

Indigenous unemployment in rural and regional Western Australia: A contextual, cultural and bottom-up approach

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Abstract

Historically, Australian policy makers have associated rural Indigenous community's high un-employment levels and low labour force participation rates with poor livelihood outcomes. This is primarily a result of a 'one size fits all' approach where labour market outcomes are seen not within their geographical and cultural contexts (Biddle, 2017; Altman et al, 2007), and where the indigenous unemployment issues are often seen through a western lens (Lawrence, 2005). This paper develops further on these ideas to propose that the patterns of Indigenous unemployment must be considered within a complex and colonising system. These patterns need to be recognised, admitted to, and amended in partnership with the local communities taking into account the specific geographical and cultural concerns. Sustainable livelihood solutions must be sought to address economic development in remote Indigenous communities, and this would require challenging the value perspectives informing government policy. Transformation must come from within the local communities and governments need to change how they conceptualise Indigenous peoples' 'issues'. Otherwise, colonising and disempowering processes will continue to be reinforced. The researchers explore the ideas through fieldwork in Wakathuni, a remote Aboriginal community settlement located in the Pilbara region of Western Australia.

Introduction

Historically, Australian policy makers have recognised the need to increase workforce participation (Thomas and Daniels 2010), and the associated rural and remote Indigenous community's high unemployment levels and low labour force participation rates with poor livelihood outcomes. Contextual factors such as limited employment opportunities, combined with limited infrastructure for sustainable economic development, limited levels of education and training opportunities, poor health and abuse of drugs and alcohol are considered to play a significant role. Moreover, studies show that even Indigenous self-employment suffers because of these factors and remains very low as compared to non-Indigenous self-employment. Although policy changes and introduction of government programs that support setting up businesses for Indigenous entrepreneurs meant an increase in Indigenous self-employment, Indigenous residents were still found to be 13 times less likely to be self-employed than non-Indigenous remote residents (Hunter, 2013).

It is clear that factors that drive policy-makers to effectively ignore the situation of people living in rural and remote areas are: the belief in a strong and competitive national economy, a reduced role for governments to intervene, and the idea that the market will organise and equally benefit all geographical spaces in Australia, Rural and remote communities are supposed to self-govern and demonstrate their self-help credentials, or government can show its power and disadvantaging and exclusionary measures can follow (Godwin and Pritchard, 2007). Indigenous communities receive financial grants to create artificial independent job markets and employment for Indigenous populations, and to effectively turn these populations into a particular kind of entrepreneurial and competitive subject (Lawrence, 2005 p. 47).

As a result, federal funding for various Indigenous programs and communities has been implemented and withdrawn in a destructive cycle and limited desired outcomes have been produced. Sustainable livelihood solutions to address economic development in remote Australian Indigenous communities are needed, but this requires changing communities' mind-set and challenging the value perspectives that inform current government policy. For example, Godwin and Pritchard's (2007) research in a small Tasmanian community dealing with a tough situation demonstrated that a change in attitude towards community development, and a form of networking unique to the community became the primary factors for a successful outcome. Capitalist notions of job markets and employment are central to identity development and social behaviour in hegemonic western cultures, but contrast with the idea of people working in and as a community to sustain their health. These capitalist notions also contrast with Indigenous peoples' emphasis on kinship and relatedness. The driving force behind capitalism is all about economy; integrating trade and financial markets at a global level and living in 'one world', but in denial of human lives and human rights (Ife, 2013:184-85).

Current regional and Indigenous public policy in Australia at both federal and state levels, continues to draw from a colonising, assimilationist paradigm that doggedly and voraciously consumes the attention of mainstream society (McRae-Williams and Gerritsen, 2010). This paradigm does not recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) peoples' tradition of adaptability and flexibility to remain independent in a forever changing world (Nakata 2007). The human capital model, which focuses on people's marketable skills, knowledge and social productivity levels and relates these to people's socio-economic backgrounds, characterises government policy-makers' deficit thinking. That thinking fails to recognise the worldviews, knowledges and realities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) peoples as distinctive and vital; does not recognise the social, historical and political contexts that shape the lives of ATSI peoples; and does not honour their social mores as essential processes through which they live, learn and situate themselves (Martin and Booran 2003). It does not recognise the capabilities of successful ATSI peoples' businesses in Australia (Korff 2017). Yet, in 2009/10, the top 500 ATSI owned businesses generated a combined income of AUD 1.88b., and they employed 11,095 full-time workers (Korff 2017). ATSI owned businesses, which mainly operate in the health and community services sector (40%), employment and training industry (26%, and in land management (17%), achieve their successes by their capacity to adapt to changing circumstances (Korff 2017).

In order to move away from governments' capitalist notions of doing economy and their deficit thinking, and instead, build on and learn from Indigenous communities' strengths and resilience to support Indigenous communities' development, Biddle (2017) explored the capabilities and social capital of communities and their functioning based on six variables established by Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (2014): connectedness to country, land and history; culture and identity, resilience, leadership, having a role, structure and routine, feeling safe, and vitality or health. This paper develops these ideas further to explore the significance of geographical and cultural contexts in arriving at sustainable livelihood solutions for remote Indigenous communities.

