

'MAINSTREAMING' INDIGENOUS INEQUALITY AS DISADVANTAGE AND THE SILENCING OF 'RACE' IN AUSTRALIAN SOCIAL, EDUCATIONAL AND VOCATIONAL TRAINING POLICY

STELLA CORAM

Abstract

Traditional constructs of inequality and discrimination to explain the life chances of indigenous Australians have been supplanted by the discourse of disadvantage. The boundaries of exclusion are made less clear by the emergence of inclusive discourse related to increased access and participation (outcomes) in which it is premised that disadvantage is the absence of opportunity and that the promotion of advantage will ameliorate disadvantage. In their critique of the rhetoric of outcomes, Smyth and Dow (1998) argue that outcomes fit the need for certainty in a world of increasing uncertainty. I borrow from Smyth and Dow's (1998) framework of central control to propose that mainstreaming, as a statement of inclusion, paradoxically, obscures institutional practice. Through a reading of disadvantage represented in social, education and vocational training policy, I identify a set of themes that rename traditional group inequalities related to class and race as economic, individual and or cultural disadvantage respectively.

Introduction

Disadvantage is a central theme in the explanation of the distance or gap between the life chances of indigenous and non-indigenous Australians in countless research projects and policy documents. The solution is the creation of advantage to meet the diverse needs of the individual

through increased access and opportunity (or targeted outcomes) in education, vocational training and employment. For Taylor (2004: 179), the shift from collective goals toward individualism bypasses the systemic nature of white supremacy, "an affair of statecraft". It is the erasing of history that obscures the systemic social engineering that has led to current patterns of inequality (Taylor, 2004: 179).

In their critique of outcomes, Smyth and Dow (1998) proffer that outcomes fit the need for certainty in a world of manufactured uncertainty. I borrow from their framework of decentralised-state control to develop the argument that mainstreaming, as a statement of inclusion, obscures the institutionalising of inequality. Whilst not denying the possibilities for change through *action* based measures, I suggest the importance for considering the implications underlying the discourse of disadvantage. The notion that inequality arising out of colonisation can be closed through increased access and opportunity, and the building of community capacity, unduly puts the onus on indigenous people to overturn the historical effects of structural arrangements. Furthermore, this delineates policy focus from understandings of how the privileged maintain their advantage and how outcomes reflect bureaucratic processes in the renaming or mainstreaming of inequality as disadvantage. This article, in examining the discourse of disadvantage, identifies a set of themes that depoliticise structural inequalities through the reframing of class inequality as economic disadvantage and of group or racial

inequality as individual disadvantage and or cultural disadvantage.

Mainstreaming Bureaucratic Process

Smyth and Dow (1998) view outcomes orientations as part of the new orthodoxy in economic rationalism and seek to debate the pervasive myth of outcomes, which in policy circles is an uncontested "article of faith". According to Smyth and Dow (1998) outcomes represents a naturalised and largely uncontested discourse. They explore the embrace of outcomes approaches and suggest that this is encased within a move toward technologies. The appeal of outcomes originates in the struggle to insert a degree of predictability and control in an age of manufactured uncertainty (Smyth and Dow, 1998: 291). There is no evidence that outcomes orientation actually produces results that improve the educational life chances of students. In contrast, Smyth and Dow (1998: 292) claim that outcomes has reduced, marginalised and rendered other discourses irrelevant.

Mainstreaming is the integration of bureaucratic process in policy. Artemjeff (2006: 20) cites the work of Sue Nott who proposes two conventions for understanding mainstreaming; that of the bureaucratic expert who revises existing policies and the participatory democratic who focuses on organisational change and strategy building. Mainstreaming thus is the re-organisation, improvement, development and evaluation of policy processes so that equality is incorporated into all policies at all levels at all stages (Artemjeff, 2006: 20). A broad anti-discrimination perspective under common policy, mainstreaming has its origins in gender constructs of equity. Gender mainstreaming originating in the 1970s has been widened to include other forms of exclusion in anti-discrimination policy and practice promoting equal opportunity. Mainstreaming, a new concept in the recognition of diverse

inequalities was adopted internationally including Australia (Artemjeff, 2006: 19).

