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Success in Closing the Socio-Economic Gap, But Still a Long Way to Go: Urban Aboriginal Disadvantage, Trauma, and Racism in the Australian City of Newcastle

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Abstract

The research presented in this article is based on a four-year place-based qualitative case study of Aboriginal success in addressing Aboriginal disadvantage in the Australian city of Newcastle. The article presents extracts from in-depth interviews with Aboriginal people working on a day-to-day basis with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people experiencing disadvantage in this city. Interviewees define Indigenous disadvantage in a way that differs considerably from how it is defined in mainstream policy circles. They describe Indigenous disadvantage as being grounded in the histories of social exclusion from Australian society, rather than merely a contemporary phenomenon related socio-economic factors (i.e., lack of educational and employment opportunities). They indicated that it was (a) closely tied to Aboriginal experiences of displacement and trauma; (b) not just a material problem but a historical and social structural problem; and (c) unique to each community. For instance, urban Indigenous disadvantage is distinct from Indigenous disadvantage in remote areas. This supports the claims of Indigenous sociologist Maggie Walter (2009).

In doing so, the article more strongly aligns with a critique of a neo-liberal racial project, which defines Indigenous disadvantage within an individualistic framework of individual rights and in terms of socio-economic gaps, from the voices of Aboriginal representatives.

Keywords

urban Indigenous disadvantage, racism, colonisation, Indigenous policy, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, Australia

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Disclaimer

Although this research is based on comprehensive in-depth interviews with Aboriginal people who were generous and willing participants in this research, I would like to note, by way of respect to them, that this paper does not "speak for" or represent an Indigenous voice, or claim an Indigenous authority. Aboriginal interviewees were given opportunities to comment on the findings of this research in the form of three discussion forums held in April 2014, November 2015, and March 2017. They also saw a first and second draft

of a lengthy community report that was circulated in November 2015 and March 2016, and earlier and later versions of the discussion paper that were circulated in October and November 2016. However, the writing of this article involves a non-Indigenous researcher imposing their theoretical and analytical understanding onto data that were collected from in-depth interviews with Aboriginal people.

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Success in Closing the Socio-Economic Gap, but Still a Long Way to Go: Urban Aboriginal Disadvantage, Trauma, and Racism in the Australian City of Newcastle

On November 19, 2015, an Indigenous discussion forum was held to discuss the findings of a three-year study of Indigenous success in addressing Indigenous disadvantage in the Australian south-eastern coastal city of Newcastle. The forum was one of three designed to elicit feedback as part of the study at hand. Present were chief executive officers and directors of local Indigenous organizations, as well as Aboriginal people employed in senior policy and program officer positions in local offices of various state and federal government departments. Those who had facilitated the research design and process were also present. All had been interviewed. All present interact directly on a day-to-day basis with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experiencing disadvantage in this city.

The discussion concerned how Indigenous disadvantage is a complex social phenomenon as experienced by local Aboriginal people living in Newcastle. One participant noted that, statistically speaking, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population in the Newcastle Local Government Area sits at the “top of the bottom socio-economic pile” (forum participant 1/interview 58). The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2001, 2006, 2011) Census data from 2001 to 2011 confirmed the assertion. While those participating in the discussion agreed, they also noted that “[there is] a long way to go” (forum participant 1/interview 58). Those present spoke about local employment and education indicators, illustrating socio-economic improvements among local Aboriginal people. Relative socio-economic improvements in this locality allowed participants to draw attention to the “disadvantage that Aboriginal people continue to experience once they get an education and a job” (forum participant 1/interview 58). The discussion about local success in closing the socio-economic gap had the effect of exposing the limitations of framing Indigenous disadvantage in policy in terms of a specific set of socio-economic outcomes that are the same for Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians (Fogarty, Bulloch, McDonnell, & Davis, 2018).

Participants at the forum agreed with interviewees who were not at the forum, explaining how the disadvantage local Aboriginal people experience is historically informed (Paradies, 2016). How they framed Indigenous disadvantage indicated that it “operated outside the usual theoretical understandings of poverty and social stratification,” and that “Aboriginality is at the crux” of Indigenous disadvantage in Newcastle (Walter, 2009, p. 5). This supports the claims of Palawa sociologist Maggie Walter.¹ Walter’s supposition is that Indigenous poverty, or disadvantage as it is referred to in Australia, is a concept and lived reality that is the product of social relations. Like Walter (2009), those present asserted that the components of the domain of Aboriginality are complex and multifaceted with intersecting and intertwined layers in the context of Indigenous disadvantage. While not disagreeing with Walter’s theorizing of Aboriginality in relation to Indigenous disadvantage, those present at the forum, along with interviewees generally, gave prominence and drew attention to the deeply racialized dimensions of Indigenous disadvantage in Newcastle. The discussion exposed and illustrated how Indigenous

¹ The terminology used in this article is relevant to the circumstances being discussed. Palawa are the Indigenous people of the Australian state of Tasmania. Indigenous disadvantage is the phrase used in national policy circles. Indigenous Australian peoples are referred to as two distinct cultural groups: Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people. Newcastle is on Awabakal country. Awabakal is the nation and language group for the traditional owners of the land.

disadvantage is associated with past policies of racial ordering, dispossession and trauma, and contemporary racism. Partly, this concerns a long-held proposition that socio-economic accounts of Indigenous disadvantage ignore individual and institutional racism, and that multiple forms of racism are determinants of disadvantage (Hummer, 1996). This proposition has received limited sociological consideration in Australia (Howard-Wagner, 2018; Walter 2009), but has been explored in detail by sociologists and philosophers in the United States, particularly in relation to the intersectionality between race and poverty (Mills, 2015; Soss, Fording, & Schram, 2011; Wacquant, 2010; Winant, 1994, 2004). For example, American scholars show the persistent power of race in poverty governance, linking past racialized state policies to present day poverty in the United States (Soss et al., 2011).