Fleming (2015) argued for viable, pragmatic models that value both traditional and western knowledge to drive remote Indigenous Australian communities' development. She suggests that Indigenous Australians can and should design their own economic futures, and that place-based approaches can and will succeed if key issues are addressed and all key drivers are engaged. Fleming (2015) argued that governments need to provide an enabling regulatory environment that supports Indigenous business development and the capacity of Indigenous workers, and helps build Indigenous community capacity.

The above arguments are important considering, in 2014, the premier of the Western Australian Government, Colin Barnett, threatened to close 150 of the 274 remote Indigenous communities in

Western Australia. He made this announcement after the Commonwealth Government's Indigenous Affairs Minister, Nigel Scullion, announced funding cuts for Indigenous communities' essential and municipal services such as power, water and rubbish collection. Around the same time, Barnett accepted a Commonwealth payment of \$90 million for the Western Australian state government to take over responsibility for Indigenous communities, and argued it needed to make decisions around what communities would be spared. The only communities spared would be those considered as potentially productive and self-sustainable (Harrison, 2014; Perpetch and Vidot, 2014). Arguably, productivity and self-sustainability imply employment opportunities for people living in Indigenous communities.

Then, in late 2016, the Western Australian government committed \$52 million to improve the community infrastructure, power, water and wastewater facilities of 10 Indigenous communities, aiming for these to become 'hubs' for other communities in the region and eventually receive a 'town status' (Wahlquist, 2016). Wakathuni, a community located a half hour drive and approximately 28 km South-East of Tom Price, lies within the shire of Ashburton in the Pilbara region of Western Australia and was on this list.

Although this government focus on improving community infrastructure looks encouraging, it is driven by western capitalist concepts of globalisation and a neoliberal agenda that threaten to dismantle existing structures whilst placing aside the strengths and ways of working of Indigenous communities.

It is important to define relevant meanings of sustainability; a word that has become popular across broad policy and academic circles, and is therefore often re-appropriated to differing contexts. For Indigenous people, it is more important to balance the flow of goods and resources over time through a system of reciprocity. It is less important to know what others do for a living, and more important to know what people do with their goods and resources. Indigenous people are concerned with the long-term welfare of their whole community, not individual households. They rely on extended families that live across the country, each area producing seasonal products at different times (Sercombe, 2005). Traditional economies are environmentally sustainable, because for Indigenous peoples the land is their 'homeland' and nature's resources such as game, fish, seeds and fur are used as 'trading' tools, but on a limited basis. The natural harmony is to be maintained. They therefore use the natural resources available to them in a way that could be considered self-supporting and viable across a long term. In contrast, Barnett's plan to invest only in productive and self-sustainable settlements is located within a western economic paradigm that views sustainability as the economic self-sufficiency of individuals who can productively support themselves, but does not consider relationships across the wider community and environment.

The four-year project discussed in this article did not aim to build on the premise of Indigenous economies that are interconnected across states and territories through family and tribal connections, but focused on a single community in the Pilbara region of Western Australia. With the support of the Gumala Aboriginal Corporation, Ashburton Aboriginal Corporation, Wakathuni Aboriginal Corporation and Curtin University, this project sought to help improve Wakathuni's productivity and self-sustainability, while placing an emphasis on Indigenous values. Unemployment appeared to be a major problem in Wakathuni. To better understand this problem, and to add to sound policy development that builds on the community's strengths and opportunities, the researchers applied a multi-scalar approach (Baum, Bill and Mitchell, 2008). The multi-scalar focus on place and people considers areas such as education, mobility, and proximity to industry; factors that need to be considered within a broader Australian Indigenous context to understand the issue of regional and local Indigenous unemployment. An exploration of the potential drivers of labour market

disadvantage, as affected by individual, social and spatial variables, would allow the researchers to formulate and strategize livelihood solutions.

Background information on Wakathuni

Interestingly, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) has no data on Wakathuni. Data can only be extrapolated from the broader Ashburton regional statistics (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013b). Researchers therefore conducted semi-structured interviews with questions asking people about their age, gender, occupation, education, and factors affecting (lack of) employment. We present both the Ashburton data collected from the ABS, and the results collected from interviews with individuals from the Wakathuni community. The data are contextualised and discussed in relation to the literature, to conclude that a focus on ‘factors’ or ‘variables’ impacting on Indigenous people’s unemployment is untenable. For policy makers to develop sound policy on Indigenous employment, traditional responses and a functionalist approach examining ‘factors’ affecting unemployment excludes an examination of systems within which these factors operate (Durst, 1990). A focus on ‘factors’ reinforces colonising, positivist notions of classification and a linear development of humankind that reflects more the western constructions of cultural reality than the realities of the Indigenous peoples. This alienates people from the environment in which they live.

An anthropological-sociological perspective and anti-positivist stance concerned with issues of social justice, of relevance to the Indigenous community in policy-development, is more culturally appropriate. Such a stance also takes note of cultural practices, institutions, social groups and everyday life that are impacted by, and potentially transformed through globalised communication, economic, political and environmental pressures.