The expansion of feminist mainstreaming to an overarching contemporary theory of inclusion is problematic. Generalist mainstreaming may overlook radical approaches that point to systemic oppression to explain inequality. In this context, the narrative of dominance is at 'risk' of becoming irrelevant to policy. Dobrowolsky and Lister (2006) observe that racial and or ethnic discrimination is no longer mentioned in British social policy. The noted critical cultural theorist Stuart Hall observes that "race and ethnicity are blanked out spaces" given the pre-eminence of statements of inclusion in British policy documents (cited in Dobrowolsky and Lister, 2006: 175). For Dobrowolsky and Lister (2006: 174) statements relating to social cohesion constitute cultural racism because of the requirement for the integration of minorities into mainstream culture. They note with interest that the term discrimination was later reinstated in subsequent policy for 2004. This is indicative of the contested politics of naming institutional (in) equality within policy.

In the inclusive discourse, two assumptions underscore the 'mainstreaming' of inequality; that disadvantage cuts across all social and economic sectors and that participation and inclusion will end disadvantage. Here, economic inequality and exclusion have been reconstructed as 'barriers' or disadvantages (to be removed) and social inequality have been reconstructed as a need to strengthen community cohesion or capacity. Vinson (2004) observes that ministers emphasise community building for mediating disadvantage. Hence, the discourse of disadvantage, underwritten by a lack of advantage, declares that anyone can suffer disadvantage (not just the historically oppressed) and that the community is 'there' to comfort the disadvantaged. To understand the discourse of disadvantage

in indigenous policy it is important to review a selection of major reports and policy statements, which consistently indicate the representation of disadvantage as a descriptive condition.

The Trend from Indigenous Inequality to Disadvantage¹

Landmark reports such as the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody RCADIC (1991) and *Bringing them Home, The National Inquiry into the Removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families* (1997) are explicit in identifying the appalling treatment of indigenous Australians. The legacy of Australia's history helps to explain the disproportionate detention rates of Aboriginal people (RCADIC, 1991, Chapter 10). Ronald Wilson QC concluded in *Bringing them Home* (1997) that the removal of children constituted "an act of genocide" (p. 27). *Bringing them Home* made 54 recommendations including a prime ministerial apology, the implementation of indigenous self-governance (or self-determination) in indigenous affairs and compensation for children taken – the 'stolen generations' (pp. 34-50). Sadly, the continuing disproportionate incarceration of indigenous Australians (Gardiner, 2001) indicates that the 339 recommendations to come out of RCADIC such as early intervention programs and improved prison operations to reduce incarceration rates and deaths in custody are yet to impact.²

Not surprisingly, the narrative has since shifted from the language of oppression expressed as "genocide" to reducing disadvantage. In his national apology to the 'stolen generations' the incoming Prime Minister Kevin Rudd (2008) acknowledged policy failures and the need for a new resolve to 'close the gap' between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians:

This new partnership on closing the gap will set concrete targets for the future within a decade to halve the widening gap in literacy, numeracy and employment outcomes and opportunities for indigenous Australians. (Kevin Rudd, 2008: 2)

His commitment to "closing the gap" to end indigenous disadvantage coincides with the policy of intervention in indigenous affairs established by the former Howard government. Jenny Macklin, the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs has already indicated that the Northern Territory Intervention Strategy 2007 under which indigenous welfare was quarantined and children submitted to health checks (Stafford, 2007: 4) will continue until the midyear review in July 2008. Macklin confirmed significantly that there will be no compensation to members of the 'stolen generations' (Skelton, 2008: 5). She did, however, restore the permit system to allow indigenous communities to determine access to their land as well as the Commonwealth Development Employment Program (CDEP), both cancelled under the strategy (Skelton, 2008: 5). The Minister's foreshadowing of concentrated efforts to address the need for housing and improved school attendance (Skelton, 2008: 5) continues the integration in policy of the creation of advantage to ameliorate disadvantage.

