Summarising: Schwab (1995), *The Calculus of Reciprocity: Principles and implications of Aboriginal sharing*
Responsibility for the preparation of this research summary rests with the authors of the MCEETYA report *Education, Training and Indigenous Futures: CAEPR Policy Research 1990–2007* and not the original author(s) of the summarised material.

Title of Research:
The Calculus of Reciprocity: Principles and implications of Aboriginal sharing

Research Publication:
CAEPR Discussion Paper No. 100/1995

Name of Researcher(s):
R.G. Schwab

Time period:
1995

Geographic location:
Melbourne (Vic.), Kuranda (Qld.), Kempsey (NSW) and Adelaide (SA) and remote communities of the Central and Western Deserts (NT) and Northern Australia.

Methodology:
This paper reviewed existing ethnographic literature on reciprocity and sharing among Aboriginal communities in urban areas and remote communities.

Aims:
The purpose of this paper was to identify the principles of Aboriginal reciprocity that applied to Aboriginal communities in urban and remote Australia.

The paper then aims to demonstrate that the notions of sharing and reciprocity are part of a complex cultural system in which individuals and groups provide economic assistance to one another but also variously display, shape or deny social alliances.

Selected findings and insights:
'Caring and sharing' is a phrase which is often used to describe the Aboriginal way of life but this paper shows that sharing is not a simple process, but is founded upon a complex set of principles dealing with the breadth of Aboriginal kinship, the nature of generosity and the basis of social and cultural identity.

- These principles underpin a system of strategic interaction through which individuals evaluate and respond to requests for assistance from other Aboriginal people, a social interaction which this paper describes as a *calculus of reciprocity*.

While the paper does not suggest that the **principles of reciprocity** do not operate flawlessly within households and communities and that tensions and misunderstandings never arise, the paper does identify the following principles underpinning Aboriginal social interaction:

- Aboriginal kinship is extended and flexible and may include 'kin' who are not blood related. As participants in such kinship networks, Aboriginal people have not only rights but obligations toward all individuals they define as kin;
- Sharing is the norm among Aboriginal kin – of shelter, food, cash and other resources;
• Sharing among Aboriginal people is propelled by demand but constrained by a delicate balance between what is considered appropriate to demand and appropriate to refuse;
• Saying 'No' to demands for resources has social not just material implications;
• Deflecting demands is acceptable but requires strategic behaviour not to shame or embarrass either party;
• The social implications of refusing to share are particularly profound for individuals in peripheral positions.

Educational implications:
This paper provides a useful introduction to the complexity of Indigenous culture. For example, the development of strategies by schools to deal with feelings of 'shame' is relevant to both remote and urban settings. This is particularly relevant to situations where Indigenous students are expected to provide their own educational resources or wear particular clothing and are unable to do so because of their parent/carer's lack of finances. This paper 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.

Relevance:

Introductory Topic: Culture, Community and Family Life

Domain 2: School and Community Educational Partnerships

Complexity and diversity of communities

Related papers: