Ethnic Diversity and the Color Line in Australian Metropolises: Experiences of Urban Indigenous Youths

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Abstract
This paper illustrates some characteristics of young Indigenous Australians living in urban areas of Australia. An interview survey targeted Indigenous youths studying in higher education. The results reveal how they experience the mainstream society and establish their Indigenous identity while they adapt to the society. This study also investigates the procedures of building relationships between mainstream groups and the participants in response to diversified urban life. The interview data show that some experienced facing stereotypical views and prejudices through their individual life history; however, they had positive views about being Indigenous in urban areas. This study does not focus on the contrast between white (European) and black (Indigenous) people in rural or remote communities but on the impact of the nature of metropolises, where diverse ethnic minorities coexist. Following the different perspectives of studies in remote areas called ‘homelands’, which are often found in Indigenous studies, this study focuses on this insufficiently developed field with an in-depth exploration of the relationship between Indigenous youths and urban society.

1. Introduction
This article focuses on young Indigenous Australians and their experiences in urban societies. It is generally agreed that previous studies on urban Indigenous Australians conducted in Japan and Australia have not produced sufficient information. Therefore, this study aims to further advance this largely undeveloped field and analyze to what extent urban life has affected Indigenous youths’ perspectives and understanding of mainstream society. Although there is a trend of Indigenous Australians moving to live in urban areas, the majority of studies have remained focused on remote communities, i.e., the so-called ‘living museums’. A consequence of this situation was the intervention by the Federal government into the suffering of these Indigenous ‘homelands.’ Thus, government programs
have shifted to remote areas. As a result, remote areas are targeted many times more often than urban areas.

In terms of urban Indigenous studies, a considerable range of studies have been conducted across academic fields, especially in the fields of sociology, anthropology, and/or education. For example, Fletcher (1989) reported on education, including urban schools in New South Wales. As for Japanese scholars, Suzuki (1995) explored the town of Redfern in Sydney and analyzed its urban Indigenous community. Shimomura (2009) explained the differences in Indigenous education between urban and remote areas. However, the research field of Indigenous youths at tertiary education level has largely not been developed yet. This study targeted young Indigenous students in the tertiary education sector and listened to their life experiences in urban society to clarify the impacts and influences of mainstream society on them.

2. Characteristics of urban Indigenous studies

Previous studies of urban Indigenous peoples basically developed in the fields of anthropology and sociology, particularly cultural anthropology and urban sociology, and then in other fields such as education and health science. Scholars pursued issues related to the characteristics of residential areas, migration of Indigenous peoples from remote to urban areas, their mobility within urban areas and social life issues, such as employment, health and housing (Gale 1972). Gale (1972) analyzed the patterns of urban migration and the demographics and distribution of Indigenous peoples in urban areas. Gale (1972) also identified Indigenous peoples’ issues with housing, health, employment and welfare services. Simultaneously, other studies focused on the loss of traditional culture, such as the state of kinship and culture, or on the hybrid new culture of Indigenous peoples in the changing urban society (Eggarking 1998; Anderson 1998). While Macdonald (1998) contextualized cultural continuities in New South Wales, Atherton (1998) explored new types of Indigenous culture in the context of tradition and transition. Studies have also focused on Indigenous children educated at urban schools. They argued the differences in cultural behaviors between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students and proposed methods to resolve conflicts in urban schools (West 1993). Hudspith and Williams (1993) identified the importance of enhancing Indigenous identities and self-esteem in the classroom.

Researchers and journalists who work with Indigenous people in remote areas strongly insist on improving the situation in these remote areas. For example, Hughes described Indigenous peoples and emphasized the realities of remote areas.
• About a third -160,000 people- work in mainstream jobs in cities, town and the country. Their wide range of occupations includes wharfies, truck drivers, building workers, postmen, real estate agents, doctors, lawyers and merchant bankers. These Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families have mainstream living standards. While they remain proud of their traditional culture and ties to their ancestral lands, they are also able to participate fully in Australian society.

• The largest numbers - about 250,000 people- exist on the fringes of towns and in major city ghettos. They have low labor force participation, high employment and high welfare dependence, poor education and poor health. They live in crowded, often derelict houses. Their everyday lives are prone to substance abuse and violence.

• The smallest group, about 90,000 people live in some 1,200 ‘homeland’ settlements established in remote Australia from the 1970s. These families are the most deprived. Most are totally dependent on welfare. Most have missed out on schooling for a generation. They suffer such appalling health that their expectancy is more than 20 years shorter than that of non-Indigenous Australians. Most have deeply frustrating lives in crowded sub-standard houses in settlements marked by high rate of alcoholism, drug abuse and violence, particularly against women. Remote settlements have been compared to Third World refugee camps. (Hughes 2007: 3)

Hughes strongly emphasized the need to end the shameful conditions in which Indigenous people live in the remote communities. As mentioned in the Introduction, owing to the momentum of this pressure, State and Federal governments have emphasized improving health and life expectancy in remote Indigenous communities over the years. However, according to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (2011), the standard of health in Australia’s largest urban Indigenous communities is no better than in big communities in the bush and the life expectancy is about the same. The television program reported on the Indigenous community in La Perouse on the northern headland of Sydney’s Botany Bay. The suburbs in that area are home to about 4,000 Aboriginal people. The TV reporter interviewed a 65-year-old Indigenous man to reveal the disadvantages experienced by the urban Indigenous community. Other studies focused on the relationship between individuals and the community in addition to issues of socio-economic disparity. Bolt (2009) studied the formation of urban Indigenous identities. His study was conducted in an Indigenous community in the local government area of Shoalhaven in New South Wales, which is about 160 kilometres south of Australia’s largest city, Sydney. Yamanouchi (2010) described the relationship between community and Indigenous identities of the Indigenous peoples in
south-western Sydney. Her study pointed out that Indigenous social relations are not always exclusively based on kinship ties, which are common in rural areas. Through participation in community-based organizations’ activities in the investigated area, Indigenous peoples communicate with each other and feel a sense of community. These studies attempted to focus on individuals’ perspectives to capture the relationships between each person and their communities. These studies tended to share a community-based study method and focused on specific Indigenous communities. The above researchers also tended to choose mature-aged people for their research subjects. Therefore, studies have not yet been developed enough to focus on the current situation and issues of Indigenous youths studying at higher educational institutions in urban areas for a variety of reasons. Thus, this research attempts to focus more on individuals and investigate how these Indigenous youth experience and understand the mainstream society and then develop their identities as Indigenous Australians while experiencing and learning to socialize in the mainstream society.

3. Research methods
A qualitative methodology was determined to be the most appropriate for documenting the voices of young Indigenous people. My study of life history approach allowed me to create a space for Indigenous youth to speak out about their life experiences. Twenty Indigenous students aged between 18 and 25 years old were identified with assistance provided by the Koori Centre at the University of Sydney and Tranby National Indigenous Adult Education & Training in Sydney. Because rural–urban mobility is common among Indigenous youth, some have experienced living in both urban and rural areas (while others were born and raised entirely in Sydney). The interviews were conducted between 2009 and 2010. Ethics approval was obtained and procedures were followed in accordance with the standards of the University of Sydney’s Ethics Committee (number 02-2009/11258). A written informed consent was obtained from all participants.

4. Research findings
(1) Misconceptions or stereotypical views
In interviews, participants described their experiences of ‘misconceptions’ or ‘stereotypical views’.

