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Title of Research:
Money, Business and Culture: Issues for Aboriginal Economic Policy

Research Publication:
CAEPR Discussion Paper No. 101/1995

Name of Researcher(s):
D.F. Martin

Time period:
1995

Geographic location:
A remote township of Northern Australia.

Methodology:
This paper is based upon ethnographic research undertaken in a remote township of Northern Australia with a population of around 1,000 Aboriginal people and 50-60 non-Aboriginal residents, primarily service-deliverers. Until the 1990s it had been geographically extremely isolated and run until the late 1970s by a mission administration. At the time of this research it was being increasingly exposed to the political, cultural and economic reforms of western society – including monetisation, both in terms of grants funding and welfare payments.

Aims:
The purpose of this paper is to identify the distinctive cultural values of Aboriginal people that apply to the Aboriginal way of dealing with money and business. That is, the paper aims to describe Aboriginal 'economic' values and practices and their relationship with mainstream economic values and practices.

Selected findings and insights:
Social relations and interactions are defined in terms of personal autonomy and relatedness to land and kin. That is, Aboriginal societies are characterised by both a strong emphasis upon individuality and self-reliance and the primacy given to the extensive social relations in which an individuals operates.

Cash is a vehicle for both personal autonomy (accumulation) and relatedness (distribution) and thus there is an inherent tension in the Aboriginal way of dealing with cash and business services provided. For example:

- money for services or goods is often not viewed within a mainstream market economy, but is determined by kinship considerations; and
- economic outcomes may be seen as much in terms of the accumulation of social capital as financial capital.
Much social transaction, including cash and material resources as well as family and kin commitments, arises as a result of ‘demanding’ rather than sharing or being offered resources. In making demands, it may not be due to immediate need but rather:

- Making demands may be a way of asserting one’s personal autonomy and explicitly seeking to assert one’s place within the social world.

The paper made the point that the original Indigenous social forms evolved in contexts where much of life took place in small fluid groups of closely linked kin. Once groups enlarged to more than 20 or 30 people, then tensions increased significantly.

- The tensions existing in townships may therefore be explained by the relatively large numbers of Indigenous people living in close proximity.

Aboriginal ‘business’ tends to be personalised business, embedded within the matrix of social, political and economic relationships of the Aboriginal domain. The success of a business is primarily evaluated not in terms commercial viability and cash profits, but rather social viability and social capital.

- Rather than ‘productivity’ or ‘efficiency’ being the key performance indicators, Aboriginal business looks to such Indigenous goals as sociality, balancing the complex system of social debt and obligation, establishing and maintaining political relations, and ritual preparation and performance. That is, the overall accumulation of social capital even more so than financial capital.

Yet within this social dynamic, the paper identifies important changes that are taking place with increased access to the welfare-based cash economy (and the cash economy in general):

- Aboriginal people are increasingly able to assert their independence from others, including men from responsibilities towards their domestic units;
- younger men can be more independent from older ones, leading to greater value being placed upon goods and services bought from the mainstream economy and less upon those originating essentially in the Indigenous domain;
- the high level of personal autonomy given to children also extends to them being able to ‘demand’ money and have responsibility for choosing how to use it. The paper contends that this leads to increased disengagement of parents from direct responsibilities for the care and nurturing of their children.

The paper however stresses that such changes are lessened by the continuing role of ‘relatedness’ operating in communities.

In terms of policy implications, there may be incompatibilities for particular regions or Indigenous communities between core government policy objectives of economic development, and Aboriginal cultural values and priorities relating to use of money, financial capital and the manner in which Aboriginal businesses operate. Furthermore, as this paper points out, other CAEPR research reached similar conclusions in regard to the nature of the ‘Aboriginal economy’ operating in urban areas.

Educational implications:

This paper has educational implications at two levels. Firstly, it provides insights into the complex nature of Indigenous social and cultural life which assist educators in their understanding of student behaviours. For example, the strong emphasis upon individuality in Indigenous culture influences Indigenous student behaviour and may be easily misinterpreted by teachers. Similarly the resultant tensions in larger Indigenous communities may have consequences for schooling. The development of behaviour modification programs
for Indigenous students to take into account high levels of personal autonomy, as has been the case in some schools, may also require an associated development of teacher programs to help them better understand student behaviour so that they can modify their responses in a culturally sensitive manner. [teaching]

At another level, these findings, when considered alongside other CAEPR research on the need for financial and consumer education, have significant implications for training courses directed towards business enterprise development and capacity building within communities. [financial management] [training]

Relevance:

*Introductory Topic: Culture, Community and Family Life*

*Domain 2: School and Community Educational Partnerships*

- Complexity and diversity of communities

*Domain 5: Pathways to training, employment and higher education*

- Adult return to education and training

Related papers:

S. McDonnell and D.F. Martin 'Indigenous community stores in the ‘frontier economy’: Some competition and consumer issues', *CAEPR Discussion Paper No. 234, 2002*