

PFII/2013/EGM
Original: English



DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS
Division for Social Policy and Development
Secretariat of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues

INTERNATIONAL EXPERT GROUP MEETING
Indigenous Youth: Identity, challenges and hope: Articles 14, 17, 21 and 25
of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
(New York, 29-31 January 2013)

Paper Prepared by
Steven Brown

Theme 1: Identity

INTRODUCTION

Identity for indigenous youth globally is a challenging subject. As youth develop and transition from children to youth, then to adults to participate in the work force they go through a journey of identifying who they are. As the world around them changes so does the way they identify to their ancestral ties and set a solid foundation to becoming a strong and proud indigenous person.

Indigenous youth are now faced with a new generation of issues when creating these foundations of identity. They are not only faced with social issues of youth in a mainstream society, they are faced with their own unique way of identifying as an indigenous person in a modern world. Their ability to develop as youth is impacted by body image, anti-violence, pressures from social media and peer pressure. For indigenous youth these issues are compounded by the pressure to live in two worlds as an indigenous person with community expectations and as a young person in modern society.

The majority of indigenous youth are classified as disadvantaged when measured against those who are non-indigenous, including lower school achievement, rates of year 12 completion, transition to university and tertiary completion, post education training and employment.

From the information provided by the UN Secretariat, youth (15-24 year of age) account for approximately 18 per cent of the global population and with some 370 million indigenous people in the world, there are approximately 67 million indigenous youth globally. This number may well be higher, since indigenous peoples often have higher proportions of youth than non-indigenous peoples in the same countries.

This paper will identify a number of the issues that arise in relation to the identity of indigenous youth and provide a number of examples where member states can work together to provide a greater tomorrow for my people. Modern stereotypes of indigenous identity do not define us as indigenous peoples, but oppress us from reaching our full potential as leaders in our communities, not only in our tribal lands but also in modern society. Through challenging these stereotypes we can create a safer place for indigenous youth to learn about their ancestry and cultural ties to improve our communities.

1. What is identity in the indigenous context and how is it portrayed by indigenous youth.

For indigenous youth knowing who you are and where you come from is the most challenging obstacle you will face in the transition from childhood into becoming an adult.

Indigenous youth in my region live on a sliding scale that has different expectations when living in two worlds (modern and traditional). There is a sense of acceptance from all tribes that we are all affected by colonisation in some way or form and that we are all different in the ways that we identify as indigenous peoples.

Identity in the Pacific region has been a major challenge over the years. Since the widespread colonisation of our lands, anthropologists and early explorers have recorded our people in time and defined us. Over time the changing culture of society has not only changed people's views of indigenous peoples, but also the definition of indigenous peoples in the regions. An example of the changing environment within the Australian context is the 1967 Referendum that allowed Aboriginal people to be counted in the national census. Before this time Aboriginal people came under the native Flora and Fauna Act of Australia.

Indigenous youth in 2013 are faced with an ever-changing environment not only culturally in modern society, but in the traditional context as well. As mentioned at the UNPFII 11th session by Ms Janine Gertz (Co-chair of the Indigenous Peoples Organisation Network of Australia), "The status of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages in Australia are critically endangered or extinct. Prior to colonisation, more than 250 Aboriginal languages were spoken. At the time of a national survey¹ was conducted in 2005, only 145 Aboriginal languages were still actively spoken, with most of these languages (110) categorised as "severely and critically endangered" by global linguistic experts. Only 20 of the Aboriginal languages are considered to be alive and "strong"."

Language plays a key role to our ability to identify as an indigenous person and is the foundation of our identity as indigenous peoples. Identity for indigenous youth are embraced by three main components; language, cultural practice (including dance), and spirituality. Out of the three components our mother tongue is the main way of communicating and passing our teachings on to the next generation. Without our mother tongue we face challenges in passing our culture to the next generation and are faced with a new cohort of disconnected indigenous youth.

Living in two worlds is becoming harder as the world changes especially in developed countries. As an Aboriginal Australian living in an urban area to improve my access to opportunities, it is challenging to maintain connectedness to my country and continuously practice my culture. In the modern context society expects an indigenous person to be that of what they see in movies and

¹ AIATSIS and FATSIL, *National Indigenous Languages Survey Report, 2005*

recorded in history by early explorers. These perceptions that are portrayed by society are being projected onto our generation of youth. I see this as 'Social Grafting', through which modern society is influencing our identity in a modern world.

