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Brough, Mark, Chelsea, Bond, Hunt, Julian, Jenkins, David, Shannon, Cindy, & Schubert, Lisa
(2006)
Social Capital Meets Identity: Aboriginality in an Urban Setting.
Journal of Sociology, 42(4), pp. 396-411.

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<https://doi.org/10.1177/1440783306069996>



COVER SHEET

This is the author version of article published as:

Brough, Mark and Bond, Chelsea and Hunt, Julian and Jenkins, David and Shannon, Cindy and Schubert, Lisa (2006) Social capital meets identity: Aboriginality in an urban setting. *Journal of Sociology* 42(4):pp. 396-411.

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Social Capital meets Identity: Aboriginality in an Urban Setting

Submitted Paper – Journal of Sociology

Mark Brough, Chelsea Bond, Julian Hunt, David Jenkins, Cindy Shannon, Lisa Schubert

Word count: 6070

ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a qualitative study of social capital within an urban Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander context. Using data generated from 100 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants in focus-group discussions and in-depth interviews collected by Aboriginal community development workers, this paper describes two worlds of social capital available to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The primary source of bonding social capital comes from family and wider Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community connections. In the context of an oppressive history, a second world of bridging social capital remains elusive to many Indigenous Australians. Our findings suggest that to understand the tensions between the two social capitals requires an engagement with the complexities of identity. We argue it is vital to explore the texture of social capital, rather than just measure volume.

Keywords: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, social capital, identity, urban, inequality

Introduction

There is a long and undignified history in Australia of attempts to assimilate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander¹ people into the dominant cultural space of 'white Australia' (eg. see Rowley, 1972). Whilst the official policy of assimilation no longer exists, there nevertheless remain powerful social forces which are maintained as a result of stereotypical constructions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander in/authenticity. Anderson (2003:47) has recently noted the power of cultural essentialism in the policing of Aboriginal identities: "In other words, now you could pick a real Aborigine by his or her 'authentic' or 'traditional' cultural practice." In particular, urban Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are vulnerable to this form of identity policing, occupying a liminal space within the broader Australian consciousness founded on a narrative of 'Aboriginality' concerned with 'primitiveness' and 'otherness' (Hollingsworth, 1992; Lattas, 1992).

In short, identity can be used as a means to both include and exclude. This is also true of social capital. If social capital is understood in terms of 'social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them' (Putnam, 2000:19), then clearly there is the potential for privileged access for some and denial of access for others. The limited work that to date has explored social capital in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities has been largely confined to areas of education and economic research. For example, Schwab (1996) has argued that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people often have to perform a 'cultural cost-benefit analysis' regarding a decision to engage in tertiary education. In a similar vein, Hunter (2000) has argued that less participation in the labour force by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may facilitate greater participation in other kinds of community activities thus actually increasing social capital. Becoming better connected to dominant educational and economic structures may not be a straightforward choice. Researchers have identified a difficult set of 'social capital' possibilities for many Indigenous Australians (eg. See Giles et al, 2004; Hunter, 2004; Brough et al, 2006). Such

tensions encompass Putnam's (2000:22) distinction between bonding and bridging capital, where bonding capital refers to parochial social networks founded on homogeneity and where bridging capital refers to heterogenous social networks. This paper explores this tension between bonding and bridging capital and argues that far from being a simple question of choice, for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, the tension reflects much deeper issues about identity. We seek to provoke a deeper questioning of the nuances of social capital via an equivalent concern for identity. Rather than measuring the amount of bridging or bonding capital, we explore the texture of the space between; here there is a need to connect the by now familiar distant outsider descriptors of social capital to closer, more meaningful insider lived experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Connecting Identity and Social Capital