Yes, a lot of your friends when you’re growing up, a lot of non-Indigenous friends you might have, might always ask you, you can’t be an Aboriginal cos you don’t have dark skin and they live in the bush that kind of stuff. It does make me angry, you know
that’s the truth, it does make you angry, it does upset you, but then I suppose as you get older you learn to deal with it, learn to try to set it back on them and educate them, …

the truth, cause I suppose with your mates saying then when you’re young, people have no education I suppose and their parents pass it on to them and give them an education about who Aboriginal people are. That’s just the way the stereotype: … and it’s just a generational thing they just keep on doing it and doing it, their grandparents might be ignorant and stereotype our people all the time, and so just being generational it just goes in a cycle sort of thing. (O male)

Participant O said that he was angry; however, he concluded that the reason for this misconception was because of a lack of education in relation to understanding the diversity of Indigenous Australians. According to Heard (2009), the rate of intermarriage was much lower in Indigenous peoples who live outside Australia’s capital cities. Thus, most Indigenous people who had achieved relatively high levels of educational and income mobility were in exogamous relationships. This suggests that any remaining social divide between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians is attributable to socio-economic divisions and to the relative residential isolation of Indigenous communities outside the capital cities (Heard et al. 2009: 39). The level of exogamy was lower amongst the generally much larger populations of Indigenous peoples living outside the respective state capitals, while social divisions remained stronger in rural areas. Participant M, who came from a rural community, clearly describes this socio-economic divide:

Where in my town it’s pretty dead, like they’re like: … The more non-Indigenous people have like have most of the jobs where the Aboriginal people who you can see everyday, they don’t have the jobs, you know? (M female)

The social divisions in participant M’s town are clear, and discrimination and the disadvantaged status of Indigenous peoples remains stark. Thus, participant M moved to Sydney and started studying at university to seek a better life. Meanwhile, participant P described his complex experience in his rural hometown, Bathurst. *

Well Bathurst is a very: … it’s a pretty big place, I think there’s would be about 40 thousand, 50 thousand people, well it was when I was there: … and um: … Indigenous population I wouldn’t know because when I was there I didn’t really: … they wouldn’t include me, I wasn’t: … they like: … it was strange, it’s kind of like being: … I knew myself
I was Aboriginal but because of my skin the Aboriginals wouldn’t include me, but because the Non-Aboriginals knew I was they wouldn’t include me either it’s kind of like you’re in the middle… (P male)

Participant P felt that he belonged to ‘no side’ because he was not perfectly accepted by both non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal peoples. Thus, he could not comfortably belong to either non-Aboriginal or Aboriginal peoples. He said it was ‘like you’re in the middle’. He described his suffering in being Indigenous in Bathurst.

I did suffer from that [stereotypical view] a lot especially in Bathurst because… and a lot of the time even teachers would tell me to forget… if I wanted to be called Aboriginal, just forget it… yeah… And friends like, they’d often assume that I wasn’t… and they’d sit there and they’d put down Aboriginals in front of me and they used to say bad things all the time about Aboriginals, they’d say that they’re lazy and I used to disagree because I am Aboriginal but a lot of the time I was afraid to say it because I didn’t want them to think those thoughts about me. (P male)

If that society was much more racially mixed or multi-ethnic, the view of the majority of students would be somewhat different and they would see hybridity as being more natural. Indigenous youth in urban areas, especially those who are fair (white) in appearance tend not to experience the same level of hardship in their lives. Participant P mentioned his different experiences between urban and rural areas.

Nah, not really… I just tried to treat everybody equal, like how I would want to be treated I suppose… and I’ve got friends from many different cultures… not so much in Bathurst… there is, it’s majorly European um… when I came here now I’ve worked with many people from different cultures. (P male)

Similarly, participant O pointed out that Indigenous peoples who were raised in urban areas nonetheless report feeling uncomfortable because of stereotypical views or misconceptions from non-Indigenous peoples. However, he showed a positive view about his hope to change the future relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples through education.

Yes, definitely. I wanna educate not only my people, but also the wider community. Ev--
Everyone that lives in Australia I wanna educate more about our history and our culture. I think it’s important cos they live on this land that they should know the truth about it. (O male)

Likewise, participant P noted that his positive change from feeling ambivalent about his Indigenous identity to constructing a solid Indigenous identity due to his multicultural experience of university life in Sydney.