A first step was the identification of Wakathuni’s community strengths and opportunities through the conduct of needs assessments and site surveys (Tulloch, 2015). In order to contribute to the broader literature on Indigenous communities’ livelihoods and ways of improving their capacity to be self-sustainable, it was important to determine the social and geographical statistical variables of Wakathuni and how these compared to those of the Ashburton region within which the community is located. The researchers wanted to know if significant differences emerged, and what the underlying structures would be that contributed to these key differences.

Statistical data were collected through desktop-research, and field research data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The implementation of semi-structured interviews was seen as suitable and has been applied in various research projects (Watts and Carlson, 2002; Johnston and Thomas, 2008; Ashton, Gibson and Gibson, 2015; Dyer, Aberdeen and Schuler, 2003; Evans et al, 2009). Similar projects taking place in remote and rural communities showed that collection of data through methods such as surveys was not successful (Ashton, Gibson and Gibson 2015: 43). The use of semi-structured interviews permitted the researchers to design interview questions guided by key topic areas, while allowing for greater discussion and flexibility (Minichiello, 1995: 65). The problem however was that approximately 80 people resided in Wakathuni but only 21 people were interviewed due to others attending a funeral outside Wakathuni. 26% of those who responded did not reside in Wakathuni, although considered it as their ‘home’. Either they were studying or working in the nearby towns. 40% of the interviewees were females. Age of respondents was from 14 to 55 and above, with 52% from 30 – 54 age group.

The researchers were trained prior to the fieldtrip, in the use of participatory action research, and underwent cultural awareness talks by the aboriginal elders. The implementation of a Participatory Action Research primarily seeks to improve the relationships between the researcher and the researched, deemed as critical to the success of any project (Kelly et al 2012). Additionally, a

preliminary visit or previous contact with the subject community is essential to determine the written, oral and unspoken protocols and behavioural norms of the community. Researchers visited Wakathuni number of times prior to undertaking interviews, along with the local Aboriginal organisation – the Gumala Aboriginal Corporation – who acted as mediators during the engagement process. An extensive ethics approval process was undertaken through the University Ethics Office. Qualtrics was used for data compilation and analysis.

Wage versus ‘traditional’ economies

Already in the early 1990s, Durst (1990) argued that western economists and policy-makers often miss the point that Indigenous peoples maintain a type of economy that differs significantly from the wage-based market economy. The two types of economy can even conflict with each other, because their underpinning views of the world differ. The wage-based economy is often situated within a market ‘logic’, and so is thought to view human and natural resources as commodities to be used. Following this, Australian Indigenous communities assume interdependency, so share among each other what individual people ‘gather’, which includes social security payments. In other words, with social networks and the common good as central foci to their transactions, the strength of traditional, and even transitional, economies lie in their social capital. In contrast, the wage economy promises a ‘superior’ lifestyle, but also fragments the social functioning of relationships among (Indigenous) peoples and their (extended) families. The promises of the wage-economy draw individual people or entire families away from their communities and community-life. The wage-economy also values only individuals whose performance accords with western economic standards. It rewards some people but not others, and sets up a difference in community status which is no longer determined by natural leadership or people’s natural skills and capacities, but by the amount of money a person earns. Although transitional economies have appropriated the market economy for Indigenous uses, this change in social ordering can weaken individual people’s sense of personal value, efficacy and confidence as a member of community (Durst, 1990: 63-64). Furthermore, Aboriginal Australian communities have had to contend with the destruction of their Indigenous economies through colonisation, as opposed to economies, such as in Papua New Guinea, which have experienced more of a transition, and so have been able to adapt (Curry 1990).

‘Dependency theory’ is often used to explain the highly unequal distribution of power in the world economic system. Durst (1990) uses this theory to explain that global economic and political forces have created a situation where regional areas of Western countries have become dependent on multi-national corporations to provide financial, technological and human resources, whilst regional resources remain undeveloped or underdeveloped. By extracting natural resources not for local consumption but for export, and providing local Indigenous people with only just enough money to stay out of the poverty cycle, global economic and political forces manage to subtly impose their western standards of living and cultural values onto the Indigenous people; a covert and destructive form of colonialism (pp. 65-66). The wage economy in an era of globalization warrants that employing institutions can demand from individuals to obey those in authority, thus instilling a sense of inferiority among Indigenous peoples because their opinions and ways of ‘doing’ economy and forms of governance are not considered of equal value (pp. 63-66).

A case in point is Wakathuni. Established in the year 1990, this community’s population has fluctuated since the early 2000, ranging between 60 and 100 occupants. The Australian Commonwealth government to date has ‘managed’ Aboriginal peoples’ affairs by segregating Aboriginal people and forcing them to assimilate by way of education, training and employment (Pearson and Daff, 2010). They were (and are) treated as socio-cultural unities, yet Aboriginal people are not ‘one’ group of people but a diversity of groups, each with different languages and connections

to the land. They have in common the forced removal out of country and into town camps so the government could better control them; and later, families were moved on again, from town camps into Wakathuni. Although located within Banjyima country, the people in Wakathuni therefore come from different language groups and belong to different country. Furthermore, most Wakathuni residents now receive social security benefits, continuing the cycle of dependency forced by the early government, and their ways of doing economy are not, and never have been, recognised by government forces. Their sense of autonomy is further eroded by a series of government interventions that do nothing to make the settlement 'self-sustainable'. The settlement is considered remote, and goods and services such as police, education, medical services, supermarkets, and recreational activities can only be accessed in Tom Price and Paraburdoo. The distance people need to travel to access these services is problematic, not only because individual people's needs cannot be met, but also because the community suffers; transportation costs are not equally shared so place a financial burden on the community, hence it cannot become viable. Furthermore, the shire of Ashburton does not have sufficient jobs available and apart from the multi-national companies, the private sector cannot be expected to create them. By drawing from and building on the skills, capacity, and knowledge of its residents around their traditions and culture, Wakathuni community would not only attract revenue but enhance its social capital, bind the community together and instil a sense of pride and personal value in its people. A reliance on their traditional economy complementary to the wage economy would add value to the community and lead to a holistic community development.