It is a proposition that challenges Australian national (federal and state) Indigenous policy in the twenty-first century. The national policy has leaned toward contemporaneous understandings of Indigenous disadvantage. It is a policy approach that ignores different social histories and divergent social locations, and past and present effects of discriminatory treatment (Howard-Wagner 2018). Indigenous disadvantage has instead been interpreted as a social product of contemporary socio-economic inequality and is situated within a political economy of poverty (Howard-Wagner, 2018; Walter, 2009; Walter & Saggars, 2007). While policy makers have been concerned with removing the barriers that prevent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples from fully participating as Australian citizens in Australian society, the Council of Australian Governments' (n.d.) *National Indigenous Reform Agreement (Closing the Gap)*, in its various iterations from 2009 to 2017, is a policy premised on the rights to work, to good health, to a sound education, and to a decent home (Howard-Wagner, 2018). In 2009, *Closing the Gap* involved the adoption of a comprehensive and integrated approach across seven strategic platforms, or what the policy document referred to as "Building Blocks" (Council of Australian Governments, 2009). The seven "Building Blocks" were: early childhood, schooling, health, economic participation, healthy homes, safe communities, and governance and leadership. This policy lens sees Indigenous disadvantage as a phenomenon in its own right, but it is essentially a large scale anti-poverty program. The solution is a redistributive paradigm that prescribes to an "atomic individualist ontology" (Mills, 2015, p. 84), which addresses disadvantage through an individualistic framework of individual rights—the rights to a job, education, and housing—and targets individual agency (Howard-Wagner, 2018). That is, it offers the individual Indigenous citizen, as the beneficiary of redistribution, the opportunity to become part of the mainstream economy (Howard-Wagner, 2018). It is also a policy premised on the notion that Indigenous disadvantage will be eliminated once material inequality is overcome and the conditions that produce socio-economic inequality among individual Indigenous citizens is eliminated (Maciel & Vine, 2012). So, like poverty governance in the United States, Indigenous poverty governance in Australia ignores the radically disparate impact of the past history of racially differentiated and discriminatory treatment (Howard-Wagner, 2017; Mills, 2015). It dissociates Indigenous disadvantage from an understanding of past policies of racial ordering, dispossession and trauma, and contemporary forms of racism (Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2016; Howard-Wagner, 2009).

Elsewhere, I develop this argument "reveal[ing] how discursive racial practices converge to form an interconnected neo-liberal racial project in governing through Indigenous disadvantage in Australia, which concerns the framing of Indigenous disadvantage as a racial epistemology" (Howard-Wagner, 2018, p. 1339). Importantly, I argue that epistemic practices underpinning Indigenous policy in the present moment enact racial legacies (Howard-Wagner, 2018). In doing so, I reveal the persistence of

the colonial in neoliberal knowledges and understandings of the social world (Howard-Wagner, 2018). This concerns how and whose knowledge frames understandings of Indigenous disadvantage.

Thus, the findings of this research speak back to such epistemic practices in Indigenous policy in relation to *Closing the Gap* in Indigenous disadvantage in Australia, introducing new considerations in relation to how “Aboriginality is at the crux of Indigenous disadvantage” (Walter, 2009, p. 5). It does so by revealing how those who participated in a collaborative research project in Newcastle situate historical and relational racialized considerations as critical to addressing the disadvantage Aboriginal people experience in Newcastle.

Methodology

The research on which this article is based takes as its starting point a four-year place-based qualitative case study of Aboriginal community development in Newcastle dating back to the 1970s. This study has key characteristics associated with the urban Indigenous movement, such as the formation of urban Indigenous community based organisations, and it predates the popularisation of a top-down Indigenous development paradigm in countries like Australia, Canada, and the United States in the twenty-first century (Howard-Wagner, 2017). The purpose of the research is to explain Aboriginal success in addressing disadvantage and promoting wellbeing across the Council of Australian Governments’ *National Indigenous Reform Agreement (Closing the Gap)* “Building Blocks” in this city, basing this success on urban Indigenous-driven development (Howard-Wagner, 2017). The research was conducted by a non-Indigenous researcher between 2012 and 2016.²

Relationships forefront my way of being, way of knowing, and way of doing research *with* Aboriginal people. This is how I conducted research, which was built on a sociological ethnography on racism, Whiteness, and Aboriginal marginalization, in the city of Newcastle from 2000 to 2006 (Howard-Wagner, 2006, 2009, 2015). It built on an existing relationship of openness and trust with Aboriginal partners and organizations in this urban locality. The earlier project led to the one at hand. The research agenda was set by local Aboriginal Elders and senior position holders in Aboriginal organisations. Local Aboriginal Elders and senior position holders with Aboriginal organizations presented the idea for this research at the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) Community Consultation on Racism in Newcastle held in July 2001 in the lead up to the United Nations World Conference on Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance.³ A key concern among those present was a continued propensity within the mainstream to ignore local Aboriginal success and preserve a deficit mentality around Indigenous issues locally. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) Regional Councillor at the time stated: “Media alerts from ATSIC never get used— like the release about 30 Aboriginal students accepted to study medicine at the University of Newcastle” (Howard-Wagner, 2006, pp. 250-251). A representative from the local Aboriginal land council noted: “There is a proliferation of racism through the media—they focus on the

² This research was supported under Australian Research Council’s Discovery Early Career Research Award funding scheme (project DE120100798). The views expressed herein are those of the authors and are not necessarily those of the Australian Research Council.