I did a lot growing up and that was mostly because I’d hear other people say “you are, you’re not, you are, you’re not” and I’d get so confused with it and I did I suppose… like you don’t know who you are in a way, but I think cause I’ve gotten more confident, like now I know that I’m Aboriginal, I know where I’m coming from… like I know where we come from, and I’m on a journey to find out as much as I can now… try and piece the picture back together… try and fit the puzzle back together and find out what happened in the past and might… like why is my family so broken now… why they don’t know so much and… there’s so many questions that aren’t answered that I’ve thought and I don’t know… I have to find out… and I suppose a lot of the conflict came too, it’s just having that go to… let get up and say that I am Aboriginal, a lot of the times I have been, like I said, a random and they’ve said things and I’ve just been quiet because I didn’t know who I was then… they’d say bad things about Aboriginals and I’d think well maybe it is better to be Non-Aboriginal, maybe I should be like them and not my family but you know, not now… but that’s the only conflict that I used to growing up, but now I don’t get it… now I’m proud of it… yeah… (P male)

The diversity of the urban environment in the largest city in Australia helped participant P to build up his Indigenous identity from an unsuitable situation, such as belonging to ‘no side’. Participant P clearly expressed his strong commitment being Indigenous, when he said, ‘I do enjoy [being] Aboriginal … I do play didgeridoo’. This is one of the benefits from education, especially higher education, because higher education institutes generally serve a variety of international students and local students, in contrast to local community-based schools, which generally serve local people. This positive attitude could be more effective in succeeding in higher education in a diverse urban society.

(2) Reverse discrimination and a lack of opportunities
While there are a wide variety of support programs serving Indigenous Australians,
participant I points out that they are not always available for all Indigenous Australians:

No, I’ve never received… I’ve never been eligible for it because my parents both have work and … even now I find it really hard to... it’s still is… in terms of the government and that in Australia it’s really... It’s kind of very categorized. It doesn’t focus on the individual situation. So I think that’s why it’s very misleading. I think because people think that all Aboriginal people get houses and payments a week, and gets like all things cheaper but it’s not true in the end. And I’m like in my circumstances it’s never been the case. And not that like… I’m well off, but I don’t have great amounts of money. It’s just you live comfortably but it’s... it is a bit misleading, I think in terms of payments and funding. (I female)

From her perspective, mainstream society has a stereotypical perception of Indigenous peoples as if all Indigenous peoples receive government support, such as housing payments or funding. However, many students live independently in their urban communities and study at universities. Furthermore, she mentioned the possibility of interfering with reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.

Um… I think that in education a lot that the um... the Indigenous… the white people feel that I think the Indigenous people get put like… segregated, and I think that’s what the main thing is. Especially in high school, if there is… it’s great having a lot of Indigenous programs but if they are just for Indigenous people, the other white students will think “Oh they get to go away and go on a camp, or they get to have the day off school, why don’t I?” So it’s that jealousy factor that doesn’t reconcile it. (I female)

Her comment exposed a feeling of ‘reverse discrimination’ among non-Indigenous people. Essentially, the Indigenous-focused supporting programs introduced to reduce the socio-economic disparity of both sides stimulates the jealousy of non-Indigenous people, which eventually causes so-called reverse discrimination that creates a gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Thus, these programs may prevent mutual understanding between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. However, a considerable number of the participants received comprehensive support, such as homework centers, the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme for Indigenous students who need assistance of individual tutorials, the support of Indigenous Education Assistants, and direct assistance, such as ABSTUDY, which is a scholarship for school education. These participants clearly built
their path to higher education with the assistance of those supporting programs. Therefore, because socio-economic disparities still exist between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, these support programs are indispensable and it is important for the mainstream society to increase their awareness of objections to these programs.

Participant J explained how difficult it was for her to pursue learning about Aboriginal studies without help from an Aboriginal support office/officer after having moved to Sydney:

I moved to Sydney when I was only one... there were only two Aboriginal kids in my school so that was hard, and I wanted to do Aboriginal studies in year eleven and twelve for the HSC, but they didn’t offer it at the school, so I had to do it by correspondence and that was very hard because we didn’t have an Aboriginal support office or employment officer at the school because there wasn’t enough Aboriginal kids. So I had to travel into Redfern to do the course. (J female)

Additionally, participant J experienced trouble with the staff at her school because she wanted to pursue Aboriginal studies for her Higher School Certificate (HSC).

