic or, even more extreme, as lazy and incompetent. It was only through our ethnographic fieldwork journey that we became aware of the challenges Aboriginal people in Ngukurr pose for mainstream work practices and expectations, which reflected different priorities indicative of distinct life-worlds.

It was only through the eyes of Aboriginal informants that our cultural presumptions about employment became obvious. One day while sitting in the centre of town, after a particularly anxious morning of failing to get the newspaper out on time, an old man sat down beside McRae-Williams and observed: “*Look those moonanga [white people]. Like chooks with their heads cut off, playing at being busy*” (McRae-Williams 2008:). The magic of work to the dominant culture was again driven home by the perplexity of a young Aboriginal woman. She could not understand why, late at night in the midst of captivating and enticing social interaction, McRae-Williams was in a corner trying to get some sleep (for work the next day). The suggestion to those around was that McRae-Williams was “*brainwashed*” by work and had just been born that way and could not control it. The extent to which a work-centric way of viewing and being-in-the world was internalised was a recurring theme, a cultural obsession that never faltered. For most non-Indigenous people in Ngukurr it delineated time and structured our activities, playing a part in how we saw ourselves, interacted with others, and experienced meaning and purpose in life. The contrast with Aboriginal social priorities was sharp.

### **The Centrality of Relatedness to Aboriginal People**

The Aboriginal kinship system has been explained as a configuration of belonging (Poirier 2005). Each person is a node within a dynamic and complex network of agency, social relationships, and responsibilities. Yet kinship – with its inherent notions of relatedness, autonomy, and acceptable authority – was not the only element defining how individuals engaged with one another in Ngukurr. As Musharbash (2003:252) highlighted, inter-personal interactions are as dependent “*on ‘friendships’ and animosity, on life-histories, on personalities and inclinations as on kinship*”. The point is that, in Ngukurr, whether you focus on kinship structures, life-histories, or personalities, life is shaped by how you are relating to others around

you. For those from non-kin-based societies it is difficult to conceptualise what this actually means beyond the abstract: how being part of such a system might feel or how it can give shape and meaning to daily life. Relatedness in Ngukurr was a potent psychological and emotional investment. It was about being-in-the-world with others, showing and feeling love, compassion, care and concern. It was about being human. Mullins' (2007) discussion of 'mobbing' in Aboriginal society reflects this point. He states that,

Mobbing is the activity of establishing, developing and maintaining identity with others, based on commonalities of place, descent, history or shared experience, developed and affirmed by means of the culturally patterned practice of sharing ... Any such alliance needs constant affirmation and activation. The price of neglect is rejection, hostility or even ostracism (Mullins 2007: 33).

The employment domain in Ngukurr is not separate from kin relationships. Rather it is formed and given meaning from within this framework. Family is not left behind, when an individual enters a workplace. Somebody may apply for a work position, show loyalty or disobedience in a workplace, change where they work, or disengage from the work environment altogether, as a way to demonstrate their present position in negotiations of relatedness.

Yet, as Austin-Broos (2003) noted, factors such as living in settlements, the introduction of commodities, and having access to cash have crucially changed how Aboriginal people relate to each other. Relations and relatedness are increasingly abstracting themselves from place, song, and rite. Enormous weight is being placed on relatedness alone (Austin-Broos 2006:11). The impact of these changes is evident in Ngukurr, where life has become a field of intense social drama permeated by both tragedy and comedy. While relatedness has not separated from the larger ontology of place and ceremony, processes of colonisation have fragmented a social field

where establishing, retaining, and maintaining these links has become difficult. This tenuous world manifests itself through inter-group violence, entrenched suspicion, fear relating to sorcery, and complex deliberations about the proper application and future of Aboriginal Law. Negotiating relatedness from within this degree of social and cultural disorder takes up much time and energy and is prioritised over formal employment expectations.

Aboriginal authority systems have been described as operating dynamically, principally determined by situation. For example, in Ngukurr a person's right to authority was context-based and often transitory. Leadership or decision making rights were based on the relatedness of an individual to certain others, specific places and particular activities at distinct times. Mullins (2007:35) stated that "*where testing of relatedness is not at stake, commands can seem to be arbitrary expressions of another's will... an infringement on one's own autonomy*". It is this tension between autonomy and relatedness that underlies all social interaction and practice in Australian Aboriginal society (see: Sansom 1980; Liberman 1985; Myers 1986; Martin 1993). Edge (1998) emphasised that in a relational society every individual is defined by a unique set of relationships and is subsequently different from all other people and is expected to be autonomous. According to Edge (1998), Aborigines value autonomy and the notion of 'individuality' in a deeper sense than do Western individualists. In Ngukurr the value placed on autonomy was reflected in child rearing practices, in people's acceptance of the good and bad elements of personality, their aversion to telling others what to do, and a belief in their right to direct their own activities.

It is, therefore, unsurprising that the value placed on relatedness and autonomy made working in supervisory positions in the formal employment domain difficult for many Aboriginal people in Ngukurr. As the comments of one woman effectively capture,

I ask them to do a job but some of them are my relatives so I ask them what job they would like to do. I try to organise them but they say I bin do that job on Thursday I nomo [don't] want that job. I try and write the roster but then I feel shame. I don't know how to tell them what to do.

[Another woman states] "we should have a meeting tell them to listen to you"]

[She replies] Maybe 20 times we bin having that meeting and it's still the same

(McRae Williams 2008).

If a supervisor failed to display compassion and empathy or did not respect a worker's autonomy, it was seen as "*not liking*" the other person. In Ngukurr an Aboriginal supervisor demonstrated compassion by recognising that the worker may not want to do a particular task; may not want to do it now; or, may want to do something else altogether; and, that these possibilities were the prerogative of the worker. Respecting their workers' autonomy was the source of considerable stress for supervisors, who faced opposing pressure to enforce conformity to mainstream work practices and adherence to the rules of the CDEP.

For example, an Aboriginal supervisor may be 'shamed' by others for not showing compassion for their workers' feelings or a particular situation. Not paying a worker, (i.e. withholding resources or not sharing), irrespective of whether they completed their work task or worked the prescribed hours, was for the supervisor to ignore their emotional link to the worker. Predictably compassion usually took precedence over the enforcement of work rules. Maintaining relatedness was essential to life well beyond the workplace. The expectation to show 'compassion' illustrates the absence of a boundary between work and life in Ngukurr. Yet,

the formal employment policy of the CDEP assumed Western attitudes to and behaviour in the workplace.

The value of autonomy within this relational society meant that being an effective ‘boss’ in Ngukurr required great skill and endurance (both in formal employment and other domains). Maintaining supervisory authority involved not simply reaching a deal in the workplace, but also negotiation of this relationship within all other facets of life. Sustained authority needed constant maintenance and re-invention.

### **Aboriginal Expressions of Relatedness and Work**

The behavioural expectations associated with being culturally, socially, and emotionally engaged with others in Ngukurr did not simply vanish within the framework of formal employment. Work for Aboriginal people in Ngukurr was essentially personal. This is in sharp contrast to the Weberian impersonality that is a focal characteristic of Western institutions. For example, “*school and work are about doing a job, being on time, getting things done. At the core, they are not about how people who function in them are feeling or getting on with their lives*” (Burbank 2006:7). Burbank found that while Aboriginal people understood the financial benefits derived from work they did not ‘feel’ the point of work. As an example, she explained that:

Hunting and fishing feel good because one engages in them when one feels like it, perhaps because one feels like eating a certain kind of food or sharing food with kin.

Working in the shop may feel good one day, but not the next. Yet the job requires that one be there, whether one feels like it or not, thus the sense of senselessness (2006:7).

In Ngukurr, most workers did not usually ‘feel’ work, although some work experiences were valued. The work/home divide and hierarchical structures were not internalised and did not

generate any higher level meaning. The attempt to 'feel' work by a minority of workers was unable to be sustained within the dominant culture. Wholeheartedly feeling work meant to abandon their very sense of how to exist in the world. Feeling work sporadically did not necessitate such a dramatic cultural shift. Of course, CDEP rules did not allow that distinction.

The materialistic expression of Aboriginal relatedness is often referred to as a system of demand-sharing, or as a "moral economy" (Peterson 1993; Peterson and Taylor 2005). In this system it is ethically appropriate to ask a certain range of others for resources and the moral responsibility is on the one being asked to share (Schwab 1995; Macdonald 2000). As Mullins (2007:33) has explained "*the aim and result of such [sharing] activity is the formation of social alliances...Any such alliance needs constant affirmation and activation*". Refusing cooperation is seen as insensitive and destructive to those alliances.