Altman (2004: 2) observes that following the demise of the Australian Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) in 2002, mainstreaming became the new approach to indigenous service delivery through the reallocation of indigenous specific programs to mainline departments. Closing the gap, the core indigenous affairs policy and approach is to be delivered through whole-of-government mainstreaming marked by collaboration, recognition of regional need, flexibility in delivery, accountability and leadership (Altman, 2004: 2-3). This is consistent with the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), which agreed in 2002 to trial working together with indigenous communities as

part of its Indigenous Whole-of-Government Initiative. COAG agreed to oversee the provision of more flexible programmes and service based on priorities agreed with communities and is informed by the principles of 'shared responsibility' and 'capacity building' for a 'shared future'.³

Closing the gap informs the focus in policy and research in terms of identifying 'what works' in policy elsewhere and setting achievable outcomes. The Social Justice Report (2007) refers to the need to understand 'what works' and 'why' (pp. 288 & 300). Gap analysis is about being evidenced based. As Jones (2003: 202) observes, an account of reality must be matched by proof. Gap analysis and the setting of targeted outcomes have been central to policy formulation for addressing indigenous disadvantage. In the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (1989: 1) it is stated that that despite improvements disadvantage remains. "Gaps persist between indigenous and non-indigenous students across the training and education sectors". The aim is to bring about equity by accelerating improvements in education outcomes for indigenous Australians. Strategic interventions in addition to mainstream funding will accelerate improvements in indigenous student learning outcomes (National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy, 1989: 1).

The commonsense response to disadvantage evidenced by the widening *not* closing of the gap is to increase access and equity. The national statement for vocational training, *Shaping our Future 2004-2010* champions "building equity into core business" so that "indigenous Australians will have skills for viable jobs" (*Shaping our Future*, 2004: 7). Consistent with the charter of strategic interventions mapped out in the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy to "accelerate" indigenous learning, the slow pace of change has necessitated renewed rhetoric of action expressed in

'ramping up' objectives and targets. The Victorian Minister for Education, Bronwyn Pike, is quoted expressing the need for "accelerating Koori learning outcomes" (Tomazin, 2008: 4).

Indigenous disadvantage covers a range of perspectives in reports and policy. The Social Justice Report (2002), sets benchmarking of indigenous disadvantage from a human rights perspective. "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are significantly disadvantaged in contemporary Australian society..." (Social Justice Report, 2002: 2). Disadvantage is reflected in statistics showing significant health and unemployment, low attainment in the education sector, unsatisfactory housing and infrastructure, incarceration and deaths in custody (Social Justice Report, 2002: 2). The report continues: "The single, significant contributing factor to incarceration is the disadvantaged position of indigenous people socially, economically and culturally. The cause of systemic disadvantage is fundamental disempowerment and marginalisation of indigenous peoples (Social Justice Report, 2002: 2). Human rights represent individual rather than collective rights (Niezen, 2003). Given the 'threat' to collective identity, it is significant that disadvantage as a human rights issue for indigenous people continues to inform the Social Justice Report for 2007. Clearly, the purpose in linking indigenous disadvantage to human rights is to demarcate indigenous disadvantage from non-indigenous disadvantage namely because it is derived of colonial hegemony. Renaming the effects of 'history' through the discourse of disadvantage though is dangerous because it paves the foundation for the creation of the disadvantaged (diverse) individual not 'encumbered' by race or ethnic identifications. It is significant that the document *Addressing Disadvantage* (1994) prepared by the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation writes of the shutting down of successful small business so as to limit competition for non-

indigenous operations (pp. 14-17). Disadvantage is not incidental or an absence of individual advantage, it is deliberate, a consequence of history, of exclusion.

The discourse of 'tackling' or 'overcoming' disadvantage is central theme in policy. The National Indigenous English Literacy and Numeracy Strategy 2000-2004 (2000: 4) refers to tackling educational disadvantages faced by indigenous children. The strategy sets as its model dual learning based on English literacy and numeracy in addition to indigenous culture and languages. The national blueprint *Overcoming Disadvantage* (2005) sets holding governments accountable for achieving this. This follows *Sustaining the Reconciliation Process* (2000: 1), which lists the strategies of promoting recognition of rights, overcoming disadvantage and economic independence in its road map to reconciliation. In terms of state policy, the Victorian Aboriginal Justice Agreement (p.1) states that "it is not possible to tackle the over-representation of Aboriginals in the criminal justice system without tackling the disproportionately high levels of indigenous disadvantage".