³ I attended this event as a researcher conducting participant observation and taking detailed field notes. I sought permission from and had signed consent forms from the organizers and attendees to observe and document the event for the purpose of my research.

bad news stories” (Howard-Wagner, 2006, pp. 250-251). A representative from a local Aboriginal community based organization stated: “I get calls from a young woman at the *Newcastle Herald* who rings me each month to do negative stories—only interested in alcoholism, domestic violence and bad issues and who won’t report good news stories” (Howard-Wagner, 2006, pp. 250-251). The focus on failure or dysfunction “squeeze[d] out news focusing on success, strength or ‘good news,’ which [was leading] to a distorted public perception” (Fogarty et al., 2018, p. 23). The discussion revealed not only an entrenched deficits view, but also how race and racism were deeply intertwined with the framing of Indigenous failure or dysfunction in Newcastle. Such narrative framings have long been reproduced in Australian Indigenous policy in relation to Indigenous disadvantage (Fogarty et al., 2018; Howard-Wagner, 2018). This relates to how:

The extent of the “Aboriginal problem” [in Australian policy] is determined through extensive monitoring and surveillance that references no less than 170 social measures, standardised against the norms of mainstream Australians . . . The so-called objective facts that emerge are used unflinchingly to confirm the status quo. That is, the “Aboriginal race” is an intractable “problem.” (NSW Aboriginal Affairs, 2018, p. 8)

Success, even in the limited form of the extent to which Indigenous Australians conform to a set of pre-determined, measurable characteristics (Fogarty et al., 2018), remained invisible. It also suggested that “success [and disadvantage] can mean quite different things to Indigenous and non-Indigenous people” (Finlayson, 2004, p. 2). The intent of this collaborative research project was to speak to such issues. The aim was to explore urban Aboriginal success in addressing disadvantage, but also to explain how local Aboriginal people defined success and disadvantage in this context.

The Australian city of Newcastle is an extremely suitable case study for achieving the aims of the research in a wider policy context as well. This large post-industrial city has gone through significant change, in part, as a part of the closure of the major industry, BHP Billiton Steel Works, in 2000. It has transitioned into a vibrant regional capital and tourist destination. For example, it is a regional center for health and social services and is a regional headquarter for government agencies that service the greater region. Its economy has also been buffered by the Australian mining boom: Newcastle is a major port city servicing the manufacturing sector, particularly heavy engineering, and the mining industry in the Hunter region (to its immediate north) and the Central Coast (to its immediate south). It is a working class town with a long history of progressive politics. It is renowned for its trade union history.

Newcastle also has a fraught colonial past. In 1804, it became a penal colony for convict recidivists, who worked under harsh conditions extracting coal from the banks of the Coquun (Hunter) River. The Awabakal people initially co-existed with the penal settlement until the 1820s. Newcastle’s status as a penal settlement prevented large land grants from being made in the area (Brayshaw, 1986). In 1826, the first Indigenous mission in Australia was set up by Reverend Threlkeld on the Gunya Hotel site at Belmont—a gathering place for Awabakal people—almost 20 kilometers south of Newcastle (Carey, 2004; Johnston, 2006; Keary, 2009). While still on country, the Awabakal people were contained within the site of the mission. The Awabakal people’s language was documented and published by Reverend Threlkeld in 1827, making it the first Australian Indigenous language to be written down (Threlkeld, 1834). In successive years, as this land became valuable, the Awabakal people were displaced and dispersed, and this resulted in a rapid decrease in their numbers (Threlkeld, 1834). Similar to many other

stories about the decline of Australia's Indigenous Peoples, smallpox, dispossession, and violent conflict lead to a significant decrease in the number of Awabakal people in the Hunter region during the 1800s (Blyton, 1995; Roberts, 2002).

During the twentieth century the Aboriginal population of Newcastle recovered with Aboriginal people relocating to Newcastle from outlying rural areas in the north and west of the Australian state of New South Wales (NSW). Aboriginal people came to Newcastle because of its employment opportunities and lower levels of racism and discrimination (Heath, 1998). Urban Aboriginal relocation and migration from rural and regional parts of NSW to Newcastle from the mid-1950s to the 1970s also occurred in the context of a specific history of racialized laws, policies, and practices dating back to the early 1800s that progressively saw many Aboriginal people dispossessed from their land and relocated and segregated on missions, reserves, and stations in this Australian state. Like most urban areas in Australia, the population of Aboriginal ($n = 5,259$), Torres Strait Islander ($n = 104$), or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ($n = 110$) people living in Newcastle is now a "mixed mob" comprised of traditional owners and Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people who have moved to the area (ABS, 2016; Howard-Wagner, 2017). Newcastle is also a regional center for servicing many of the outlying Aboriginal communities to the north and west of Newcastle.

Local Aboriginal people have been successful in working with federal, state, and local governments, and non-government organizations, in developing Aboriginal-centered economic, social, and cultural initiatives, programs, and businesses that empower local Aboriginal people, tackling significant social problems and ameliorating local Aboriginal socio-economic disadvantage (Howard-Wagner, 2017). Newcastle provides significant examples of successful Indigenous governance and Indigenous community entrepreneurship in practice, having set up separate community operated organizations and services that deliver government subsidized or wholly funded programs and initiatives (Howard-Wagner, 2017).

Importantly too, since the 1970s, there have been many studies documenting the economic opportunities available to Aboriginal people in Newcastle, community needs, and migration of Aboriginal people from rural areas to this city (Arthur, 1994; Ball, 1985; Guth, 1971; Guth & Valance, 1972; Hall & Jonas, 1985a, 1985b; Heath, 1998; Maynard, 2001; Mitchell, 1978). These studies offer evidence that two main reasons Aboriginal people moved to Newcastle from outlying regional and rural areas in the Australian state of New South Wales were because "the employment picture for Aboriginal people in Newcastle [was] at the level of dependable long term working class employee" (Guth, 1971, p. 49) and "liberal uninformed acceptance" among non-Aboriginal people in Newcastle compared with the high levels of unemployment, segregation, and in-your-face racism prevalent in those areas (Guth, 1971, p. 46).

The objective of this study was to build on this knowledge. By working with Aboriginal people with whom I already had existing relationships, we designed the research to facilitate shared interests and be of practical benefit to Newcastle's Aboriginal community. This research relationship came about because of longstanding local relationships. Over the years of doing my PhD and living in Newcastle and giving back to the community in many capacities, I had become known among local Aboriginal people in Newcastle, particularly to many long-term leaders, Elders, and senior position holders within organizations. I had also established credibility locally and nationally through publications, which local

Aboriginal people had read. The research was designed in collaboration with a group of five chief executive officers (CEOs), managers, and board members from the core local Aboriginal organizations, who directed aspects of the research, assisted with the design of the interview questionnaire, and assisted with the interpretation of the research findings. Consent and access was sought and negotiated at all stages of the research, including prior to the main ethics application in late 2011.

