

Indigenous Australians and the legacy of racialisation since British colonisation

The racial history of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians dates back to 1788 when the continent was first colonised. Since this time the Indigenous community have been forced to confront a vast number of issues including; inhumane violence, breaches of their basic human rights, the displacement of their communities, the dispossession of their land and a basic lack of understanding regarding their culture and needs (Harris, 2003). Indigenous Australians are a people who have conserved a relationship through ancestry, self identification and community acceptance with the pre-colonial populations in Australia (Paradies, 2005). They are the original landowners and native people of Australia, and are often known as Aboriginals. In this text I will be referring to the native people of Australia as both Indigenous Australians and Aboriginals.

To understand the present racialization situation that exists in Australian society in reference to the Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians it is vital to revisit the past as this is where the issues we see occurring now stem from. This text will start by examining the colonisation of Australia by the British Empire. It is here that we see the process of dislocation, dispossession and racial inferiority begin for the Aboriginal people and the concept of white superiority takes hold of the European settlers. Practices such as forced assimilation, which in turn created the stolen generation, will be brought to light and discussed. From here the essay will move on to analysing the segregation and racism that exists between the Aboriginal people and white Australians in more current times. Here we will develop on the theories of whiteness and white superiority drawing connections with them and Australian societal life. Next the essay will look at the disparities that exist between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, concentrating on the health and wellbeing aspects of life, exploring the factors that exist within the health care institutions themselves that directly contribute to the cause of these inequalities. Lastly, this text will look at some of the systems in place aimed at fixing the vast disparities that are present between the two groups and decipher how successful they have been in closing the gap.

The historical recount of Indigenous Australians and the racialization they have faced is a long, multifaceted and complex narrative. Many stories of suffering, torment and hardship comprise Aboriginal history and unless you were an Indigenous Australian who lived through this time it is certain you could never know the true size of the impact racialization has had on the Aboriginal people. Nevertheless, this essay aims to provide an insight into the legacy of racialization in postcolonial Australia.

The colonisation of Australia and its lasting effects on the Aboriginal people

On the 26th January in 1788 the first fleet of European colonizers arrived on the East coast of Australia and staked the British empires claim to the land (Ballyn, 2011). The colonialists used the legal doctrine of 'Terra Nullius', meaning land belonging to no one which is used in international law to label territory as unclaimed and therefore free to be colonised (Mormon- Robinson, 2003), to seize ownership of the Australian continent (Short, 2003). From this moment onwards the arrival of ships became a routine occurrence, ships carrying British convicts from overcrowded prisons and general supplies that would be used to aid the building of what was soon to become a thriving colony (Ballyn, 2011). However, despite the use of the legal doctrine Terra Nullius and the British declaration that the lands sovereignty was yet to be claimed, Australia was already inhabited by its Indigenous people, the Aboriginal Australians.

Throughout Australia the Aboriginal peoples culture, although different in some respects, always shared a commonality of territoriality, spirituality, kinship, art, family life, educational practices and ceremonies (Short, 2003). They were a thriving community with their own self-taught societal values. Anthropological and historical studies bring to light just how affluent the Aboriginal people were prior to European settlement. Over tens of thousands of years the Indigenous community had established complex forms of social

organisations which included the development of rules and regulations which related to land management and usage (Greer, 1993).

The take over of Australia by the British had disastrous consequences for the Indigenous population (Ballyn, 2011), they were denied their basic human rights under international law and complete control of their lives was put into the hands of the white settlers. (Mormon-Robinson, 2003). When the European settlers first landed on the shores of Australia estimates put the Aboriginal population as ranging from 300,000 to one million people across five hundred different groups (Short, 2003). As can be anticipated the arrival of the Europeans foreshadowed the inevitable many disastrous conflicts between the white settlers and the Aboriginal people (Reynolds, 1997).

The first one hundred and fifty years of European settlement in Australia saw a dramatic decline in the Aboriginal population with an estimated population decrease in just the South eastern part of Australia from 250,000 in 1788 to 10,000 in 1850 highlighting the severity and rapidness of the attempted removal of the Aboriginal community (Harris, 2003).