In contrast to the limited research that has specifically examined social capital in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, there has, for many years, been a sustained interest in the nature of Aboriginal identities and the multiple discourses of Aboriginality frequenting the Australian social landscape (e.g. Anderson, 2003; Dodson, 2003; Muecke, 1992; Lattas, 1992; Selby, 2004). In speaking of any identity, it is important to acknowledge the complexity and variety of social meanings being ascribed as well as the constant transformations possible through time. For example, the prominence given to essentialised notions of Aboriginality, has been a topic of concern for some time in the writings of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal commentators. In particular, there has been concern expressed by those whose identities don't neatly fit the convenient essentialist binarisms of black and white. Perkins (2004:181) for example, asks the question of how to articulate a non-white, non-Indigenous, non-ethnic Australian identity within the heavily guarded borders of black/white Australia. Such questions remain awkward within the Australian social landscape. Our concern here for the positioning of an urban Aboriginal identity contains a

similar kind of awkwardness. Yet failure to engage in the discussion of this identity whilst nevertheless measuring levels of social capital could not do justice to the centrality of identity displayed by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait people we worked with within this project.

Woolcock and Narayan (2000) have argued the need for poor communities to move toward greater bridging capital and less bonding capital. Portes (1998) has commented on the possibility of strong bonding capital getting in the way of bridging capital. These arguments are open to considerable critique, since a number of studies report linkages rather than tensions between bonding and bridging capital. Fernandez (2002) has argued that bonding capital can help produce bridging capital. Similarly, Leonard and Onyx (2003) have questioned the evidence for disjunction between bonding and bridging capital. Their qualitative findings suggest that loose ties (bridging) and strong ties (bonding) mingle together, with loose and strong ties often formed within the same broad social network. Leonard's (2004) recent study of bonding and bridging social capital in the catholic community in Belfast demonstrates the powerful political, social and economic texture of strong bonding capital and much weaker bridging capital.

One of the potential challenges of applying a social capital analysis across different cultural contexts is of course the danger of ethnocentrism. The notion of social capital is itself a sociocultural product and may not make either theoretical or methodological sense in cross-cultural circumstances. Putzel (1997) has noted the failure of much of the social capital literature to distinguish between the 'mechanics of trust (the operation of networks, norms etc) and the political content and ideas transmitted through such networks and embodied in such norms'. We would add the importance of cultural content to Putzel's concern for political content. As a 'meta-variable' social capital contains the potential for arbitrary or exaggerated abstraction well beyond the lived realities of people's lives (Boggs, 2001; Roberts, 2004). However, this is perhaps just the tip of an even larger iceberg. We are told

social capital is both the 'glue' that sticks like people together and the 'lubricant' that allows different people to mix together more freely. If this is the case then cultural identity must be central to social capital analysis, rather than simply an 'additional challenge' for the researcher. Moreover, within an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander context in which notions of community and social connection contain a strong cultural and political meaning, the potential to connect social capital and identity holds a potential lived as well as theoretical resonance.

However there is a very uneasy relationship between the academic territories of social capital and cultural identity. At best the study of the relationship between identity and social capital is conceptually and methodologically immature. At worst there is the danger that research results showing lower levels of social capital in ethnically diverse populations will be used to support neoconservative renditions of inherent dysfunction in multicultural communities. Putnam's unpublished, though highly publicized findings about this have already attracted this kind of critique (Hallberg and Lund, 2005). It is vital then, that before we measure amounts of social capital within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities that we first consider the sociocultural nuances of social capital, which in this paper are described in terms of the connections between identity and social capital.

Methods

Using a qualitative research design, 20 focus group discussions and 17 in-depth interviews were conducted with a cross-section of Indigenous community partners (and their constituents). These participants were drawn from staff and clients of a range of Indigenous organisations in Brisbane, Ipswich and Logan. All interviews were conducted by Aboriginal research team members (predominantly Bond and Hunt). All participants were over 18 years of age and comprised a close to 50/50 male/female split, as well as a spread of age

groups from young adults to community elders. The focus-groups were mostly constituted of client groups of organisations. This provided a useful means to construct a sampling process which picked up a variety of 'communities of interest' (Willis et al 2005). We worked with a diverse mixture of organisations (ie elders, child and family, youth, men's and women's groups, welfare, health, education, sport and recreation, government and non-government). These organisations were identified through an initial community engagement phase of a larger urban health promotion project. The health promotion aspects of this project have already been reported elsewhere (Brough, Bond and Hunt, 2004). The number of participants in focus-groups ranged from 3-10. Whilst the smaller groups did not conform to standard focus-group size (6-10), we were more committed to following through with the interview process in a naturalistic manner, taking up opportunities as they arose rather than conforming to rigid group numbers. Equally where participants preferred to be interviewed individually, we responded appropriately and completed 17 in-depth interviews.