The turn to mainstreaming in indigenous affairs reflects longstanding policy failure. The former shadow Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, Dr Michael Wooldridge, in reference to the 25 years marking the Aboriginal Referendum 1967, which granted indigenous citizenship, observed in 1992 that: "Aboriginal health and Aboriginal employment, particularly self-employment, are areas where we have to say that to date we have failed". Interestingly, the 17 year gap acknowledged in Rudd's landmark speech in 2008 reflects a similar theme expressed in 1992. Dr Wooldridge writes that "Aboriginal life expectancy for men and women is 17 to 18 years less than for the general population". In parts of Australia life expectancy is actually decreasing. For

males in Central Australia, it is 40 years (Wooldridge, 1992: 28). He concludes that parliamentarians must act. "We have a chance to put the neglect and insensitivities of the past behind us... we owe it to our future and our children not to waste this opportunity" (Wooldridge, 1992: 29). Given as Australia's treatment of indigenous people is not cause for national pride, it is important to consider how this may be rewritten arguably so as not to reflect poorly on governments or institutions.

Recasting Class Inequality as Economic Disadvantage

The traditional explanations for inequality – gender, class and race – have been rescripted. Traditional class inequality between working and ruling classes has been subsumed to an emerging struggling middle class, which is now said to be suffering disadvantage. In his essay on the economic and educational disjuncture of the mainstream Watson (2006: 5) opines the "forgotten majority" who are at risk of losing their "national inheritance of egalitarianism". The deployment of disadvantage as a middle class phenomenon infers national identity grounded in the loss of egalitarianism – the 'fair go'. That is to say, it is the 'true blue' (white) Australian, who is now at a disadvantage. Watson is selective in that he does not mention Australians who have long comprised the "stream of disadvantaged", those who have rarely enjoyed access to the mainstream. The mainstream, representative of a fair society, glosses over the existence of an atypical sub-stream.

Watson's shrinking middle class is supported by Pusey (2003) who argues the increasing high stress mortgage belt of middle Australia. In his survey of 400 'middle' Australians, excluding the top 10 and bottom 20%, Pusey found that 80% expressed insecurity about the future and that 70% believed wage earners were 'losing out'. Their quality of life is in decline,

dispersed, fractured and hollowed out. Hamilton et al (2007) contest this arguing instead that Pusey deals with perception rather than reality. According to Hamilton et al (2007), who test for shrinking middleclass by looking at average income, fewer than 1 in 10 middle class people are struggling. Median disposable income has increase by 43% with the standard of disposable income approximately \$70, 000 (Hamilton et al 2007: vii).

The notion of the struggling middle class is the result of constant reinforcement of stress, unmet aspirations and the displacement of anxieties about moral decline (Hamilton et al, 2007). However, Hamilton et al do not account for expenditure including the rising costs of living associated with middle class aspirations of privatised health and education. Given that the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Survey for 1995 found that one in nine indigenous persons aged 15 or more received an annual income of more than \$25, 000 (Indigenous Australia Today, 1995: 6) it can be said that studies related to middle class earners of \$70, 000 are generally not inclusive of indigenous people. It is an indictment that indigenous people do not even get to 'struggle' with mortgage belt stress and an annual disposable income of \$70, 000 noted by Hamilton et al (2007).

The advent of the global-profit economy in which industries are relocated offshore to minimise production costs and maximise profit points to uncertainty for many in the labour market (Cunningham et al, 2000). A new policy discourse that privileges the rhetoric of re-skilling to meet labour demands means that occupational categories have been displaced. Australian workers must embrace 'life long' learning or 'skill-up' to ensure that they are able to compete in a competitive labour market. This is implicit in the national vocational training blueprint *Shaping our Future* (2004) in which it is made clear that employment is changing. "A typical career path is

becoming less linear and increasingly complex. As the knowledge economy evolves, some people change jobs by choice and others by necessity" (*Shaping our Future*, 2004: 6). Work it is acknowledged is no longer long-term. "The number of people employed part time, casually or on contract has increased by over 50% while full time employment has increased by just 11%" (*Shaping our Future*, 2004: 6).