Bird-David (1992) interprets this demand-sharing practice as about the 'procurement' of resources. It is not simply about finding and demanding resources but, rather, focuses on bringing about, obtaining by careful effort, prevailing upon, and persuading. She has stated that this is not dependent upon hunting and gathering (Bird-David 1992:40; cf. Hunt 2000). In Ngukurr, plant and animal food resources associated with traditional hunting and gathering practices were only sporadically available. Yet in the contemporary environment of welfare payments, wages, cash and commodities, procurement activities remained the primary means by which individuals acquired daily resources. Bird-David (1992:40) notes "*Procurement' is management, contrivance, acquisition, getting, gaining*" and is deeply integrated into Aboriginal existence and processes of self-understanding.

Aboriginal people in remote Australia have only relatively recently been introduced to the cash economy. Prior to the late 1960s the older generation worked on cattle stations. Their

remuneration was mainly in rations and clothing, not cash, and the work was seasonal (Bunbury 2002). These workers were turned away from the pastoral industry, as it mechanised and shed labour following the official imposition of equal wages for Aboriginal workers. So the welfare system provided most current residents of Ngukurr with their introduction to cash. This secured and reinforced their almost exclusive focus on circulation and consumption (Peterson 2005). As a consequence ‘passive welfare’ or ‘welfare dependence’ facilitates the reproduction of a culture, where relatedness and its expression through procurement and demand sharing remains central and inhibits individuals’ capacity to attribute meaning or value to formal/mainstream employment (Pearson 2000).

### **The Aboriginal Moral Economy and Employment**

In the ‘moral economy’, supported as it is by welfare payments, maintaining employment motivation was difficult for many individuals in Ngukurr. Those who were employed were perceived by others as having access to more resources – not simply increased finances but also access to telephones, vehicles, and other equipment – and were subjected to increased demands from others to affirm and express relatedness. As the comments of one middle-aged man illustrate ... “*why should I work, I get nothing but humbug [demands for resources] when I work*” (McRae-Williams 2008:206). So the centrality of relatedness often conflicted with non-Indigenous/mainstream expectations about appropriate workforce aspirations.

The contradictions between a moral economy of procurement, which validates autonomy and relatedness, as against the formal rules and expectations of Western-style employment, are fundamental to discussions about passive welfare or welfare dependency in remote Aboriginal communities (Pearson 2000). Getting Aboriginal people to conform to the behaviours and values of a work-centric society was the principle aim of colonial authorities like governments,

missions, and pastoral enterprises (Stone 1974; Reynolds 1981; Powell 1982; Rowse 1998). It is a fundamental aim of government policies today (Commonwealth Government 2009; Working Futures 2009). However, this continual work focus has had little impact on changing the ways-of-being and world views of Aboriginal residents in Ngukurr. Rules of relatedness continue to be privileged over official workplace rules and are enforced through ever-present Aboriginal surveillance systems.

In mainstream Australia work has permeated all social institutions (educational, political, economic and cultural) and underpins many other contemporary ideological positions, giving them strength and validation. The centrality of work to Western culture has meant that official notions of self-determination, community empowerment or development, have placed emphasis on particular and specific ways of engaging in and 'taking responsibility' for workplaces. That Aboriginal people in Ngukurr showed a preference for non-Aboriginal 'bosses', a preference also documented elsewhere (Taylor 1984; Trigger 1992), challenges these Western assumptions and questions the basis of such discourse. As articulated by Coombs et al.:

Aborigines do not face the Australian economy with their time fully available for employment or divided simply between 'work' and 'leisure'. Rather they come with their time significantly allocated to Aboriginal purposes and activities (1989:85-86).

We do not argue that all Aboriginal people in Ngukurr fail to see the opportunities that employment provides, or are unconcerned about the lack of such opportunities within their community. Rather, it is that they may not 'feel' this kind of work, since it is not the defining or central feature of their cultural, social, political, and personal lives. As one woman eloquently explained:

You work for yourself, take responsibility for yourself, or maybe just your little family. I [am] always working for family, that's my main job, being responsible to family. Mother's side, father's side, husband ones, always working to show them I love and respect them. Then I know they will be there for my son and be working for him (Field notes, February 2008).

### **Relatedness Versus Policy**

It is well recognised that Australian Aboriginal relatedness is often in tension with Western workplace structures and associated ideology (see: Taylor 1984; Fox 1985; Cowlshaw 1999; Austin-Broos 2006). Yet, it would seem that recognition remains only that. Policies continue to create new discourses to support old directions, where notions of cultural difference continue to be sidelined. Current Indigenous public policy in Australia, at both the Federal (Commonwealth of Australia 2008) and Territory (Working Futures 2009) government levels, assumes and promotes values that grate against those of an ingrained moral economy. Communities are to be "normalised", making them like mainstream rural settlements and promoting local businesses. So-called welfare dependency is to be ameliorated by enforcing individual work discipline through denying welfare payments for non-compliance with work tests and regulations. Aborigines are to become Western-oriented by purchasing their own homes and even moving to the larger regional towns to find employment. The presupposition of official policy, as a package of 'normalising' measures, is that socio-cultural change will follow (Peterson and Taylor 2005: 115).