Western governments designing solutions

Durst (1990) argues that, in line with the wage-economy paradigm and a focus on deficiency, governments design 'solutions' for Indigenous people that are premised on Indigenous people's deficiencies. The Australian Commonwealth and State governments are no different, and consider Indigenous peoples' unemployment a result of what they define as deficiencies in education, training, poor health or lack of relevant experience. The focus is not on Indigenous viewpoints on economy, their ways of working, their strengths, their capacities, opinions or forms of governance. Moreover, policy-makers justify their policies by drawing from data from government agencies such as the ABS. The positivist framework the ABS uses to be able to create statistics and their definition of 'employment' is problematic. It considers paid work to be full-time, part-time, or casual work, or hours worked in a family business. This definition would exclude work-activities that are created through the Community Development Program (CDP), because the Australian Commonwealth Government funds these projects. CDPs are flexible programs focused on local decision making and local solutions, aiming to 'employ' job seekers for up to 25 hours per week in activities that benefit the community (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, n.d.). Community organizations that run CDPs pool people's unemployment benefit payments, and 'pay' people who 'work' for them (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012a). Effectively, these agencies manage the welfare payments of Indigenous people who are still formally unemployed, even though they are required to work for at least 5 hours per working day. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2012c) also points out that in remote areas, job opportunities tend to be scarce and little incentives exist to actively look for work. Many people who live in those areas therefore belong to the 'not in the labour force category' (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012c).

Government policy-makers would be wise to reorient public policy and recognise the enormous power of traditional economies. Fortunately, nowadays an increasing number of Indigenous people demonstrate they are mindful both of their exploitation and of their traditional conservation ideals, and seek positive, sustainable solutions. They demand local autonomy through greater participation and ways of controlling their economies, including governments' financial assistance programs. The people of Wakathuni for example identified unemployment as an issue, but only because capitalist

labour markets are considered the norm. They wanted to develop community facilities and secure more financially viable and sustainable means to support their community, not framed by the needs and wants of the Australian or State government. They wanted the researchers to create an inventory of the skills and community capacity, so the Wakathuni residents would be able to find better ways to sustain their community. The researchers believed a questionnaire would help to produce such an inventory.

Non-Indigenous versus Indigenous unemployment indicators

Only 7.6% of the Ashburton population is of Aboriginal ancestry (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013h). In 2011, when the region still benefited from the mining boom, 74% of all non-Indigenous people within the broader Ashburton region was employed, and only 1% was unemployed. In contrast, 59% of Indigenous adults were employed and 10% were unemployed. These data suggest a big racial divide in the region's workforce population.

Compared to the Ashburton total participation rate for males (77%) and females (69%), the Indigenous workforce participation rate for males was 76%, and females 52%. Male Indigenous unemployment was 8%, and female Indigenous unemployment was 12%, compared to non-Indigenous male un-employment being less than 1%, and non-Indigenous female employment at a little over 2%. The largest number of male unemployed Indigenous people was found in the age group 15 to 24 years: 15%. Among the females, the largest number was found in the 25 to 34 age group: 23%. It is clear that differences in gender and age play a role in Indigenous people's unemployment. Furthermore, females appeared to have a higher labour force participation rate than males, yet their unemployment rate is also significantly higher. It must be noted that the participation rates for the Ashburton total could be skewed due to the 26% of males and 10% of females who have not stated their labour force status to the ABS.

Our own surveys in Wakathuni show the participation rate for males at 50% and females at 71%. Within these participating work forces, 50% of males are unemployed and 60% of females are unemployed. Although, as previously mentioned, issues collecting a total population sample arose, participation, employment, and unemployment rates were still calculated for the participants who responded to the survey and live in Wakathuni. These results may be skewed; however, upon talking to community elders, it seems that unemployment should be much higher even than this. This comparison is consistent with the literature, which suggests unemployment rates in remote communities are significantly higher than the regional centres within which they are located. Also, the unemployment rates amongst females are higher (Baum, et al., 2008; Carson and McConnel, 2011). However, underrepresentation of unemployment in remote indigenous towns is further possible, as after long periods of unsuccessful attempts to find work, people often stop looking altogether and are no longer classified as 'unemployed'.

Unemployment impacts on people's weekly income, and a relatively small number of Indigenous people earned more than \$2500 per month. Whilst 72% of non-Indigenous households earned \$2,500 or more, only 45% of Indigenous households earned that amount of money (figure 1) (ABS 2012H).