We acknowledge that our purposive recruitment method privileged the views of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people connected to Indigenous organisations, however we also make no methodological apology for working within a Participatory Action Research (PAR) framework, hence deliberately connecting the research component of this project with larger practical health promotion outcomes. Using a PAR approach we were concerned with a research process tied to actions and outcomes. Rather than separate research and action, or even 'knowers' and 'known', like Ismael (2002) we wished to ensure that the research process remained intertwined with the health promotion components of the project. This conforms to the philosophical commitment within PAR of 'rejection of the asymmetry implicit in the subject/object relationship that characterizes traditional academic research' (Fals-Borda, 1991:4). An ongoing dialogue with participating organisations was maintained throughout the project, culminating in a workshop with all participating organisations in which our findings were able to be fed back to participants which gave us the opportunity to

validate our interpretations of data.

Rather than use an existing social capital measurement tool, we were more interested in a formative qualitative exploration. We utilised the idea that social capital rests within a socio-cultural context and we wanted to explore how this context influences the texture of social capital. We have not quantified social capital here, instead we have sought to refine the ways in which social capital may or may not be useful to understanding the inequality faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Our approach to qualitative inquiry utilized the strengths of Aboriginal researchers as interviewers. Not only did this facilitate access and rapport within the community, but also triggered much critical self-reflection within the research team, particularly among the interviewers, for whom the roles of being both a community member and a researcher was not always an easy mix. The emergence in our findings of the importance of the intersection between identity and social capital was not deliberately sought within the question-lines of the semi-structured interview guides used by the field researchers. Question-lines were driven by a concern to describe accepted features of social capital such as trust, reciprocity and social norms. It was more a case that identity was always there 'regardless of the questions'. We speculate that this outcome reflected the convergence of Aboriginal researchers speaking to Aboriginal people within a shared space of urban community. The importance of constructing Aboriginal spaces to discuss questions of Aboriginal identity is clearly central here, although constructing spaces in which Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal voices meet and form a dialogue on this topic have also been acknowledged as important (see Palmer and Groves, 2000).

Certainly the importance of constructing a shared intellectual space between Aboriginal team members (Bond, Hunt and Shannon) along with non-Aboriginal team members

(Brough, Jenkins and Schubert) was a critical backdrop to this research. We used this shared space to discuss emerging themes within the collected data, as well as to assist in cross-validating our identification and interpretation of themes drawing on our acknowledgement of differing insider/outsider locations in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

We saw this backdrop of dialogue as not unlike the research interview process itself, that is, as an active process in which all participants in the dialogue are engaged in stimulating new insights rather than simply tapping and emptying the contents of the interviewee 'vessel' (Holstein and Gubrium, 2004:151). The 'interviewees' were in our case also active participants in many of the community development/health promotion activities which we were also a part. Moreover, the 'interviewers' were also active community members. We sought this mingling of roles in an effort to ensure the bridge between research and action remained firmly open.

Findings

Below we present a number of themes which emerged from the qualitative data, all of which possess an element of tension between bonding and bridging capital and at the same time demonstrate aspects of identity. We make no attempt to definitively place the data below within the boundaries of bonding versus bridging capital. Rather we wish to reflect the deeply felt space of uncertainty between these categories for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people within this study. Though triggered by questions regarding social ties within communities (bonding capital) as well as ties to other communities (bridging capital), the themes emerging from the inductive process of qualitative inquiry reveal significant social, cultural and political texture challenging the neat borders of bonding and bridging capital.

Between Capitals: Self

A number of participants spoke about the difficulties they often faced in terms of feeling 'caught between two worlds' as can be seen in the following commentaries on identity:

Sometimes you feel like shit, I don't fit in anywhere...sometimes, you feel like you're sitting in the middle and you're going, "Which way do you sit?" because there's elements of both that you feel uncomfortable with. Sometimes you feel like you're just sitting in the middle and getting bits from either side or that your only showing parts of yourself from either side.