Changes surrounding the nature of work have the effect of alienating the relationship between workers and their labour. A decentralised, deregulated competitive Australian labour market premised on reduced workers' rights including the right to strike, individual contracts, low wages and increasing casual employment (Workplace Relations Amendment Act, 2005) puts the onus on workers to ensure their place in the labour market through ongoing training and being 'flexible'. This underlies the Victorian skills statement; *Maintaining the Advantage* (2006). The individual learner must engage in "smarter learning, lifelong learning earlier learning and easier learning" (p. 1). It is the individual seemingly who must cope with casual work, loss of wages and conditions by being prepared to retrain in order to be employable.

Paradoxically, the acquisition of new skills is not always conducive to employment. Penny Toynbee, a British journalist who posed in a number of occupations – kitchen hand, childcare worker, hospital porter and a shop assistant – to understand the experience of being a 'low-skilled' worker in the UK found that these workers are not encouraged to 'skill-up'. Quite the opposite, the intent is to keep workers doing low skilled work. Skills acquired through experience or responsibilities translate into higher wages, the least desired outcome in the profit economy. Toynbee (2003: 210) concludes that the assumption of inequality is tied to ability not inability. Higher wages

for those at the bottom of the wages pool would translate into higher unemployment, thus workers would be worse off. This brings to light the tension between the market reliant on low wages and the rhetoric of 'skilling-up' (Cunningham et al, 2000: 22). Taking this into account, I argue that the skills training agenda is oppressive because it implores the disadvantaged to aspire to skill up at the behest of industry needs. The mainstreaming of low paid workers to the skills agenda is indicative of shifting politics in the renaming of worker exploitation as economic disadvantage.

Re-casting Group Inequality as Individual Disadvantage

The tradition of group identity to explain social inequality has largely made way for the discourse of the diverse individual or the individual with diverse needs. The national qualifications framework for vocational training statement: *Working with Diversity* (2004) sets a flexible system to attend to the diverse needs of individual learners. Diversity is regarded as the quality of being different and unique at an individual or group level.

"Recognising diversity means creating and sustaining an environment in which everyone can achieve their full potential" (*Working with Diversity*, 2004: 10). The mandate is to establish pathways for disengaged 'learners' so that there is a direct link between education and employment. This is captured in youth pathways (Burgell and Schulze, 2005). The national policy framework for youth, *Footprints to the Future* (2001), sets a commitment to aid the most 'at-risk' young people through secondary schooling and beyond. The youth framework is about sustained transition to independence allowing every chance for youth to achieve their potential and to contribute to the community.

It is significant that the Victorian Minister for Education Bronwyn Pike has just announced the initiative of establishing individual records for every Koori student in Victoria.⁴ Under a sweeping overhaul, Victorian schools will be required to develop an individual education plan setting out learning targets or goals to be negotiated with family. Each school will report back to the education department and be accountable to the Minister about the way they teach Aborigines (Tomazin, 2008: 4). On face value, tailored (managed) pathways make sense given the 'facelessness' of the competitive economy. However, the construct of the individual is problematic in the context of indigenous culture in which collective identity is valued (Birch, 1997). The initiative of an individual learning plan for Koori students seems paternalistic and beyond that little more than a contract or statement of agreement. The keeping of individual records conforms to Smyth and Dow's (1998) thesis of state control whilst delegating local management (mainstreaming). Though such 'partnerships' inaugurate democratic process, negotiated agreements between students, their guardians and the state to 'boost' indigenous learning outcomes remain driven by the state. Action charged rhetoric implies working harder at change rather than changing the 'course' for change.

