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Title of Research:
Indigenous household structures and ABS definitions of the family – What happens when systems collide, and does it matter?

Research Publication:
CAEPR Working Paper No 26 2004

Name of Researcher(s):
F. Morphy

Time period:
2001

Geographic location:
A remote outstation community of East Arnhem Land (NT)

Methodology:
Employs a case study of the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) census enumeration strategy by accompanying an ABS census collector to a remote community and reviewing the extent to which enumeration of family and household composition reflects Indigenous reality.

Aims
This paper seeks to evaluate the ABS's Indigenous enumeration strategy as it was applied in the context of an Indigenous outstation community and to assess the quality of data collected. In so doing, the paper aims to identify the extent to which the ABS classifications of family and household 'fit' Indigenous cultural reality.

Selected findings and insights:
This paper provides an insight into the kinship relationships within a typical small outstation community and the difficulties the ABS faces in identifying Indigenous household and family membership. The paper identifies two major problems underlying the interpretation of data received about the structure and composition of Indigenous households:

- the lack of congruence between the kinship terminology of the local system and that of the Anglo-Celtic system; and
- the difference in the dynamics underlying the structure and composition of households in mainstream and local Indigenous societies.

For example,

- none of the Anglo-Celtic terms for the kin comprising the 'nuclear family' are directly translatable into local Indigenous kinship terms. And vice versa – none of the core terms, let alone the non-core terms, of the local Indigenous system are directly translatable into Anglo-Celtic kinship terms;
the meaning of marriage is different, with marriage to kin a feature of Indigenous people but not so for non-Indigenous people. Similarly the meaning of kin is quite different, with a much broader inclusive definition among Indigenous peoples;

Indigenous households are often spread across more than one dwelling and the notion of a ‘nuclear family’ as a primary method of identifying a household does not apply; and

rather than nuclear family being a central family organising principle, in Indigenous communities the Indigenous kinship system is built on lineages not nuclear families.

The paper concludes that the Census is not able to capture the complexity of Indigenous principles of kinship and household structure. Furthermore the paper notes that:

the complex familial structures of Indigenous societies are one of their most enduring aspects, persisting in communities in ‘settled’ Australia as well as in remote, ‘traditionally-oriented’ communities; and

while in settled Australia Indigenous people are generally using the Anglo-Celtic terms themselves to describe their kin relationships, it cannot be assumed automatically that those terms have mainstream meanings.

Educational implications:

This paper provides a useful introduction to the complexity of Indigenous household structure and composition and to Indigenous kinship relationships. It is therefore applicable to the development of teacher preparation and in-service courses for those teachers likely to be working in schools with significant numbers of Indigenous students. [teacher preparation] [in-service]

The paper also provides useful background information for those principals seeking to establish education partnership agreements in their school communities, particularly in understanding the family and household dynamics of their Indigenous students and their potential effects on student learning. [partnerships]

Education policy and planning staff will also find the paper’s findings useful in so far as it warns about too heavy a reliance on ABS census information on which to address Indigenous family and household issues. [planning]

Relevance:

Introductory Topic: The Changing Demography of Indigenous Australians

Introductory Topic: Culture, Community and Family Life