The purposive qualitative research design involved a form of criterion sampling (Palys, 2008), which targeted frontline workers addressing Indigenous disadvantage in Newcastle in areas of employment, education, housing, early childhood, child protection and wellbeing, health, and justice (civil and criminal). The data itself was derived from 71 in-depth interviews (individual and group) with people working at the frontline of Indigenous service delivery in the greater Newcastle region. Access to interviewees in 14 Indigenous organizations, eight mainstream not-for-profit organizations, and seven government departments in the Newcastle region was formally sought through high level bureaucrats in head offices in Sydney and Canberra or CEOs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organizations, and in many instances the boards of the organizations. High level bureaucrats and CEOs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait organizations identified potential interviewees, providing the email and telephone contact details of potential interviewees. Interviewees were individually approached via email or telephone. They were advised that:

- a. They were under no obligation to participate;
- b. Their participation was entirely voluntary;
- c. There would be no information given to their organization as to whether they participated or not;
- d. They would not be identified in the research; and
- e. They could withdraw at any time.

It happened that no Torres Strait Islander people were interviewed as part of this study. That is, Aboriginal people working in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organizations and Indigenous identified positions in government and non-government organizations in Newcastle were interviewed.⁴

While interviews were the primary research method, the undertaking of an in-depth, place-based case study enabled the adoption of similar methods to an ethnographic study without the heavy reliance on participant observation. The methodology and methods combined complementary constructivist and Indigenous methodologies and methods (Denzin, Tuhiwai Smith, & Lincoln, 2008; Moreton-Robinson & Walter, 2009; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999), such as Indigenous discussion circles (Ciftci & Howard-Wagner, 2012), which were used as a means of developing the research instruments and verifying the findings of the research in collaboration with the research collaborators. For example, prior to commencing interviews and designing the research questionnaire, I convened a discussion circle with 12 local Aboriginal Elders. This took place in the regular setting of the Elders' local craft morning. The unrecorded discussion circle involved me describing the intent of the research, its history, and my history in relation to partnering with local Aboriginal people in research. I then yarned with Elders for about three hours about Aboriginal success in addressing disadvantage in Newcastle. While we weaved

⁴ The study was not designed to focus on Aboriginal people; rather, no Torres Strait Islander or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in Newcastle participated in the study.

baskets, they weaved together a bricolage of narratives about Newcastle's Aboriginal history over the last 40 years. This knowledge assisted the design of the interview questionnaire.

The primary data was also supplemented by over 100 interviews conducted with local Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people living in the greater Newcastle region as part of the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) Newcastle radio series titled *Meet the Mob* (ABC, 2016), many off-the-record informal yarns,⁵ and print media documents. The purpose of analysing the *Meet the Mob* interviews is that they provided important historical background on community building and development in Newcastle, including the history of activism and the role of different Aboriginal people and organizations in furthering the rights of, and addressing the needs of, local Aboriginal people. A number of those interviewed also talked about racism.

The research process was further complemented by successive follow-up interviews, observations, three discussion forums discussing the findings of the research, and collaborator and participant feedback on a lengthy report of the research findings. What we aimed for was to ensure that I did not misrepresent collaborators or participants, which I hope we achieved through processes of verification. At the request of the research collaborators, these layered processes of verification took the place of co-authoring. They explained this preference by their desire to maintain a distance between the research and local Aboriginal partners and organizations. Unfortunately, at the time, their reason for this and the need to do so said something too about Indigenous representation in Australian Indigenous policy spaces in terms of not only marginalization of Indigenous voices, but the weight given to those voices.

Along with other questions, interviewees were asked a number of questions designed to collect data on factors contributing to the Aboriginal community's success in overcoming Aboriginal disadvantage in this city. The first interview question asked: "Whether Newcastle's Aboriginal community could be considered a success in overcoming Indigenous disadvantage and promoting Indigenous wellbeing?" The majority of interviewees responded "yes" to this question. Interviewees were also asked: "Why do you think this is the case?" The majority of interviewees attributed this success in closing socio-economic gaps between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous population in Newcastle to local Indigenous organizations (Howard-Wagner, 2017). There were no dissenting views, but a couple of interviewees, who had only lived in Newcastle for a few years, did not feel they were in a position to comment. They were then asked: "What would you describe are the key indicators of local Aboriginal community's success in addressing disadvantage and promoting wellbeing among local Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples?" Other related questions included whether the interviewee "considered any service or program among the then seven *Closing the Gap* Building Blocks to be particularly successful (early childhood, schooling, health, economic participation, healthy homes, safe communities, and governance and leadership)? If so, why?" This question concerned the model then adopted under Council of Australian Governments' (n.d.) *National Indigenous Reform Agreement (Closing the Gap)* in 2009. Interviewees also responded to questions asking them to define Indigenous

⁵ Bessarab and Ng'andu (2010) define a yarn or yarning "in a semi-structured interview [as] an informal and relaxed discussion through which both the researcher and participant journey together visiting places and topics of interest relevant to the research study. Yarning is a process that requires the researcher to develop and build a relationship that is accountable to Indigenous people participating in the research" (p. 38).

disadvantage, including what disadvantage means to them. Interviews lasted between one and three hours, with many interviewees providing rich, detailed narrative responses to the questions asked.

While based on comprehensive in-depth interviews with Aboriginal people who were generous and willing participants in this study and some being partners in designing the research, it should be noted, however, that I am not representing an Indigenous voice or claiming an Indigenous authority. Interviewees were given opportunities to comment on the findings of this study in the form of three discussion circles and a first and second draft of a community report circulated to interviewees and organizations in November 2015 and April 2016, and they were in agreement with the findings of the research and were at ease with how it was presented and interpreted. My aim was to rigorously convey the ideas discussed by Aboriginal contributors and it is local Aboriginal people who give this sociological account its meaning. However, the writing of this article involves a non-Indigenous researcher imposing their theoretical and analytical understanding onto local Indigenous narratives (Christie, 2008). So, while naming my location as a White female researcher has important epistemological value in terms of positionality, I believe it is also important to indicate the disciplinary space from which my voice emanates. I am a sociologist and socio-legal scholar who adopts a critical lens for understanding Australian Indigenous policy in the neoliberal age. I draw on a wide range of tools from my critical toolkit that is a grab bag of critical theory and standpoints, including race and Whiteness approaches and Indigenous standpoints.