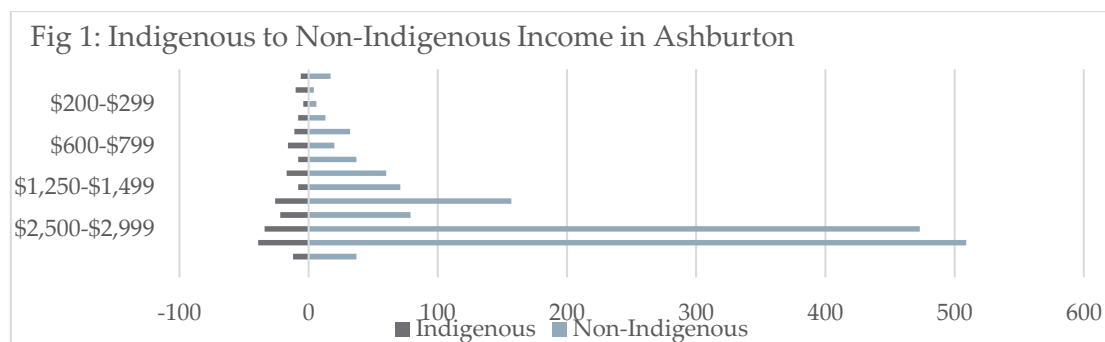


Figure 1 Indigenous to non-indigenous income in ashburton (Source: ABS, 2012H)

This division would most likely be more acute within localised remote settlement statistics, with the unemployment rates being potentially even higher than the Ashburton Statistical Local Area. Another important factor to be considered, in terms of people’s monthly income, is the practice of Indigenous Australians to share their belongings with their extended families. Indigenous Australians share their households with large numbers of people. In 2013, 33% of Indigenous Australians’ households consisted of five or six residents, whilst only 15% of non-Indigenous Australian households consisted of that number of people (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013b).

Employing multi-scalar analysis

The researchers employed desktop-research and questionnaires to understand how the regional statistics compared to the data gathered in the Wakathuni community. They adopted the viewpoint that individual scales analyse individual places or regions, but individual scales do not allow for a deeper, integrated understanding of an issue such as employment.

Baum, Bill, and Mitchell (2008) used a multi-scalar approach to better understand labour market disadvantage from both a social and a geographical perspective (p. 195). They analysed and made associations between social and geographical scales, to understand the interaction between people and place and as such be able to explain broader social and economic outcomes (Baum, et al., 2008: 194). Social variables included vulnerabilities, local governance, and external institutions, but also local and regional conditions such as population fluctuations. Geographical variables included proximity to industry, and how labour markets are segmented along geographic lines (p. 195). The nature and external conditions of industry were also considered as impacting on employment rates, for example lack of industry within Aboriginal settlements, highly specialised industry, and settlements not being in close proximity to industry (Carson and McConnel, 2011: 258). The researchers of this study supported the multi-scalar approach, and explored the variables of levels of education, (spatial) geography of industry, mobility and systemic disadvantage.

Education

Levels of education are considered a key factor in levels of unemployment. Carson and McConnell (2011) found that Indigenous workers in remote locations rarely have post-school educational qualifications and so are less likely to gain employment within a professional field of work (257). Upon comparing Indigenous and non-Indigenous education levels in the broader Ashburton region, disparities between the two population groups appeared. Among the non-Indigenous population, 47% completed Year 12 or equivalent, whilst only 21% of Indigenous people completed year 12 or equivalent. More than 40% of the non-Indigenous population attained a professional qualification above Certificate level or a university degree, compared to only about 28% of the Indigenous

population. Most notably, 0% of non-Indigenous individuals did not attend school, compared to 4% of Indigenous individuals, and 8% of the Indigenous population attained primary level education only. The lower levels of education amongst Indigenous populations are thought to be the dominant factor contributing to differences in labour market outcomes, and government and academic reports refer to these data to justify policy and strategies to close the gap in labour market outcomes and the need to improve education outcomes (Karmel, et al., 2014).

The data collected on tertiary education levels in Wakathuni cannot be compared to the data from the Ashburton region because not all participants replied clearly to the questions and some did not reply at all. The data did suggest however that a relatively high number of females achieved a certificate level of education, which related mostly to training in the hospitality and tourism industry. The women obtained their education at a Technical College in Tom Price, a town some 30 km from Wakathuni. Yet none of these women worked in the hospitality or tourism sector, because such facilities were not present in Wakathuni. Most men indicated they completed their training in the areas of conservation, gardening, and construction. They were more likely to use these skills in employment or CDEP programs in their local community. These data suggest that post school qualifications can, but do not necessarily equate to higher employment outcomes. Conversations with older members in the community suggested they had not completed high school education, or other Aboriginal education. In terms of Early Childhood Educational (ECE) outcomes, studies (Biddle & Holzinger, 2015) for two cohorts of Indigenous children from 11 different areas around Australia have shown that preschool attendance increases cognitive and development outcomes. The impact of the ECE program - 3A (Abecedarian Approach Australia) project, which was introduced in the Wakathuni community in 2012 with endorsement of the then WA Education Minister Peter Collier (Gumala Aboriginal Corporation, 2012), is difficult to measure at this early stage, however is a step in the right direction. Even so, it would be incorrect to assume that a lower level of education is the root cause for lower Indigenous labour market outcomes.