We suggest this official optimism may be unfounded. For example, there is evidence that when Aborigines migrate to larger towns they do not improve their employment status (Biddle 2009). This is not surprising: they are ill-educated and trained for a mainstream economy that has

little demand for unskilled labour. Also, even with some commercialisation of the larger Aboriginal settlements like Ngukurr and notwithstanding local employment readiness or willingness, there simply will not be enough jobs to 'solve' the unemployment problem. We noted above that there are about 60 'staff' jobs in Ngukurr. There are usually well over 200 people in the CDEP. Even if all the staff positions were indigenised (notwithstanding that Aboriginal people have difficulty in being supervisors), substantial unemployment would persist. So, fostering a culture of accumulation and deferred consumption within the Aboriginal people of Ngukurr is an objective that is at odds with their life-views and social behaviour. As Cowlshaw (2003:111) stated "Rejecting our proffered solutions to their problems could be seen as a way in which Indigenous people assert their autonomy from the state's suffocating solicitude".

A better alternative may be to design forms of work that accord with Aboriginal preferences to be on the land and to work when work needs to be done, rather than to set timetables. One option is to develop work on suites of activities, such as eco-system management, art and crafts, and ecotourism (Altman 2006; Armstrong et al. 2009; Gerritsen 2009). Such economic activities would accommodate rather than ignore Aboriginal world views.

### **Conclusions**

Official policy does not acknowledge the contradiction between its objectives and the social concomitants of Aboriginal social and work order. The problem is not confined to work and employment policy, it also permeates social policies (Gerritsen and Straton 2007). Other observers have noticed other instances of similar cultural incomprehension, as for instance over the repatriation of Indigenous remains from Western museums (Strathern 2010). Official policy assumes that Aborigines have to be dragged from welfare dependence to workforce discipline.

This overlooks that the people of Ngukurr have made a bounded accommodation with the dominant Western society and have learned to persist despite the dominant capitalist system. As Povinelli (1993:5) argues

Aboriginal economic action is, therefore, neither an enclave of subsistence production nor a capitalist penetration. It is part of an ongoing production of group – its economic, cultural, and political well-being – drawn from the multiplicity of cultural and political-economic discourses and resources that Aboriginal people find in their lives.

This paper has posited that work is the dominant place of intercultural interaction in Ngukurr and that entrenched Western work ideology plays a significant role in shaping non-Aboriginal experiences in the community. As Beder (2000:266) observed of Westerners:

Most people spend almost all of their time working, resting from work, or spending the money they earned working. A life that is not fully taken up with work and consuming seems to offer not only boredom but also purposelessness.

The Ngukurr Aboriginal world view, especially as related to work, is diametrically different. Work is primarily managing social relatedness and autonomy. Being unemployed or employed on the CDEP are not different states but merely different social locales for fortifying relatedness and autonomy. Reaffirming ties is equally, if not more, important than attendance at the formal workplace. Similarly, referring to Northern Cheyenne reservation Indians, Ward (1998:475) stated that:

Being unemployed does not necessarily mean that a person does not contribute to the household economy, nor does it result in a loss of social status. Unemployed adults may contribute to the support of their households through subsistence and informal

economic activities or through eligibility for general assistance, a situation which has become the norm for a substantial number of reservation residents.

This case study suggests that the lived reality of Indigenous individuals, families, communities, and cultures may present a formidable challenge to well-meaning state employment and economic development agendas. Increasing levels of employment (and education) for Indigenous people may well be a means of achieving more social and economic mobility, community empowerment, and the reduction of poverty. Yet, behind such governmental economic and social assimilation agendas is the assumption that colonised (or minority) subjects will simply be able to cast off their (often traumatic) histories, identities, and ways of constructing meaning, in order to subsequently transform into a shape that comfortably fits established standards. We argue that such a supposition portends future strife with a people who, even if they understood the implications, do not find Western work habits and priorities appealing and may continue to resist the cultural transformation necessary to profit from the benefits of an employment-centric society.

### **Notes**

- 1.** In this article the word ‘Western’ refers to dominant Australian society that has a basis in Western European culture and institutions.

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