It was not just the physical murder that was aimed at diluting the Aboriginal population, alongside the relentless killing Indigenous Australians were put in prison, raped and dispossessed from their lands. They had their natural environments completely destroyed, which in turn ripped down the foundations of their spiritual, cultural and legal systems (Short, 2003).

Recounts of historical events have a tendency to be retold from the perspective of the powerful instead of the weak. This is very true when looking at how the battle for control that took place between the original occupants of Australia and the colonialists is told (Harris, 2003). Only in recent decades has the ferocity of the atrocities that befell the Aboriginal people been recorded as factual evidence. Closer to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries historical writers were very aware of what had happened to the Indigenous population of Australia yet many decided to eliminate the story from historical accounts (Harris, 2003).

It is fact that the Aboriginal people were systemically removed through the device of murder, as stated by Charles Rowley (1970, p54) “The native inhabitants of Australia did not melt away magically before the tide of European settlement like fairy floss, the hard reality of it is that we killed them”.

For the Aboriginal people who survived the colonisation they now faced being enmeshed in a cycle of cultural dislocation (Ballyn, 2011). They were often separated from their lands and forced to live on missions where they were expected to conform to living amongst and like the White Australians. However, this was less a process of integration and more a method to “breed out the colour” (Knightley, 2001). In 1973 A. O. Neville was the chief protector of Aboriginals in Western Australia. He was present at the first national governmental conference on Aboriginals and spoke out about his beliefs regarding the fade out of the Indigenous population as a people (Knightley, 2001).

“Are we going to have a population of one million blacks in the commonwealth or are we going to merge them into our white community and eventually forget that there were any Aborigines in Australia?” (A. O. Neville 1973 cited in Knightley, 2001).

One of the main procedures conducted to aid the productivity of total absorption of the Indigenous population into the white community was to take ‘half caste’ children away from their families and put them in institutions, often run by a religious body (Knightley, 2001). Aboriginal children of mixed raced origin, which were most commonly the product of rape were stolen from their mothers and taken to be raised and educated miles away from their home land and familial roots causing a second wave of dislocation, dispossession and exile (Ballyn, 2011). This generation of children are now referred to in Australian history as the “stolen generation” (Read, 1998). For the stolen generation the removal from their family and the only existence they had ever known resulted in devastating outcomes, outcomes that are still evident in many of their adult lives. They experienced immense suffering within these institutions as they were frequently abused both physically and sexually (Knightley, 2001).

This process of forced removal was directly linked to the concept of eugenics (Ballyn, 2011). The views of Dr Cecil Cook, the chief protector of Aborigines between 1927 and 1939, were discovered in the national archives of Australia. Dr. Cook strongly believed in the pseudo science of eugenics which was aimed at teaching the benefits of creating state engineered human breeding programs (Knightley, 2001). He was a firm believer in the eventual accomplishment of breeding out Aboriginal blood entirely and trusted this could be achieved by encouraging the marriage between mixed race Aboriginal females and white males (Knightley,

2001) and the mandatory removal of any offspring these marriages may create from their Indigenous heritage (Law,2010).

The improvement of humans genetic traits was the purpose of Eugenics and this was not an uncommon occurrence in this era throughout the globe (Law, 2010). Eugenics methods have varied in their extremity from approaches such as genocide and the enforcement of compulsory abortions to racial separation, yet always had the same goal of maintaining racial purity (Law,2010).

Just as the killing of many Aboriginal people was somewhat hidden from recounts of history so to were reports of the stolen generation with there scarcely being a mention of them until more recent times (Read, 1998). It wasn't until the thirteenth of February 2008 that an apology from the Australian government was officially made to the Aboriginal people (Korff, 2016). Prime minister at the time, Kevin Rudd, apologised for the governments previous actions which had lead to the overwhelming sorrow and suffering of so many Indigenous Australians (Australian Government, 2015).

When looking back on the historical events that occurred from the colonisation of Australia onwards it is clear to see that there is a "direct link between colonial progress and the destruction of Aboriginal society" (Johnston, 1992, p4).