Geographical Variables: Industry

High levels of education, and an unemployment rate of only 1%, suggests that non-Indigenous people in Ashburton work in a highly specialised industry. Primarily a mining area, non-Indigenous individuals and families stay within regional towns such as Tom Price, Pannawonica, Paraburdoo and Onslow, provided there is employment. When the demand for iron-ore exports drops, production drops and employees are made redundant and often move out of mining towns into larger employment centres, such as Perth. But this is not always the case. Haynes et al. (2011), argue that the geographical space in which people reside impacts on people's ability to move between jobs (p. 3). Traditional economic models assume that individuals will move away from localities with unfavourable employment opportunities (Haynes, et al., 2011: 3). However, factors such as housing affordability, level of income support and the cost of travel, can keep people from moving (Haynes, et al., 2011: 3). Similarly, remote Indigenous unemployment is linked with housing affordability and keeps people from moving to better employment areas. Although Haynes et al. do not make a link with Indigenous contexts, they do argue that people living in remote areas face strong geographic barriers, and experience a 'spatial miss-match' between available jobs and human capital (education and skills). A factor that also needs to be considered in Indigenous people's contexts is that Indigenous people have strong identity, social and cultural connections to place. Country for the Indigenous people is not just 'imagined or represented, it is lived in and lived with' (Rose, 1996, p. 7). Connection to country is linked to overall well-being with reference to impact on mental health due to loss of essential connections to culture and community, spirituality and ancestry. (Swan & Raphael, 1995). Uprooting people from their country either through forced closure of remote communities or

employment solutions that are not place-based, instead of providing holistic growth, will only alleviate the well-being issues that the indigenous people are currently facing.

Mobility

Lack of mobility is also a barrier to accessing industry and education, and impacts on Indigenous unemployment (Carson and McConnel, 2011: 258). This particularly applies to geographically remote settlements, which are often too small to facilitate industry, or to supply adequate primary or secondary education. Therefore, children attend schooling outside the settlement, often within nearby towns. Although transportation is often supplied by the government to school children, this same service is not extended to job seekers or mature students who attend Vocational Education and Training (VET) courses. Carson and McConnell (2011) therefore argue for an increase in Indigenous mobility for mature Indigenous people so they can access and engage in formal education required for professional practice, to as such increase labour market outcomes. Others argue that the VET sector should better accommodate the community needs. For example, {Allison, 2006 #66} argue that VET courses should be restructured and delivered more holistically and flexibly, to help build sustainable communities in regional Australia. Further that the VET sector should facilitate the development of learning communities, where people and institutions combine their skills and expertise to make the most of available resources and develop the ability to generate even more resources should they be required. Both Allison et al. (2006). and Guenther et al. (2017) report that funding restrictions can be problematic when it comes from the Australian Government, because it fails to recognise the physical constraints of delivering courses in remote areas. Guenther et al. (2017) report that vocational training should better translate into employment outcomes for Indigenous Australians living in remote communities, but the ‘success’ of training can also imply students’ personal change, control and mastery over their lives (p. 24). Improved retention rates can be achieved by assisting learners to stay on track, building relationships with students, family and community and offering them support and a listening ear, and organising transport and administrative support. It also means attending to indicators of successful training. At a personal level, students should demonstrate enhanced self-confidence and identity, be proud of their achievements, and trainers should see the transformational impact of training. At a more collective level, communities will value and assume ownership of training because it connects with culture and local knowledge. At a pragmatic level, indicators of success are improved employment or career prospects.

With reference to Wakathuni, since the market drop in the mining industry, jobs in the region and towns like Tom Price have become scarce. Jobs in the mining industry directly correlates to jobs in the servicing sectors of Tom Price; as the population of mine workers fluctuate, so does the demand for jobs that service the town. The reduced demand for work in Tom Price for people in the hospitality industry for example, adds to the high unemployment rates and poor labour market outcomes. Furthermore, when participants were asked what factors they consider to affect their employment/unemployment, 50% of participants said they lacked transportation (no car) or did not have a driver’s license. This correlates with the literature, which identifies a lack of mobility to be a key factor affecting high unemployment rates in remote areas (Carson and McConnel, 2011: 258). Although Tom Price, the nearest place of industry, is only a half hour drive away, without a license, a vehicle, and without public transport, individuals rely on others to be able to journey outside of the community; the people of Wakathuni are at a disadvantage compared to Indigenous peoples living in Tom Price. We therefore see increased levels of unemployment as an issue that cannot be discussed in isolation.