Because I was the only one of two Aboriginal kids in the school and then people are very aware of it because it was such a... And because the school didn’t want me to do Aboriginal studies it became a thing, yeah. (J female)

Participant J was born and raised in Jervis Bay, which is approximately 200 kilometres from the Sydney central business district and has a big Indigenous community. She moved to Sydney when she was a high school student. Thus, she has a strong Indigenous identity and is proud of being Indigenous. She wanted to become a high school teacher of Aboriginal studies. Therefore, she tried to take Aboriginal studies as one of the selected subjects for her HSC examination, but she had no opportunity to take the subject at her high school because of insufficient enrolments to open that subject. Therefore, she travelled to Redfern to take Aboriginal studies. However, the staff at her school were aware of this, but did not provide her with support or opportunities. This lack of opportunity and support from her school made her reluctant and created a barrier to being Indigenous for her. This issue should be considered; i.e., the number of Indigenous youth enrolled at the school should not matter. If there is at least one Indigenous student enrolled at the school, the school needs to provide them with some support. However, the environment of participant J’s university life differs from her high school experience. She receives frequent support from
Koori Centre for her university life, and she has enrolled in an Arts degree course in addition to a Diploma of Education at the University of Sydney with majors in history and Indigenous studies to be a high school teacher. In addition, she had the opportunity to learn her tribal language, Gamilaraay, at her university and travelled internationally to meet with indigenous peoples from other countries. Such opportunities for young Indigenous peoples will be important factors to consider in constructing a richer and more diverse society.

5. Conclusion

This paper examined how young Australian Indigenous peoples receiving higher education in urban areas understand mainstream society and enhance their identity formation and adaptation to society through their lives and studies. Although, there are young people who faced difficulties in establishing their Indigenous identities and self-reliance before receiving higher education, they are working in a society positively in their society with the diversity in urban life. Those young Indigenous people are in an important position to bridge both sides Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples to break through such social barriers. At the same time, they are also a good role model for Indigenous children to make a better future in Australian society. In addition, a positive social experience that deepened the experiences in a diversified society, as young Indigenous people from rural areas were experienced, can have a positive impact on the future of the reconciliation of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. A variety of affirmative action programs provided for Indigenous peoples are also expected to create a new type of reverse discrimination between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. However, to eliminate the socio-economic gap that exists between them, it is necessary to provide further support for more Indigenous youths to receive higher education. Meanwhile, it is also necessary for mainstream people to communicate knowledge of how they were historically excluded, marginalized and placed in their current social position for others to understand them correctly. The weakness of the study, however, is that it could not capture the issues of young people who dropped out of higher education institutes and the backgrounds and realities of Indigenous youths who gave up on accessing on higher education. This could be a future challenge for Australian Indigenous youth studies.

Notes

1) This article is a revised edition with updated data from a part of the author’s dissertation, *A Comparative Study of Indigenous Education, in the Context of Globalisation: Australian and Japanese Perspectives*, which was approved by the University of Sydney in fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

2) Throughout this paper, the terms Indigenous Australian(s), Indigenous youth(s) or young Indigenous people(s) are used except in citations because Aborigines/Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders live all over Australia and some participants have mixed or complex backgrounds. Furthermore, the words ‘Aborigine’ or ‘Aboriginal’ were mostly used in a derogatory sense to portray Indigenous people as ‘simple’, ‘savage’, ‘pagan’, ‘cannibalistic’ or ‘barbaric’ (Miller 1999).

3) Bathurst is approximately 200 kilometres west of the Sydney central business district.

4) Higher School Certificate is the state-wide examination to obtain the entitlement to enrol at university in New South Wales.

5) The Gamilaraay (Kamilaroi, Camileroi) language is a Pama–Nyungan language of the Wiradhuric subgroup found mostly in south-eastern Australia (Ethnologue 2017).

References