The construct of the individual poses conceptual challenges for policy and research. Considine et al (2005: 29) attempt a distinction between groups and the individual in their framing of "a cohort of individuals who share similar experiences". Even though they privilege the individual, they do not relinquish group understandings in their assertion that "the factors contributing to disadvantage in vocational education and training (VET) are so interconnected that an understanding cannot be developed without recognition of the multiple and cumulative disadvantages experienced by groups"

(Considine et al, 2005: 29). Wurreker: The Koori Community and TAFE (2000) policy document in Victoria places the individual learner at the centre of policy surrounded by group principles relating to self-determination, building community, maintaining culture and equal partnership. The location of the individual at the centre of policy represents an attempt to deconstruct colonial hegemony premised on the marginal indigenous 'Other'. Positioning the learner at the centre of policy ensures recognition of both individual and collective identities.

Howes (2000: 6) argues that a culture that values diversity may fail to acknowledge that some groups will experience a reduction in power and privilege. To focus on the individual learner risks losing sight of how individuals as members of groups experience discrimination or are discriminated against. Blackmore (2005) in distinguishing between managerial and transformative diversity argues that the managerial in which learner needs are accommodated through the delivery of a flexible training system has supplanted the transformative model of diversity in which differences – especially cultural, ethnic and racial – are integrated into teaching practice. Apolitical diversity fits the rhetoric of mainstreaming in attending to the needs of the individual whilst at the same time shifting the focus away from group inequality.

Re-casting Racial Inequality as Cultural Disadvantage

Australian colonial history makes it clear that inequalities derived of race ideology have and continue to apply to indigenous Australians. Whilst the disadvantaged individual is prioritised, the aim in indigenous policy is to retain recognition of group inequality albeit in reconstructed ways. Collective experience of racial inequality has been redrafted as cultural difference and disadvantage. This is implicit in the

emphasis in the Social Justice Report (2002) on need to enliven indigenous cultural identity as a means to restore community. Cultural disadvantage emerges within and through the discourse of social cohesion, the strengthening of communities, as a buffer to disadvantage. For example, in response to the 'crisis' related to the widespread abuse of children in indigenous communities in the Northern Territory Anderson and Wild (2007: 262) conclude that a key trend in prevention is "strengthening families and communities and promoting resiliency".

Social and cultural constructs of disadvantage present an unintended consequence in the supplanting of colonial race history. That is, the reconstruction of indigenous inequalities merely as disadvantage obscures the hierarchical nature of disadvantage premised on institutional and structural inequalities (Coram, 2007: 9). Though I am sympathetic to the importance in maintaining indigenous cultures, I am concerned that the emphasis on capacity building through culturally relevant programs masks institutional neglect of communities.

Underpinning the need for strengthening communities is the assumption that low social cohesion is linked to predictors such as poor education, familial unemployment and postcode namely rural or remote locations in addition to disadvantaged suburbs in major urban centres. Low social cohesion is also indicated by high rates of imprisonment thus high social cohesion is linked to decreased rates of imprisonment. The antidote to alienation rests on the assumption that one is less likely to offend in the presence of community cohesion. Vinson's (2007) *Dropping off the Edge* finds that 33% of people living in disadvantaged suburbs suffer low social cohesion, equated with high rates of imprisonment High social cohesion conversely is equated with low rates of imprisonment (Catholic Social Services Australia, 2007). Taking into

account the location of indigenous communities in rural or remote parts of Australia, the identification of disadvantaged suburbs in effect means suburbs populated largely by non-indigenous people. This is not to suggest that indigenous people do not live in major urban centres, indeed they do. Instead, it is to highlight that disadvantage by area (suburb) does not begin to consider the most marginalised who live transiently as the poor and isolated communities often do.

According to Mowbray (2004) social cohesion is a popular term with governments because it is good for promoting affirmative messages. Governments he claims understand the value of the imprecise in deflecting liabilities for problems away from themselves towards localities and families through programs promoting community building (Mowbray, 2004). Approaches to disadvantage are imprecise because the focus tends to be on what the disadvantaged are not doing rather than what the advantaged do to maintain their advantage. Mowbray (2004) expresses concern about the influence of analysis based on association (through social cohesion), at the expense of 'causal' explanations, such as the relationship between inequality and an economy premised on low wages.