This tension between displaying a strong Aboriginal identity but also trying to 'fit in' to dominant non-Indigenous social spaces was a common source of stress. In part, this was due to the complex effort required to 'manage' aspects of self on a daily basis. A male participant who held a senior position within a large 'mainstream' organisation re-counted how he had to make decisions on a daily basis about what 'self' he should present. Others wanted a more flexible Aboriginality which could encompass a variety of social positions:

There are some people who hold it dear to them and it's the sum of who they are and what they do and embrace it completely and try to maintain it in their families. There are some who don't even embrace it at all and there is varying levels on how we embrace our Aboriginality and that's OK...but there is that scale. It's not a matter of you're black so you do this, this and this...there is many colours, shades of grey that exist.

In contrast to the simplistic essentialist markers of in/authentic Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity based largely on traditional, primitivist ideas, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants spoke of more mundane, yet culturally rich identity markers. The opening gambit in conversation between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people introducing themselves for the first time was described by several participants as a marker of the importance of identity in understanding Indigenous social interactions and networks:

...you go through the old protocol of “Who are you and where do you come from?” And sooner or later someone in that community will pick up, “Oh, you’re so and so’s granddaughter or somebody” or “you know so and so” and once that link is made it’s more or less like...I’d say a confirmation that you are an Aboriginal person at heart...You know we have an oral history and it hasn’t stopped. And people will...”Oh yeah, that was my Aunty, she was married to so and so. Yeah mum used to tell me about when they lived at such and such”. And you listen to them talk and you say, “Yeah they’re OK, they’re a black fellow at heart, they still carry that oral tradition.” They talk fondly of their old people and they know who they are and where they come from.

Multiple layers of identity are thus clarified with common connections striven for. This everyday dynamic of social interaction between Indigenous people reveals the intense intersection between lived identity and the much less evocative notion of bonding capital.

Between Capitals: Place

Place is a strong feature of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. Traditional connections to country are important characteristics of identity. This is true for many urban Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who retain connections to ancestral places of importance.

Well, I like living here in Brisbane... and I suppose, as I said, its been an experience being here, but I still want to go home, because, I mean, that where my spiritual connection is, with Normanton...That’s where my heart is...

For others, the ties with traditional country remained in place, but the suburbs are home too:

Well my people, Wakka Wakka people, but I have spent all my life just about [here]... And to me, I guess, to most of my family this is home.

For others without a knowledge of their traditional place, the connection to an urban landscape is still nevertheless very powerfully part of their Aboriginality. However, the suburban landscape is, of course, not uniform. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from suburbs less endowed with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, cannot claim their suburb as a marker of identity in the same way:

I’d say I’m from Runcorn and they would just look at me and say, “Oh yeah,

whatever” and **** would say he’s from Inala, “Oh yeah brother.” They would connect with him...he was a real black fellow ‘cause he came from Inala, that was a black community and it’s rough. If you grew up there then he was a real black fellow.

Between Capitals: Racism

Stories of not feeling trusted were very common and were understood to often have a racial overtone. Here the city provides a particular context in which racism can either be diluted or magnified. Generally people felt the city environment was less racist than small towns, however they also felt that racism could be camouflaged more easily in cities:

You know where you stand in country towns. More defined. Whereas here (city), more of it is hidden, eh. Under the carpet and they’re (non-Indigenous) a bit careful because laws around ...you know whereas out in the bush they’re away from authority, yeah they do what they like out there, basically.

Cities were perceived as more multicultural, as well as providing more opportunity for anonymity. A more covert racism was thought to operate in cities – exposed, for example, from time to time in situations where non-Indigenous interlocutors wrongly assumed their conversation was *about* Aboriginal people not *with* an Aboriginal person. Here people told stories of someone not knowing they were Aboriginal and therefore assuming it was ‘safe’ to speak in terms of racist stereotypes. For some this took place because they did not match the stereotypical physical description of Aboriginality. Sometimes telephone communication provided the necessary anonymity of identity, whilst for others professional position constructed a ‘social impossibility’ of Aboriginality in the eyes of some non-Indigenous people. For example, a male Aboriginal manager commented:

And they might think that they’re talking to another white person when they talk to me on the phone. And they think, you know, you pull them up and they’re quite alarmed when they find out you’re a black person, and you’re back flipping... ‘Well I’m not really racist, I’m just blah blah blah’.