The arrival of these British settlers and their colonisation of Australia marked the beginning of the long path of racial abuse, displacement and discrimination that the Indigenous population are still facing today.

Segregation and racial tension between Indigenous and non Indigenous Australians

Today the lasting effects of Australia's colonial past are present when looking at the Aboriginal community and their integration into society, or lack there of (Augoustinos et al, 1999). When the term Apartheid is mentioned one is transported to thoughts of South Africa and the harrowing occurrences that took place there, while few people associate the concept of an Apartheid with Australia. Apartheid is an Afrikaans word that translates to apartness and separateness and is used to explain a situation where a powerful and domineering group forces a minority group to yield to them through the use of racial segregation and discriminating measures (Korff, 2016). When we examine Australian society both past and present it becomes evident that a system of apartness and separateness has been and still is present between the indigenous and non-indigenous Australians, with Aboriginal communities still existing predominately outside the rest of society (Tonkinson, 2007). Racism and the violence and discrimination that come alongside it feature heavily in Australian society. Studies have found that discrimination against Aboriginals is the most prevalent form of discrimination in Australia (Beyond blue, 2014). It therefore seems reasonable that the term Apartheid can be used to describe the plight of the aboriginal peoples.

As mentioned previously in this text there was a strong desire by the white Australian community to create a single national identity and culture. This can be seen by the extreme measures taken in the form of the stolen generation and the governments attempt at assimilation (Sourek, 2009). Along with these methods of assimilation and bid to maintain Australia's whiteness came the white Australia policy. The White Australia Policy refers to a set of regulations that were brought in to action following the formation of the Commonwealth of Australia in 1901 (Sourek, 2009). Its primary role was the prevention of non-European immigration, however the laws and policies introduced in this era also altered the lives of the non-white population that were already residing in Australia causing the Aboriginal community further racial turmoil (Sourek, 2009). The White Australia Policy contributed immensely to the already huge divide between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians and enhanced the white communities conviction of their superiority (Korff, 2016).

When focusing on the notion white superiority the question of why throughout history the white race have always prevailed as the most privileged, affluent and domineering culture is raised. How exactly do we explain the spread of racist belief systems that travel to all corners of the globe in a very similar fashion? (Dikotter, 2008). Race is after all deemed by many scholars to be non-existent, a socially constructed myth used to put people into different categories based solely on physical attributes such as skin colour (Dikotter, 2008). Yet

we see the same racist perceptions reappearing all over the world, lasting through vast periods of time and still existing today in modern society. David Goldberg describes classic racism as stemming from the expansion of Europe and colonisation (Godlberg, 2006). As Europeans began to expand out in to the global sphere, sparking the growth and development of their empire the emergence of what is recognised now as European superiority can be seen forming alongside their global dominance (Godlberg, 2006).

“Thinkers from Oliver Cox to Fidel Castro believe that as Europeans conquered the globe, they created unequal systems of social relations in which cheap labour was essential, racism ensured that colonized people were regarded as inferior and could be bought and sold like any other commodity rather than as people” (Dikotter, 2008, p3).

Australia with its legacy of colonisation relates only too strongly to this quote, with the structures of racial hierarchy and consequently racial inferiority maintaining a strong grip on Australian community and societal interactions. White supremacy and thus whiteness has been present in Australia since 1788 when it was first colonised. In the past white supremacy has been used to aid the justification of atrocities such as enslavement, genocide and other violent acts of degradation (Rasmussen, 2001). Today we see whiteness acting as the basis for racial domination and inequality (Ramussen, 2001).