How “Aboriginality is at the Crux” of Indigenous Disadvantage in Newcastle

This article is premised on the proposition that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population in the Newcastle Local Government Area “sits at the top of the bottom socio-economic pile” (interview 58). The ABS Census data snapshots tend to support this. For example, while still relatively high at 15.3%, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander unemployment in Newcastle has significantly decreased over the last decade. In 2001, unemployment rates in this population were over 25%, which was higher than both the state and national averages (NSW: 23.1%; Australia: 20.0%; ABS, 2001, 2006, 2011, 2016). By 2011, this unemployment rate among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations had dramatically decreased, almost halving to 13.4%, a figure below the state and national averages (NSW: 16.9%; Australia: 17.1%). Importantly, between 2001 and 2011, unemployment rates for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples in Newcastle not only declined but declined faster than that of the general population. Therefore, the gap between unemployment rates in the Indigenous and general population also decreased. This was despite Newcastle transitioning from an industrial to post-industrial city. Although Newcastle now has a mixed economy relying on its position as a regional service center, its economy was nonetheless buffered by the mining boom in Australia. Again, the ABS (2016) Census recorded unemployment rates as slightly higher for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people in Newcastle (15.3%) compared to the general population (7.4%). This was lower than the national unemployment rate for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples (18.3%), but higher than the national (6.9%) and state (6.3%) rate for the general population. The end of the mining boom may account for the recent creep in unemployment rates in both the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous population in Newcastle.

Additionally, the rate of high school completion (14.6%) and bachelor’s degree level and above completion rates (11%) are also slightly higher for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples

living in the Newcastle region compared with the state (Year 12: 12.4%; Degree: 6.7%) and national (Year 12: 14%; Degree: 5.8%) rates among Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples living in Newcastle (ABS, 2016).

Relative improvements in urban Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander education and employment outcomes in Newcastle, however, only tell part of the story. For example, while individuals are “doing okay” (interview 66), interviewees consider the gap in terms of the community as a whole, which is struggling, thereby mitigating an individualized socio-economic success narrative.

I think some of us are doing okay. But as a whole, as a community, I think we’re struggling and severely struggling. Because the gap that exists between those that are doing well and those that aren’t doing so well, is still a pretty significant gap. But at the same time, the number of people not doing so well, still largely outweigh the number of people that are doing well. (interview 66)

Because of the frontline work they do, interviewees were in a position to observe the limitations with framing Indigenous disadvantage simply in terms of socio-economic outcomes, such as getting a job and an education. As one interviewee notes:

Once you address jobs and education, you are still left with the “hard” social policy issues—housing shortages, homelessness, areas of entrenched poverty, child removal, racism, high levels of contact with the justice system, youth disengagement . . . (interview with CEO local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organization 9)

Interviewees reveal the complex, multi-faceted nature of Aboriginal disadvantage, which exists beyond employment and education opportunities. They explain how “Aboriginality is at the crux” (Walter, 2009, p. 5) of Indigenous disadvantage in Newcastle. This quote extracted from an interview with a CEO of a community-based Indigenous organization, which provides housing and other social services, illustrates this point particularly well:

If you’ve never rented before, you’ve got a disadvantage. If you’re an Aboriginal person and you’ve never rented before or you haven’t come from this area, it’s almost impossible. There’s a massive gap there. There’s not accommodation in this area for whole families in crisis . . .

We also have a higher representation of children in out-of-home care. We’re more disadvantaged there. We have a lot of children removed for, at times, totally unnecessary reasons. We’ve just had a family woken up at 3 o’clock in the morning and the children taken out of their beds. That’s not appropriate under any circumstance without—we weren’t told a context of those sorts of things. They were our children. They were children from our—they were from our service.

The gaps are really large as far as how many of our young people are in jails as well. We’re in partnership with CRC [Community Restorative Centre], which is a prison release program. Our young people are very highly represented within that. I mean, I think it’s like a vicious circle in some circumstances, no money, no home, break the law, go to jail. (interview 55)

Like others, the interviewee not only draws attention to the links between disadvantage and being an Aboriginal person, but also the intersectionality between race and Aboriginal disadvantage. For example, the interviewee explains how homelessness and housing shortages, child removal, domestic and family violence, high incarceration rates, and low incomes are some of the significant social problems that Aboriginal people continue to experience in Newcastle. However, in describing these experiences of ongoing social problems in which very little has changed in terms of high rates of child removal and incarceration and the inability to rent a house, they also draw attention to how the social service system remains racially stratified. Like interviewees generally, they also explain the interconnections between different social problems, such as how family violence has far reaching effects on homelessness among Aboriginal women, children, and men, and is a major contributor to social problems among young Aboriginal people living in Newcastle, including school attendance, out-of-home care, and contact with the justice system. They point to how the region has the highest proportion of Aboriginal children and young people in out-of-home care in NSW (Virtue, 2016). Indigenous organizations providing services to homeless Aboriginal youth say that Aboriginal youth homelessness is on the rise in Newcastle (ABC News, 2015). What the interviewee also draws our attention to is the ways in which Aboriginality is at the crux of Indigenous disadvantage in this city (Walter, 2009). That is, the interviewee illustrates the complex layers of Indigenous disadvantage as it is experienced by Aboriginal people living in Newcastle, including discrimination and cultural alienation, which would not be experienced by non-Indigenous Novocastrians. This concerns the “constellation of disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal people that is an artefact and legacy of Australia’s settler colonial history and the institutionalized structuring of Aboriginal/settler social relations in Australia over 200 years” (Howard-Wagner, 2018, p. 1338). This finding is not new.

A new finding concerns how disadvantage continues despite improving material conditions or socio-economic circumstances, which also draws attention to a more nuanced understanding of the intersectionality between being an Aboriginal person, racism, discrimination, and disadvantage. This was expressed in a number of ways in the interview data. For example, it was expressed in the context of Aboriginal social mobility. That is, employment and education opportunities have led to Aboriginal social mobility, creating what interviewees describe as an “urban Indigenous middle class” in Newcastle (see also Lahn, 2012; Walter & Saggars, 2007), who are university educated and occupy professional positions in Indigenous organizations and the state and federal bureaucracy, and who are “well remunerated” (Paradies, 2006, p. 58). Yet, interviewees describe how they, who are at the top of the bottom socio-economic pile, still deal with the effects of Aboriginal displacement, disempowerment, racism, and discrimination. Many have chronic health issues, such as diabetes and heart disease, and they often care for extended family who are much worse off.

There’s still a gap within health . . . overrepresentation with diabetes, heart disease, and a whole lot of other things, there is still a huge gap in there. The hospitals don’t help . . . I had open heart surgery. (interview senior position holder Aboriginal organization 8)

Those at the top also provide support to extended Aboriginal family members and many provide services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients with severe disadvantage, serious chronic social and health issues, and trauma.

Many of those at the top give back too, working hard, long hours in the Indigenous social and health sector in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organizations and Indigenous-identified positions in government and non-government organizations. They “go beyond their job descriptions” (interview 17), trying to make a difference in the lives of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people in the region. They have to face the racism, ignorance, paternalism, and indifference at the frontline, while advocating for their community, their organizations, and local Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples. They face Indigenous trauma, disadvantage, and disempowerment on a day-to-day basis in their private lives and at work. As one CEO of a community-based Aboriginal organization notes, those engaged in delivering services and supporting disadvantaged Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples in Newcastle “don’t clock off at night—many go home to deal with the effects of Indigenous trauma and disadvantage in their homes” (interview 67).

This too is reflected in the following interview extract with another CEO of a community-based Aboriginal organization, who formerly worked in a senior position in a NSW government department:

I had a White colleague I used to work with in Sydney—she goes home to her family—nice little average family and she leaves all the stuff at work behind. I go home to all of those things I’ve mentioned, shit, you know. That’s what we deal with on a daily basis and then come to work and you’re still dealing with all of that. Then you go home and you are still dealing with all of that. You don’t ever get away from that—you can’t just shut off from it

That’s what our management team was talking about the other day . . . about having so much shit with them before they even get to work, and then before you even start your day you’ve walked out the door and carried all this crap. Then you go to work and you’ve got everyone else’s crap. How do you support staff to keep them focused on their job? So, that’s what I reckon disadvantage is! (interview with CEO, local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organization 10)

This concerns the challenges of local Aboriginal people who are now in professional positions, who see their roles as part of their community obligation, especially in terms of the “importance of reciprocity in Aboriginal community” (Behrendt cited in Upton, 2011, Reciprocity section, para. 1; see also Lahn, 2012). However, this also reflects what Walter (2009) describes as the effects of colonization as it relates to Indigenous disadvantage in which “dramatically circumscribed life chances and a hard, daily reality have become a normalized aspect of Indigenous life” (p. 7). Interviewees do not suggest that Indigenous disadvantage is intractable (Paradies, 2006), but that it is far more complex than getting an education, professional status, and remuneration, and thus social mobility and class.

Thus, interviewees identify the complex forms of disadvantage local Aboriginal people experience despite social mobility and relative improvements in education and employment. They therefore explain how Aboriginality is at the crux of Indigenous disadvantage in Newcastle, which continues despite socio-economic outcomes improving.

“We’re Not Poor Whites in Black Skins”: Interviewee Standpoints on Urban Indigenous Disadvantage

Aboriginal disadvantage and non-Aboriginal disadvantage are very different. They’re not comparable. (interview 62, group of four interviewed)

Interviewees thus reveal how Indigenous disadvantage does not simply concern how Aboriginal people are “firmly wedged at the bottom of Australian society” (Walter, 2009, p. 2). As one interviewee concisely puts it, “[w]e’re not poor Whites in Black skins” (interview 58), a point consistently made. Thus, interviewees associate disadvantage with what Walter (2009) defines as characteristics of the “domain of Aboriginality” (p. 6.). While Walter (2009) identifies four clusters, the interview data suggests that while socio-economic deprivation (Cluster one) and absences or invisibility (Cluster two) matter, interviewees focused mostly on the “burden of disregard” and “dispossession” (p. 6). The “burden of disregard” includes the “normalisation of disrespect which underpins the climate of everyday racism that is the lived experience of Aboriginal people in Australian society” (Walter, 2009, p. 7). The “burden of disregard” also involves “a broad acceptability of the denigration of Indigenous culture” (Walter, 2009, p. 7). It is the interconnections between “the burden of disregard” and “dispossession” and Aboriginal disadvantage that make the disadvantage Aboriginal people experience distinguishable from the socio-economic disadvantage experienced in the wider mainstream community.

Importantly though, interviewees do not describe Indigenous disadvantage as a homogenous social phenomenon. This is captured in the following interview extract:

I think urban Aboriginal populations typically suffer disadvantage that is distinctly different to remote communities because we’ve suffered more in terms of the impacts of colonization, you’ve had greater levels of displacement, you’ve had a lot more—a loss of cultural heritage, loss of cultural identity, you’re seeing a lot more drug and alcohol issues in urban Aboriginal populations, you’re seeing a much higher propensity to mental health issues. Those mental health issues are not always drug related, or alcohol related, they’re related to that displacement and the psychological trauma from being displaced. The disconnect in family and loss of cultural identity, there is a whole range of different things that are all bundled up together. (interview 57)

What the interviewee does, and other interviewees do, is link urban Indigenous disadvantage to present-day effects of grief, loss, and trauma associated with the history of complex social stratification in Australia. As briefly mentioned above, colonial and later Australian law and policy saw higher levels of Indigenous dispossession from the land in the south-eastern states of Australia and greater numbers of Aboriginal children being removed from their families. This too is captured in the following interview extract:

There is so much grief and loss. There’s the trauma. There’s dispossession. There’s colonizing—Aboriginal disadvantage is all of that stuff. You can throw money into all those services, you can buy that, you can fund that, but to fix all of that—that’s what I call disadvantage. So, it’s that generational stuff—the Stolen Generations is a good example. Newcastle’s full of it. We have a lot of people who are not sure about their identity—don’t know where they come from—not sure who they are connected to. I think that actually makes people really sick, as well as the grief and loss and all the funerals. So, there’s always something there, sort of lingering . . . All that stuff

I think has so much impact on somebody's ability to be—to meet their potential. How do you fix that? (interview CEO, Aboriginal organization 8)

Interviewee discourses reveal how Indigenous disadvantage in this city stems from historical racialized relations, which persist in contemporary forms. Interviewees thus explain Indigenous disadvantage in Newcastle as a highly racialized social phenomenon, associating it with racialized exclusion (Goldberg, 1993), as opposed to the effects of social externalities, such as standard indicators of poverty, place effects, or postcodes (Hunter, 2007; Price-Robertson, 2011). For example, like others, the two interviewees draw our attention to what sociologist Joe Feagin refers to as the distinctive social worlds that have been created by racialized oppression since colonization, such as child removal (Feagin, 2006).

Policy Disassociation: Aboriginal Disadvantage and Historical Racialized Relations and Racism as a Deeply Embedded Societal Phenomenon

[O]ne of the real huge issues that affects and undergirds all the others remaining. [There is] a wide gap in regard to equality . . . economic inclusion that comes back to employment, but it also comes back to prejudices around opportunities being available to Aboriginal people. Even for access to rental properties, funding for business, breaking out of the mold or the stereotype. That's a long-term outcome that we hope to see . . . as we keep trying to close this gap. (interview 56)

Racism is ugly. Racism is huge and that's part of what we fight every day. That's part of why we've got the gap that we've got. (*Meet the Mob* interview, ABC Radio Newcastle, transcript 73; see Emberson, 2015)

Interviewees point out how the national policy in relation to overcoming Indigenous disadvantage is disassociated from not only historical racialized relations, but also racism as an everyday lived reality for Aboriginal people living in Newcastle (Howard-Wagner, 2009). Interviewees describe the extent to which institutional racism is experienced “through economic and political systems and maintained by the policies and practices carried out by government and other institutions . . . [across] all sectors, from public housing to health care” (Larson, Gilles, Howard, & Coffin, 2007, p. 322). Racism and discrimination are deeply intertwined with Indigenous disadvantage in Newcastle. Racism is thus a significant part of what local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people fight every day in their efforts to overcome Indigenous disadvantage (see opening quote). Arguably, as the CEO of a community-based Aboriginal organization points out, it is part of why the gap exists today (transcript 73; Emberson, 2015). So, racism is not something that is gradually going away. Racism is an everyday burden that Aboriginal people live with (Essed, 1991; Walter, 2009).

While interviewees described a range of what sociologists Miles and Brown (2003) described as “racist incidences” that they encounter today (p. 70), they are essentially describing the continuing existence of a racialized social system, which they encounter in society. Racism is not described as the “overt behavior of individuals,” but rather in terms of how it “functions to the disadvantage of Indigenous people” (Moreton-Robinson, 2005, p. 63). The point is that racism and racist incidents are not described as a psychological phenomenon in terms of particular individual encounters or the encountering of particular individuals in society, but as encounters within policy, as discussed above, and mainstream society, as discussed below.

[T]here's still a fair bit of racial profiling that goes on in Newcastle. During the [New South Wales] Aboriginal [Rugby League] Knockout last year, I was reminded how redneck Newcastle is . . . and it was quite affronting. The Saturday night, we had the after party for the Knockout and you had about 300 blackfellas here in town, at Panthers. It's awesome when you got a bunch of blackfellas all getting together and having a good time and it's great, but once the venue closed, all of a sudden, you had a heap of blackfellas out on the street, looking to go to the next place. Every place, every club we went to, we couldn't get in and cops . . . This was before the one o'clock lock-out. We weren't being admitted to clubs. We had cops turning up . . . and that was when it—then I was reminded that we've still got some ways to go. . . . It was the first time that I'd seen it like that, so blatant. The last time I can recount it being that blatant was the last time I went to [the small township] of Moree [in rural NSW]. (interview former CEO, Aboriginal organization 10)

Racism too is encountered in mainstream organizational cultures of paternalism in employment, educational, and housing contexts.

I facilitated a community meeting with 60, 80 community members.

Those principals had to sit there and listen while everybody said, this is no good, this is racist, this is below expectations and you're letting us down, you're killing our future . . . [T]he community and all the Aboriginal mums, dads, aunts, grandparents in particular were very, very vocal around, we want the best for our children and you are not delivering it . . .

[T]hat has been the attitude in Newcastle for a long time . . . [I]t built up over a period of time of total disappointment in the fact that those people in charge of helping create the future with the kids are actually colluding with low expectations . . . Whereas the truth is, our kids can do as well, if not better than anybody else . . . We need to get rid of the deficit conversations. (interview 7)

As the interviewee indicates, non-Indigenous educators continue to possess highly negative stereotypes and imaginings of Aboriginal students in terms of deficits and the Aboriginal community more widely. Where such views persist, as in the context of schooling above, they act as a barrier toward realizing the full potential of students (Sarra, 2005).

Racism not only affects the capacity of Aboriginal people to secure employment, but also the willingness to work in certain environments or to maintain employment. Like Larkin (2014), Ganter (2016), and Lahn and Biddle (2016) found, interviewees who work in mainstream government and non-government organizations continue to be confronted by ignorance, prejudice, and racism in the local, state, and federal government workplaces.