Systemic Disadvantage

Because single factors cannot be considered alone, Baum, Bill and Mitchell (2008) suggest factors such as race, socio- economic status, age, gender, education levels, family influence, inter-generational outcomes, social capital, role models and networks, are all interconnected variables. Although lower levels of education might impact on people's employment, the problem is systemic and individual variables must be discussed together, within a broader framework of disadvantage. Furthermore, cultural and historical context needs to be considered as key to the problem. A micro-economic approach that quantifies personal, regional, and job market characteristics, is an approach used in many government reports to justify policy instruments (Le and Miller, 2000: 75). But it also represents a dominant policy agenda that locates quantifiable measures correlated to social disadvantage, but not to reflect on or change the systems that create and/or sustain disadvantage. Hence Baum, Bill, and Mitchell (2008) argue for a combination of people-and-place-based policies, capable of 'mitigating' the negative effect of social disadvantage (p. 195). By being on country, evidence suggests, that the community is able manage the natural resources cost-effectively and is able to grow economically (Altman and Whitehead, 2003). Further, place-based approach utilises local characteristics, local capacity and existing social capital to ascertain and prioritise needs and deliver services (Yeboah 2005). This results in a smoother policy implementation (Markey Halseth & Manson 2008).

With reference to Wakathuni, the researchers support the multi-scalar approach for an early analysis of the issue of Indigenous unemployment, and argue that policies which focus on social and geographical variables are more appropriate to tackle social disadvantage, because these variables operate within the broader colonial 'history'¹ of Australia and its cultural structures. Issues associated with the Indigenous people of Australia must be seen from the perspective of colonial history and persistent colonising Western ideologies and ways of collecting data. The issue of Indigenous unemployment must be seen from an Indigenous perspective, and the data collection process must be responsive to cultural and organizational specificities of the Indigenous communities. It is from this perspective that we may begin to grasp the impact of social and geographical variables as markers of social disadvantage. Daryl Cronin (2003) explains that Indigenous disadvantage is the product of inequality that exists in many forms. This includes discrimination, unequal access to basic human services, inequalities of power, and inequality of wealth, income and employment (p. 151). In examining the underlying structures of Indigenous disadvantage, we see how these structures operate within, and are facilitated by colonising apparatuses. One such apparatus includes the forced and continued dependency of the Aboriginal people on the government, spanning from early ration camps in the 19th century to current systems of welfare payments. These measures are meant to control the Aboriginal population and continue to reinforce a colonising system in the world today.

Colonisers expect that the colonised people assimilate into society, and that Indigenous people adopt western economic concepts of doing business (Pearson and Duff, 2010, p. 22). In other words, they expect that Indigenous people give up their way of doing business and accept what Durst (1990) calls the 'wage economy'; a capitalist system with roots in Calvinism and the belief in salvation from hard work (Bocock, 1992: 252-253); a belief system that reverberates in current government policies, but is not necessarily acceptable for some Indigenous people for whom Lore – their traditional learning and transmission of Knowledge – may be more important.

¹ Official history can be problematic; as native histories are often erased from the official records.

When an unemployed survey participant was asked if he would seek employment in Tom Price if public transport was provided, he answered “probably not, I don’t really want to work”. This answer highlights the meaning and cultural value of employment to many Indigenous peoples, and to what extent western agendas, and government’s discourse of ‘production’, are often forced upon Indigenous Australians who may have alternate values. It also suggests a marked resistance against the colonising system at work. An ethnographic study carried out by Desert Knowledge CRC (Cooperative Research Centre) in the remote community of Engawala, showed that community members expressed an interest in jobs that would help all the people in their community, more than enterprise development with a focus on increased private income (Moran et al. 2007: 113). Wakathuni community members similarly said that employment in mining destroys the country and therefore their culture and community. Comments like “there’s no jobs anyway” and “what’s the point” were quite common comments stated in our questionnaires. These comments correlate also with Baum, Bill and Mitchell’s (2008) suggestion that inter-generational outcomes result from poor opportunities, limited networks and social capital, and limited ‘successful’² role model figures (p. 197). However, this can also be thought of as a sense of hopelessness, carried forward through the collective memory of loss, spanning from long periods of colonisation that continue to produce colonizing ‘apparatuses’ and repressive policies that seek to destroy Indigenous people’s identity, culture and self-worth (Martin and Booran 2003, Nakata 2007).

A Way forward for Wakathuni

The semi-structured interviews conducted with Wakathuni residents offered some interesting results. The findings reflected the community’s desire to explore the potential of tourism as a source of employment generation, because Wakathuni lies on a well traversed tourist corridor that runs from the West Coast to the Hamersley Range’s Karijini National Park. The residents appeared to be well aware of their strengths and capacity to develop cultural tourism business opportunities while managing the natural resources in their area.

Questions were asked with an intention to explore how Wakathuni could enable visitors to experience its culture and place in a genuine way whilst respecting its privacy and protecting its cultural integrity. Ten participants said that Lore ceremonies occurred during the last few months of each year, and that funerals were also significant events that occurred frequently and these were private community events. Lore grounds and men’s meeting grounds were strictly off limits for non-indigenous visitors. Other questions revolved around (family) businesses that people might like to develop. Some respondents expressed interest in selling goods such as jewellery, art, craft and artefacts. Suggested services were walking-tours, bush-tucker tours, camping-tours, horse-riding tours, farm-keeping, sky observations, dot-painting and sewing or craft classes, and showcasing traditional dance and singing. An Indigenous Elder suggested that some people in the community could share their stories and ways of living, to help remove an overly romanticised and stereotypical view of how Indigenous people in remote areas live. However, the community’s desire to offer story telling was not reflected in the rest of the data. Story-telling was not mentioned by participants when prompted to talk about the activities they would like to showcase in relation to their culture and heritage. Other aspects (not generally traditional) were mentioned. Some examples of these included activities such as “football” and “garden” or “produce from garden”. This could indicate that they were unaware of the value that non-

² ‘Success’ is a problematic term, because what measures as success, and what measures are used that reflect on the system that produce those measures?

indigenous tourists have for their traditional culture. It is also possible to extrapolate that they believe more modern activities could accurately represent their way of life.