Social Grafting: the interactions between our identity in modern society and our indigenous cultural identity

An example is when indigenous youth increasingly look to what they see on television and in social media, and then question their identity against society's perception and definition of being indigenous.

Through Social Grafting, we are beginning to question our own identity not only as individuals, but also as indigenous peoples. In this changing environment our access to our culture through education needs to be improved and combined with technology in positive and constructive ways. Our cultural practices and languages are the most critical issues to be addressed for if we lose our ability to teach and pass on our traditions through language, we will be at risk of losing our culture.

There are signs of positive change in Australia, such as the increase in indigenous identification through the census, towards indigenous peoples who are proud their heritage and wanting to learn and practice culture.

The environment is changing socially, as it is becoming safer and more acceptable to identify as an indigenous person in Australia. In the 2011 Australian national census there was an increase in the population of people identifying as indigenous since 2006². In 2006 there were 455,028 indigenous peoples that self-identified in Australia and this increased to 548,369 in 2011, which is an increase of 20.5% (93,341 people). Of the increase around 37% were 10 to 29 years of age and 42.5% were 30 years and over. This can be interpreted to show that older generations are becoming more comfortable in identifying in the census as an indigenous person. These cohorts of people were subject to policies of the past that discriminated against indigenous peoples, and restricted them from practicing language and culture. Their increasing identification through the census indicates a positive shift in Australia that should be harnessed.

² The Australian Bureau of Statistics – Census For a brighter future
<http://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/censushome.nsf/home/Census?opendocument#from-banner=GT>

2. Negative factors that impact on the identity of indigenous youth.

Indigenous youth are faced with numerous negative factors when identifying as an indigenous person. Social Grafting has a large part to play as our children transition into youth and adulthood. Negative stereotypes are somehow being grafted to what defines our identity. An example of this is that an indicator of disadvantage, such as low school achievement, can lead to indigenous children being stereotyped as less capable at school. While it is necessary to address indicators of disadvantage, it is important that they do not define us.

In the current social environment these become measurable indicators to one's identity when using the self-concept theory. "This refers to an individual's perception of "self" in relation to any number of characteristics, such as academics (and non-academics)³ and racial identity⁴". These negative characteristics are being grafted to what defines an indigenous person. For example as an Aboriginal Australian man, I sometimes face discrimination, but also sometimes face the stereotypes that because I am educated, employed, and don't drink, then I am not really indigenous.

Evidence of this can be shown through the effects of the self-fulfilling prophecy. This is when "prejudice attitudes, covertly or overtly, produce discriminatory behaviour that cumulatively, across time and individuals, creates disadvantage. In this way, a stereotypical belief can create a material reality that confirms the belief: it is a self-fulfilling prophecy"⁵. Through the self-fulfilling prophecy, indigenous children and young people begin to internalise society's stereotypes and live up to society's expectations even when these expectations are of underachievement. A challenge for indigenous people is to promote positive stories to our youth that combat negative stereotypes.

Through the impacts of negative stereotypes, indigenous youth in my region are continuously faced with lateral violence, social dysfunction, and other adverse effects of colonisation. Our youth should not have to satisfy the view of others through meeting society's definition of being indigenous and resulting continuously being questioned about how indigenous we are.

If this barrier continues to exist we will have a continuous cohort of indigenous peoples, in particular youth that will face obstacles in developing a positive identity. We as indigenous youth are continuously seeking to fit in to a modern world that does not accept our ancestry.

In trying to achieve positive Social Grafting of indigenous individual identity with society's perceptions, it is critical to avoid an assimilation approach. Governments attempting to take a "melting pot" approach to treat all groups

³ Bong, M., & Clark, R. E. (1999). Comparison between self-concept and self-efficacy in academic motivation research. *Educational Psychologist*, 34(3), 139-153.