Social psychological studies conducted in Australia have established that the majority of non-Indigenous Australians view Aboriginals in a negative light, having adverse feelings about them as people and stereotyping them negatively (Augoustinos et al, 1999). Racism towards Aboriginals permeates the very foundation of modern day Australian society (Paradies, 2005). A survey on racism was conducted in 2001 and signified that Indigenous Australians experience racism across a variety of spheres at double the rate of non-indigenous Australians (Dunn et al, 2003). Discrimination such as this makes it near impossible for Aboriginals to integrate successfully into the wider Australian community, which in turn creates a societal system in which individuals are categorised into racial groups with an uneven and unfair distribution of power (Paradies, 2005). Conformist assimilation refers to the adaptation of all other racial groups within a society to match the dominant racial group of that society (Young, 1990). In Australia whiteness exists as the omni present norm meaning it is the standard against which dissimilarities and deviations are measured and valued (Durey et al, 2012). As the Aboriginal people have not conformed to meet this standard of ‘white living’, segregation and racialization has prevailed (Paradies, 2005).

A hate for something is often due to a lack of understanding for it and there is a distinct lack of understanding and empathy for the past struggles of the indigenous people from the white Australian community (Curthoys, 1999). There is extensive rejection of wanting to know the tough history of Australia and its first people. Many White Australians refuse to consider themselves the beneficiaries of colonisation or accept the truth that their home was founded through a process of invasion that resulted in both child and land theft (Curthoys, 1999). Non-Indigenous Australians wish to view their history in a positive manner and focus on the ways in which their ancestors pioneered for economic development and a free life (Curthoys, 1999).

It is often said that ignorance is bliss and this certainly seems to apply to many white Australians and how they deal with their past. Instilled with their own conceptions of their past stories and achievements, such as becoming an independent nation head, its often unfathomable to them that neighbouring countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia refer to Australia as

“The last country in the region to be decolonised, the place where the story didn’t end happily, where the colonisers didn’t go home” (Curthoy ,1999, p2).

It appears that a lack of knowledge of the historical occurrences within Australia by the Non- Indigenous community have created a system of segregation, racism and hate (Beyond blue, 2014). With no acknowledgment for the suffering that the indigenous community endured there can be no empathy, compassion or understanding for the issues they currently face (Harris, 2003)

“We must first understand and acknowledge the past and then we must try to move on, dealing where necessary with immediate problems through immediate strategies” (Harris, 2003, P5). To deny the past is to hinder the possibility for the country to move on and find reconciliation. As George Orwell (1949) said “Those who control the past also control the future. “

Health Disparities between the Indigenous and Non-Indigenous community and the role race plays

In Australia what has become known in sociological terms as 'white normativity' runs through the very core of societal interactions. Whiteness is often invisible as the notions and practices that form the concept of whiteness are actions that society deem as the norm and therefore need no explaining (Ward, 2008). It signifies a racialised social system in which the values and beliefs of the Indigenous population are overpowered by the westernised and more powerful policy and practice (Durey et al, 2012). To be a member of the White Australian group is to be a privileged member of Australian society (Durey et al, 2012). Indigenous Australians comprise an estimated 2.4% of the wider Australian community and are burdened by a wide scope of difficulties that surround the social, economic and general health and wellbeing areas of their lives. (Paradies,2005).

On an individual scale being exposed to racism has been proven to directly correlate with a range of problems that transcend into the lives of Aboriginal people. These include health issues in both mental and physical form, substance abuse and a general poor standard of living (Anderson, 2014). When looking at the issue of Indigenous health and the health care systems in place, the most striking fact is that on average an Indigenous Australian is estimated to live twenty years less than a non-indigenous Australian (Australian Bureau of statistics & Australian institute of health and welfare, 2003). When examining the causes behind this worrying figure it is evident that racism plays a leading role in the cause of disparities in the health care system (Durey et al, 2012). A large majority of Australian society hold negative opinions and racial biases in regard to the Aboriginal people of Australia. This internalised perception and racist outlook can transcend interpersonal racism to an institutional level when the people who make up a specific organisation carry these opinions with them.

Institutional racism refers to racialization and derogatory behaviour that occurs at an organisational level and directly affects the control and access to material, informational and symbolic resources within society (Paradies, 2005). Racism is often conceptualised as only applicable to interpersonal relations yet a more sinister form of racism occurs when it is found systematically within institutions (Durey et al, 2012). Being white in a county like Australia comes with an advantage. However, this advantage not only shapes the lives of the more fortunate but also affects the lives of marginalised members of society. When looking at institutional racism it usually comes down to a system of prejudice and power and in the case of Australia it is the Non-Indigenous Australians that hold the institutional power to transfer bigoted attitudes into policies and practices (Durey et al, 2012). (24)

A burgeoning capacity of investigation highlights social factors as being at the root cause of health inequalities (Marmot, 2005).