At times, racism was less certain but just as damaging in terms of trust. Real Estate offices were mentioned frequently in this regard, with a number of participants feeling they could not

adequately access private rental accommodation because of their cultural identity. Real Estate agents were seen to reflect wider perceptions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, clearly apparent in the following statement:

I think that if they had a choice, 90% of white people would rather have a white person living next door to them. When black fellas move in next door to them I think they freak out...

The powerful role of stereotypes provided a partial 'explanation' for racism as the following quote suggests:

One thing I'd like to change is the stereotyping in the non-Indigenous community. What they've been brought up with, like the older generation, they've been brought up to look down on Aboriginal people, we change their view of us ... Aboriginal people are just as good as them, that have a brain, and have a mind and have a right attitude to succeeding in life, but the general consensus among the community is 'oh mob of drunks, or you wont work, lot of dole bludgers', things like that ...

Racism is a powerful aspect of the space between, clearly fuelling distrust, destroying opportunities for bridging capital and at the very least disrupting the notion that social capital is simply a matter of individual choice.

Between Capitals: 'Mainstream' and 'Us'

A number of participants used the term 'mainstream' to denote non-Indigenous social spaces. Workplaces were particularly likely to be labeled this way if they were not Indigenous organizations. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who worked in 'the mainstream' were perceived by some as being more distant from their community. Knowledge of culture, including language was seen as in danger of being corrupted in the mainstream:

Well, someone's working in the mainstream, in town, white government, come

out, you know, he lives out here, and he thinks he's got a right... you might not use his words, you use the Murri words and he's using the whitefella words, and you probably don't even know it, and he's probably talking down to you.

Going 'mainstream' wasn't necessarily described in negative terms, nevertheless the acknowledgement that 'mainstream' was not a path likely to emphasize cultural knowledge remained present:

I look at my daughter, she went mainstream where she is today. She's one more semester next year in regards to finishing her course... And she said she's going for four interviews in two days in Canberra next week... She say's 'Oh, one of them's asked me about Aboriginal culture', she only knew the culture through me.

For those operating in the 'mainstream', the challenge to non-Indigenous people was often present. Mainstream spaces were often described in terms of having to 'prove oneself':

I used to coach a football team, and they were only under elevens, and none of the kids... none of them had anything to do with black people before... I noticed the parents stood apart, white brothers together in big groups, basically around the field by themselves, and like I had one little Asian boy in the team, and I tried to teach him things like patterns and things like that, whenever I used to talk to him he used to burst into tears. I don't know whether he was frightened of me... I went and saw his father, and I said look, he burst into tears every time I talk to him, I hope you don't think I'm growling at him all the time, he said he's frightened of you, he just said it straight out to me, he said this is the first contact he's had with Indigenous people...By the end of the year, they'd all come up to me before the games, and shake my hand, and everything, and when the season finished they were all crying cause they were all going to break up and wait till the next year, it was really good. But it was a good experience for me, 'cause as I said they got to know me, the parents got to know me, and at the end of the year, we had an end-of-year get-together, everybody was together. There was no sitting aside in their own little groups, everybody mingled in together.

In contrast, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander spaces provided more certainty:

... being in the Inala community is, most of the people here, we regard ourselves as family. Like if, when I come home to Inala, it's like walking in your front door, your home...yeah like, everybody calls, "my cousin this and there's my uncle over there" so...like you would do in the traditional times, you know? Everybody's your mob and that's how we are out in Inala, we're pretty tight like that.

Equally, 'mainstream' political participation remains problematic for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. For people who have been oppressed by dominant institutions, notions

of 'civic participation' in political processes need to be understood within their appropriate historical context. The quote below captures the important protest element within Aboriginal civic participation.