⁴ Aries, Elizabeth, et al. "Race and gender as components of the working self-concept." *The Journal of Social Psychology* 138.3 (1998): 277+

⁵ Graham M. Vaughan, Michael A. Hogg, (2005) *Introduction to Social Psychology*, self-fulfilling prophecy 249.

equally have often adopted policies of assimilation. The negatives to the 'Melting Pot' approach are:

- "it ignores the fact that discrimination has disadvantaged certain groups and that, unless positive steps are taken to rectify the problem, the disadvantage will simply persist;
- it ignores the reality of ethnic/ cultural differences; and
- the melting pot is not really a melting pot at all but rather a 'dissolving' pot, where ethnic minorities are dissolved and assimilated by the dominant social group: minority groups are stripped of their cultural heritage and cease to exist."⁶

⁶ Graham M. Vaughan, Michael A. Hogg, (2005) Introduction to Social Psychology, self-fulfilling prophecy 249.

3. Positive indigenous identity and the how it varies with context.

Key factors that provide indigenous youth a solid foundation are:

- a. positive association to identifying as indigenous for example through connection to community and positive media; and
- b. increased access and preservation of our indigenous languages through education materials.

I believe that through a change in the way modern society's view of indigenous peoples in my region, we can provide a culturally inclusive environment for our youth to become strong advocates for our communities. An example of social change through the use of media is the National Indigenous Television (NITV) station that operates in Australia⁷. The television station has been in operation for a number of years and is working to change the views and perceptions that modern society has for indigenous Australians. The station provides a media source that allows indigenous youth and peoples to view positive stories in communities and teaches some language to indigenous Australian children. This work can challenge society's stereotypes through positive stories owned and communicated by indigenous people.

Critical work is needed to preserve the languages of indigenous peoples in my region to ensure they are accessible for future generations to learn their culture. As recommended at the UNPFII 11th session against agenda item 5 by Ms Janine Gertz (Co-chair of the Indigenous Peoples Organisation Network of Australia) suggesting positive ways member states can work to address our rights under articles 11, 12, and 13 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

This can be achieved through member states adopting "a national body empowered with a mandate and resources to monitor, support and promote indigenous language has the ability to increase language use and foster the overall health of a language as the example of the Maori Language Commission⁸ in New Zealand has shown. This national institution has played an active role in achieving an increased public awareness of the Maori language along with improving public attitudes across the nation of New Zealand (Maori Language Survey, 2009)⁹."

In addition, a social awareness campaign should be progressed by member states to encourage change to social stereotypes of indigenous peoples by modern society and promote positive imagery of indigenous peoples.

⁷ Graham M. Vaughan, Michael A. Hogg, (2005) Introduction to Social Psychology, Intergroup Contact 286 - 288.

⁸ The Australian Human Rights Commission. (December 2011) *Language learning in Indigenous communities – AHRC submission to the Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs.*
www.humanrights.gov.au

⁹ The Australian Human Rights Commission. (December 2011) *Language learning in Indigenous communities – AHRC submission to the Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs.*
www.humanrights.gov.au

CONCLUSION

Indigenous youth are expected to develop in a modern world to become leaders of social action in their communities and are faced with multiple layers of disadvantage, oppression, and segregation. Indigenous youth are not only living in a modern world, but in a changing environment that expects increasing economic participation and at the same time continuous connection to tribal lands. It is unrealistic that this cohort of people must meet these expectations to be accepted socially by member states, society, and their indigenous communities.

As outlined in this paper, identity for indigenous youth in my region is a critical concern to be addressed. If we are to provide a society that not only embraces the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, but our culture as individuals, then we must work to combat the effects of negative stereotypes and their impact on Social Grafting. Through this our indigenous youth will be able to create solid foundations of their identity as individuals and shape society's view towards indigenous people. As the social environment changes with each generation, the work we do today is important, but it is what we have planned for tomorrow's generation that matters.

RECOMMENDATIONS

That the United Nations Permanent Forum for Indigenous Issues encourages member states to:

1. challenge society's stereotypes through positive stories owned and communicated by indigenous people
2. harness modern media to challenge society's stereotypes and to be led by indigenous youth as youth are the masters of social media;
3. prioritise the preservation of indigenous languages in their region; and
4. increase access for indigenous youth to education materials in their mother tongue.