Romlie Mokak, the chief executive of the Australian Indigenous Doctors Association speaks of not only the disparity in health between the Indigenous and Non-Indigenous community but also the disparity in the healthcare provided them to them (Anderson , 2014)

“Aboriginal people may present to hospitals often later and sicker, however, the sort of treatment they might get once in hospital is not necessarily reflective of that higher level of ill health. We’ve got to ask some questions about why it is that the sickest people are not necessary getting the equitable access to healthcare” (Moakak cited in Anderson, 2014 p2). The harsh truth of it is that Indigenous Australians are often not receiving the standard of health care needed as a direct result of institutional racism (Laverly cited in Anderson, 2014).

Alcoholism and substance abuse are prevalent within the Aboriginal community and of course these issues contribute to the declining health of those that participate in them. It is easy for the Australian community to label the Indigenous people as drunks unworthy of public health resources, as they often do, yet it is fact that these problems are born from the years of suffering at the hands of racism endured by the Aboriginal community since colonial times (Anderson, 2014). It seems Australians are more than happy to brand themselves with national slogans such as 'The Aussie Battler' or giving everyone a 'fair go' yet it appears this attitude only applies to those that are white as a vast majority refuse to recognise the Indigenous people of their country as one of their own, despite them being the original Aussie Battler (Durey et al,2014). To those most in need the least is provided and again the reason for this points to a blatant lack of understanding and thus empathy (Langton, 2008).

Australia is a first world country with its life expectancy rate amid the highest in the world (Marmot, 2005). The fact that Aboriginal Australians have the equivalent health quality of those in a third world country raises serious questions about social equality based on race (Marmot, 2005). Indigenous Australians are a socially

excluded minority within their country with segregation between the Indigenous and Non-Indigenous people of Australia being a part of everyday life. In terms of racism and abuse this is of course an issue that must be addressed, but when the problem stems to inequalities in health and hence life expectancy the problem simply cannot be ignored. Poverty generates many other socioeconomic factors, which is why the health of people in the third world is vastly worse than that of the first world (Marmot, 2005), but Australia is a country that is resource rich, so why is it that the native people of that country are health poor.

Geoffery Rose believes that in order to understand the issue properly we must examine the root causes (Rose, 2001). In the case of Aboriginal Australia this is social exclusion, institutional racism and inequalities in government treatment (Durey et al, 2012).

Health issues should not fall solely on those in the health care sector, they should be addressed by all sectors and be of great importance to policy makers (Marmot, 2005). An important step is to let the voices of the marginalised members of society be heard and alter the discourse that puts Aboriginals at the core of the problem (Durey et al, 2012).

Moving Forward- what has been/what is being done

Not all of Australia is happy with the current social system in place regarding the Aboriginal community. Not all are satisfied with the segregation and inequality that remains from colonial times. There are systems in place both governmental and non governmental that are working towards 'closing the gap' (Australian Government, 2015) and increasing equality nation wide. Closing the gap refers to the name of the government initiative aimed at shutting the wide division of inequalities that exist between the Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Australians. In 2015 then prime minister Tony Abbot announced that he wants to work towards making sure that the three priorities laid out to him by the Indigenous Advisory council, are met. These included ensuring children were in school, increasing the employment rate amongst adults and creating a safer community environment (Australian Government, 2015). Abbot also mentioned the necessity of recognition of the indigenous Australians in the constitution. It was his belief that targeting these four areas would produce the best course of action for closing the gap and eventually eradicating indigenous disadvantage (Australian Government, 2015).