I love my job. I love getting out in the communities and meeting people . . . and seeing a difference through what we do. That's the tough thing, I do like my job . . . I don't like the policy stuff that, as being a senior Aboriginal programs officer . . . you have to sort of do sometimes . . . I think it's really hard, because again, you're a lone voice. I'm the only Aboriginal worker in this directorate. So, I'm on the management team . . . So, you come up against some resistance . . . I call it ingrained . . . [B]asically, people who are raised with racism, and they might have changed

their ideas as adults, but it's still there . . . [T]hey're not even aware that they're doing it . . . They don't even know that it's racism. (interview 41)

While others do, the interviewee is not describing “virtuous Whiteness” (Feagin, 2010) or the well-meaning racist, who unintentionally makes a racist comment or is paternalistic in their awkward interactions with Aboriginal colleagues, but rather the deeply ingrained, historically embedded racist attitudes that are expressed by White colleagues in the workplace. Interviewees describe this as manifesting in different forms, such as overt expressions of paternalism, prejudice, and stereotypes. This concerns how interviewees make sense of their social interactions and society as deeply racialized (Trepagnier, 2010) and observe disadvantage in employment, education, and housing as evidence of the deep, foundational, and systemic nature of racial oppression in Australia (Feagin, 2006). These accounts are described as “ingrained” societal attitudes.

Importantly then, what the interview extracts presented throughout this article reveal is how interviewees associate Indigenous disadvantage with the Australian social body, its institutions, and larger social patterns. They perceive it more like what Feagin (2006) described as “a nightmare on the brain of the living” (p. 7), connecting past policies of racial ordering, dispossession, and trauma to contemporary forms of disadvantage. This is in keeping with the understandings of many contemporary sociologists of race and Whiteness (e.g., Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Feagin, 2006; Howard-Wagner, 2009, 2015, 2017; Trepagnier, 2010; Walter, 2009; Waquant, 2010).

Concluding Comments

Contemporary Indigenous policy at the state and federal level in Australia treats the disadvantage Aboriginal people experience as marginalization from the mainstream economy, and emancipation from disadvantage is about the facilitation of individual autonomous Aboriginal agency within it (Howard-Wagner, 2018). What this research found is that even though the Newcastle Aboriginal community sits at the “top of the bottom socio-economic pile” (interview 58), improvements in education and employment outcomes only tell part of the story. What is more, through conducting a study in an urban locality where the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage is slightly narrower than other localities and Aboriginal people have achieved greater educational and employment outcomes, and by interviewing those who have achieved such outcomes, this research demonstrates that Indigenous disadvantage is a far more complex social problem than socio-economic indicators suggest. In doing so, this research explains how Indigenous disadvantage cannot be reduced to an issue of poverty or socio-economic circumstances. It is not one in which “getting an education” and “getting a job” is the simple solution as is often politically suggested (Howard-Wagner, 2017). Importantly, interviewees do not define Indigenous disadvantage as comparative to non-Indigenous disadvantage or as simply exclusion from the economy, but instead define it as a social phenomenon related to past social and racial injustices and exclusion from the broader social, cultural, and political processes within society. The disadvantage Aboriginal people living in Newcastle experience is not experienced by all Novocastrians of lower socio-economic status. Importantly, borrowing again the phrase from one interviewee, “We’re not poor Whites in Black skins” (interview 59). From the standpoint of interviewees, who work at the frontline, the disadvantage Aboriginal people experience in this urban locality is described as being grounded in the histories of social exclusion from Australian society, displacement, and colonization. Overcoming Indigenous disadvantage in Newcastle is seen as requiring

different solutions to those currently offered under Indigenous policy frameworks. Interviewees argue that it requires addressing deeper racialized societal inequalities. They draw attention to the contemporary existence of a racialized social system and racialized epistemologies that exist around the disadvantage they experience.

In making this argument, interviewees situate the disadvantage Aboriginal people experience as an artifact and legacy of Australia's history and the institutionalized structuring of social relations in Australia over 230 years. Recognizing the historical antecedents of social relations to present day disadvantage in Australia includes recognizing the effects of the dispossession from culture, the dispossession from land and the placement of ownership of Aboriginal land in the hands of the "Crown," and the nationwide appropriation and removal of Aboriginal children.

This article has explored in more depth the interconnections between the domain of Aboriginality and disadvantage, revealing the ways in which Aboriginality is at the crux of Indigenous disadvantage in Newcastle. It reveals how "the domain of Aboriginality is the central core, with other aspects of poverty intimately interwoven [in this city] and interpreted through Aboriginality" (Walter, 2009, p. 8). This concerns the "dramatically circumscribed life chances and [how] a hard, daily reality has become a normalized aspect of Indigenous life" (Walter, 2009, p. 7), but also how the "burden of disregard" in terms of "the undercurrent of everyday race relations in which Indigenous people live their lives" is part of the everyday disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal people living in Newcastle (Walter, 2009, p. 11).

This does not negate Aboriginal agency in the present moment. In fact, a key point that interviewees made is that Aboriginal people themselves have played a central role in addressing the disadvantage they experience in this city through the creation of Indigenous organizations, programs, and services aimed at improving socio-economic outcomes and social conditions in culturally appropriate and less discriminatory ways (Howard-Wagner, 2017). Their endeavors to do so reinforce a long-held belief that overcoming Indigenous disadvantage is not as simple as getting an education and/or a job. That is, historical and contemporaneous racialized social relations and epistemologies matter.

While federal Indigenous policy and practice continues to fail to recognize the broader determinants that shape Aboriginal peoples' lives and experiences, such as the "burden of disregard" and "dispossession," there are emerging examples of policies and programs that could be used as a starting point or roadmap in the future, such as the New South Wales Aboriginal Affairs (2013) policy known commonly as OCHRE (Opportunity, Choice, Healing, Recognition, Empowerment). OCHRE "recognises the failure of policies fixated on 'the gap' and 'disadvantage' and by contrast, respects Aboriginal peoples' culture, rights and contributions to the social, cultural and economic development of the State" (Ardler cited in NSW Aboriginal Affairs, 2018, p. 2). It is focused on resetting the NSW government's relationship with Aboriginal communities, recognising that "for over two centuries Aboriginal peoples have been viewed and discussed as a 'problem'" (NSW Aboriginal Affairs, 2018, p. 8).

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