When asked about involving schools from other towns and cities to develop Educational Cultural Tourism opportunities, various respondents thought this was a great idea. Every respondent felt comfortable about working in partnership with non-Indigenous people to develop these opportunities. Some said that some schools were already coming out during NAIDOC (National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee) week, including schools from Perth.

Despite the positive responses, 79% of the respondents suggested they had safety concerns, for example if people would visit the community when significant ceremonies were taking place. Other issues that needed an immediate resolution were the safety concerns around kids driving cars, rubbish disposal, drugs and alcohol affecting people, and theft and vandalism. Others (64%) mentioned infrastructure issues that needed to be addressed; lack of drinkable water, lack of electricity and solar power, lack of internet access and lack of appropriate waste management were problematic. Some claimed the mining industries were responsible for drawing from fresh water supplies, leaving the community 'dry'. A further 79% of the respondents have other places they call home, suggesting they may not be available for work in this community all year round. Other issues emerged, such as Elders who used to conduct cultural tours dying, taking with them the knowledge they held to enliven bush walking and bush tucker tours.

Despite these challenges Wakathuni is keen to develop tourism industry on the backbone of their culture and tradition similar to the case of the Cook Islands. The two communities are quite similar in that they both have certain level of political autonomy. At Cook Islands, "traditional knowledge has become the backbone to the tourism industry, their primary source of income and foreign exchange" in which various stakeholders such as government, communities, and individuals have an agreed ownership and contribution towards the improvement of the industry (Forsyth, 2012:7). In other words, Wakathuni residents want to build on their traditional economy system, and draw from and build on their social capital; their skills, their capacity and knowledge, not only to attract revenue but to work towards a common good, bind the community together and instil a sense of pride and personal value in its people.

Conclusion

In order to answer the question as to whether there is a way to address unemployment in Aboriginal communities such as Wakathuni, this article showed that a contextual, cultural and bottom-up approach is needed to address the systemic issues.

Disadvantage in Indigenous people's lives is reflected in unemployment figures and is a result of a colonising history that continues to repeat itself. Current government policy does not help alleviate the impact of labour force disadvantage. The paper also showed that remote Indigenous unemployment is not a straight forward problem that can be resolved by using simple solutions. Low levels of education, geographical distance from industry and labour markets, and people's mobility are interrelating factors that operate within a broader system of disadvantage, and are perpetuated through a post-colonial 'apparatus'.

For policy-makers to address the issue of Indigenous unemployment, it is not enough to focus on individual factors and seek to close the gap by addressing one area such as increased access to quality education. The system as a whole and associated ways of thinking – the adoption of the positivist paradigm - must be reconsidered and systems change to improve outcomes for Australian Indigenous peoples. Policy-makers need to reflect on and respond to social, cultural, and historical contexts as

interrelated 'factors' of un/employment. Moreover, though Wakathuni community leaders identified Indigenous unemployment as a major issue they would like to see addressed, it is important that policy-makers reflect on the concepts of the 'wage-economy' versus traditional economies, and negotiate with the Indigenous people in dialogue and in a spirit of cooperation. Policy-makers need to draw from and build on the skills, capacity, and knowledge of Wakathuni residents, their traditions and culture. The Wakathuni community needs to not only attract revenue but also be acknowledged and worked with to enhance its social capital, bind the community together and instil a sense of pride and personal value in its people. Reliance on their traditional economy – as complimentary to the wage-based market economy - will add value to the community and will lead to a holistic community development.

This leads us to the following concluding points. Firstly, patterns of Indigenous unemployment must be considered within a complex and colonising system. These patterns need to be recognised, admitted to, and amended in partnership with the Indigenous people of Australia. Secondly, Australian governments' insistence of trying to control the affairs of Indigenous people and forcing them to assimilate into a western wage economy indicates a lack of respect for traditional economies, but also ultimately leads to less sustainable Indigenous communities. This insistence should be recognised as an automatic and self-perpetuating mechanism; an automatic reaction to problems that the wage economic system itself creates and makes community-life unsustainable. Thirdly, non-Aboriginal professionals including researchers need to be prepared to be open to new ways of looking and doing things, each time they visit and/or work in another Indigenous community and with Indigenous people. It is important to not make generalisations regarding Aboriginal people and their environments, because differences may not be so obvious and are likely to be complex and deep. Culture shock is to be expected, so guidance from Aboriginal professionals is highly advisable. Fourthly, a working knowledge of values and ethical guidelines when working with Indigenous people is needed, especially when dealing with issues relating to their health and wellbeing. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people 'have a right and indeed a responsibility to be involved in all aspects of research undertaken in their communities and organisations' (National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC, 2005). Finally, Australian governments must support self-determination so the Australian Indigenous people can transform their communities from within, so they become self-sustainable and able to support surrounding communities.

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