In regards to the immense problem of Aboriginal health care the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO) evolved. NACCHO is a living personification of the wants and needs of Aboriginal communities. (NACCHO, 2016). NACCHO is the main representative for over 150 Aboriginal community controlled health services in Australia. These community controlled health services are controlled and ran by the Aboriginal community and therefore are able to deliver cultural appropriate and sensitive health care and services, which as spoke about previously, is a welcome relief for Indigenous Australians to deal with (NACCHO,2016).

Systems have recognised the need for action however, even with action and strategies as stated previously disparity and inequality still remains. Analysis of the closing the gap strategy has highlighted that progress of the target of closing the gap in life expectancy is not on track and not decreasing, progress of ensuring all indigenous children are going to school has not been met, closing the gap between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous school attendance has not been met and closing the gap in employment between Aboriginals and white Australians has not been met (Australian government,2015). The only positive is that the government have begun implementing strategies like this and it appears as though they are dedicated and determined to close the gap between the Indigenous and Non-Indigenous groups of Australia. Nevertheless at the moment the divide remains highlighting that it is not just the government that is the problem (Anderson, 2014). This implies that it will take more than just government involvement to fix. Problems must also be addressed at the societal level.

Racism and the inequalities and segregation that is has caused need to be confronted. Education is a vital factor, the introduction of multicultural educational curriculum that clearly teaches children about the historical

past of minority racial groups and their cultures would enhance the importance of diversity and promote anti-racist norms within society (Paradies, 2005). Targeting the younger generation results in a greater likelihood of ingraining real knowledge and facts before they have been influenced by negative notions and fictions enforced on them by peers or other members of their immediate society (Paradies, 2005).

Due to the small population of Aboriginals within Australia and the large amount of segregation, personal contact between the Indigenous and Non-Indigenous population is often scarce if at all. For this reason media portrayal of Aboriginals is of utmost importance as it is often one of the only images some Australians will see. It has been shown that mass media is one of the most substantial sites for both racial vilification and anti-racism (Hollinsworth, 1998). Bolstering the significance it could have on racial opinions regarding the indigenous population.

Often the special or different treatment of one group of people based on race can result in racial hatred spreading further. However, in the case of the Aboriginal community special action is required to equate Aboriginals lives with that of the white Australian population who have benefited at the hands of special treatment their entire lives compared to that of the Indigenous population. A system of creating equality within difference (Paradies, 2005). The approach taken needs to be founded on the recognition that people cannot thrive if they are not connected (Anderson, 2014).

Conclusion

Australia is a country that proudly portrays itself as a home of multiculturalism, yet it is evident to see that it has rejected and abandoned the culture that forms the very basis of the land they call home (Durey et al, 2012). From colonial Australia to current times a deep ingrained sense of racism has permeated the very foundation of Australian society. Racism that has been caused by segregation and a wide spread concept of white superiority throughout the white Australian community. The notion of 'Whiteness' remains from colonial times and promotes an unequal sense of worth and importance between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. Motivation to adapt behaviour needs to be improved with regard to treating Indigenous Australians as equals (Beyond blue, 2016). Until this is truly accomplished, reconciliation between the Indigenous and Non-Indigenous community will not be possible.

Starting from the bottom up could be an effective solution. Educating the children on the Aboriginals past history and enforcing the importance of recognising it as their own history and not just the history of the Aboriginal people could help mend the feeling of separation and apartness that currently exists. Education is immensely important in shaping the formation of peoples views especially at a young age when ones worldviews are yet to be tainted by those around them.

It is imperative for Aboriginal people that they are connected with their own communities ties and cultures whilst also feeling connected to the wider society (Anderson, 2014). It should not be the case of one or the other as this relates all too strongly back to the times of forced assimilation. A more integrated society accepting of differences in culture needs to be formed. For white Australians to accept and understand the atrocities of the past will lead to empathy and understanding of the current issues Aboriginal people face now. With more acceptance comes less racism which will lead to more equality and integration as it is evident that racism cuts the connection between the Indigenous and Non-Indigenous population (Anderson, 2014).

Knowledge is power, which reinforces the point that until Australians are more educated on the Aboriginal people, and their struggles both past and present closing the gap and shedding the legacy of colonisation will remain difficult if not impossible.

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