The emphasis on social cohesion suggests that it is up to the disadvantaged to overcome their dislocation. The excluded are encouraged to empower themselves and to assuage the impact of their exclusion from the main economy through community strengthening. As an expression of value, social cohesion is acceptable so long as it does not turn into a smoke screen that obscures the destructive impact of a competitive economy based on itinerant work. Some do not belong to the mainstream because this is how the system works. Selective use of cohesion to convey the need to integrate the 'alienated' back into the mainstream becomes an easy

platform for obscuring the effects of institutional inequality.

Donahoo (2005) argues that Australian state governments have adopted the Blair government's rhetoric of community building. They have struggled to achieve significant change because very little is done to redevelop policy for the Australian population. No matter how similar populations may appear, policy does not translate that simply. Australian policy makers need to come up with their own original ideas and look deeply at the research of their own communities to find the answers to our inequitable wealth division (Donahoo, 2005:35). This has its challenges given the role of bureaucracy in mainstreaming policy.

Conclusion: The Orthodoxy of Disadvantage

The construct of a lack of advantage to explain disadvantage implies that disadvantage is momentary and apolitical (Coram, 2007). An important paradox is that minorities have suffered as a result of policy reform intended to benefit them (Tomlinson, 1997). As Smyth and Dow (1998) observe, the state directs policy while appearing not to do so through the setting of benchmarks. In this context, mainstreaming is the instrumentalist trajectory for incorporating inequality as actionable barriers to be overcome through the identification of benchmarks or priorities. Gap analysis is indicative of the pragmatism of instrumentalism in the pursuit of research questions that contribute new or additional knowledge in preference to questioning existing knowledge. Mainstreaming of structural inequalities as disadvantage displaces the politics of race discrimination and difference. It marks liberal ideology of increasing (equal) opportunity and in turn the premise that race discrimination is no longer relevant for explaining the social and economic status of indigenous Australians. Taylor (2004) reminds that individualism

encourages the forgetting of history and the nature of white supremacy in the systematic social engineering leading to inequality.

The appeal of outcomes originates in the struggle to insert a degree of predictability and control in an age of manufactured uncertainty (Smyth and Dow, 1998). The rise of disadvantage as a descriptive in policy imports a momentary condition that overlooks capital, privilege, power or authority. Mainstreaming is intended to give back what has been taken – autonomy, identity, language and culture – in the absence of institutional change. Mainstreaming relies on the 'feel good' in which expressions of social cohesion are intended to blunt the impact of alienation from the mainstream economy. To critically dissect the discourse of disadvantage is important because meanings form the backbone of policy.

Mainstreaming as a model for increasing equality is paradoxical because equality exists or it does not. There can be no such thing as more equality unless this means that the pool of people who are equal to each other is greater, or increasing, compared to the pool of people who are outside of this. If disadvantage is merely an absence of advantage then we make light of those whose collective experience is telling of trenchant inequality. If the absence of advantage explains the exclusion of the oppressed from the mainstream then we require urgently a more satisfactory framework that does not hide behind imprecision. It is instructive that reference to discrimination and inequality can be interpreted as a gap for which government can be held accountable and that this might explain the preference for descriptive not nominal disadvantage. It is timely for unencumbered expression of the excluded that remain largely invisible in the trajectory of mainstreaming.

Author Note

Stella's primary research interest is race formations – evolutionary hegemony or the changing significance of race – mediated within and through Indigenous contexts in sport, education, policy and popular culture. An independent scholar, she is published in peer reviewed journals including the *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* and the *Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*. Stella can be contacted via email: stella.coram@education.monash.edu.au

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Endnotes

¹ The objective here is to highlight the institutionalising of disadvantage in reports, initiatives, policy statements and the like. Given the sheer breadth of material documenting indigenous disadvantage it would be near impossible to try to capture the essence of every relevant document. On that basis I provide a selective and rudimentary sampling of documents to indicate the prescience of disadvantage. This includes Victorian documents and newspaper clippings.

² Final Report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCADIC, 1991)

³ COAG Whole-of-Government Initiative accessed April 5, 2006 from www.dest.gov.au/sectors/indigenous/education/policy/issues/reviews/coag

⁴ Koori is a term of identity in reference to Indigenous people and place in Victoria (Birch, 1997: 11).