We were very well known, especially in the 60's. I was around then, I mean I was only young but I was around then. I mean, we were the strongest voice in the whole of Australia...was the Brisbane blacks. And I can remember when...we done protests on Canberra, we could get on the telephone, using our organisations, we could amass people to participate in a protest in Canberra and the word would get round, "The Brisbane Blacks are putting a protest on. They're going to run Parliament House, we're going to put a tent embassy up there", you know, "and how many hundred can you get from this place and that place"...there'd be a couple of thousand people sometimes and we had a lot of strength and I still believe we still do...

Resistance and engagement with the 'mainstream' can be surprisingly connected in an environment where dominant institutions define the terms under which community energies are channelled into the creation of Indigenous organisations:

To get these organisations going, the white man would say, "Where's this and where's that. You got to do this form and that form". And they'd go back and there'd be a couple there that really caught on and they'd be our leaders and they'd say, "Oh yes, well I'll do this part and you do this part" and people grew interested. "Oh this is how the white man works? Oh yeah, you got to do this step and that step" and they learnt very fast.

Discussion

Putnam has been criticized for holding a romanticized view of community, in which those communities limited to bonding capital will simply 'get by' whilst those engaged in bridging capital will 'get ahead' (Leonard, 2004). Policy-makers have at times simplistically seized on the promise of 'fixing' inequality through stimulating the growth of social capital, particularly bridging capital. Before such policies are implemented in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, it might be useful to reflect on the depth and meaning of the space between 'bonded' and 'bridged' communities. If there were no space between, claiming a strong Aboriginal identity as well as an equal socioeconomic position in Australian society would not be so difficult. This paper suggests that far from being a 'new' panacea for inequality, the challenge to maintain 'old' bonds, whilst traversing new 'bridges' represents an entrenched daily struggle for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, particularly perhaps those who reside in large heterogenous cities.

The qualitative data we have presented here are not an attempt to produce a detailed ethnographic description of an urban Indigenous community since this is beyond the scope of this paper. Rather we show the centrality of identity to any discussion of social networks and social capital. Strong Aboriginal identities within 'apparently' non-Aboriginal city spaces do not conform to the hegemonic construction of Aboriginality in Australia. As Palmer and Groves (2000:36) argue the disruption of colonial renditions of Aboriginalities happens 'every time our behaviour and actions do not match the stereotyped images that the coloniser has constructed about us'. A social capital analysis which can only dichotomise bridging and bonding social capital loses grasp on the space between. For social capital, to be both a social 'glue' that sticks like people together (bonding capital) as well as a social lubricant (bridging capital) for allowing different kinds of people to mix together freely, logically there needs to be a deep epistemological connection to the identities which produce such a conceptual distinction in the first place. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people seeking both acknowledgement of their Aboriginality as well as the freedom to participate in the multi-cultural space of a large Australian city, being 'bonded' and/or 'bridged' provoked among many of the participants in this study, deep questions about identity, and the way it is constructed and policed within Australian society. Both the opportunities available and the choices people make in connecting across Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal Australia are products of Australia's colonial history in all its complexity. Without a consideration of identity, the meta-variable of social capital remains aloof from its own conceptual demarcation between like (bonding capital) and different (bridging capital).

Our findings suggest the space between bonding and bridging social capital is occupied by a solid identity, certainly one shaped by the policing of boundaries between black and white, but a black identity nevertheless. Of course, this will be of no surprise to the many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people residing in this space. Rather it is the very fact

that Aboriginal identities not grounded in conventional biological and cultural essentialisms remain 'surprising' in the broader social consciousness that is a problem. It is not identity which is hybridised in the space between bonding and bridging social capital, rather it is the opportunity structures available to people (Macintyre and Ellaway, 1999). Having to negotiate a position within these structures which welcome some versions of Aboriginality over others is a powerful statement of the need to examine the ways in which identity mediates social capital. Simplistic social policy goals of producing more social capital in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities need to be mindful that lived identities are bundled up in the same social package.

It is clear that Australia lacks a social environment conducive to trust-building between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians. It is in this context that the social and economic linkages necessary for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander empowerment are ill-formed. Mostly we witness a failure to acknowledge the diversity of Aboriginal identities, along with a failure to imagine ways in which strong Aboriginal identities can be allowed to mingle in multi-cultural landscapes without being assimilated, hybridized or otherwise de-legitimated. Stereotypical, racist and other exclusionary practices and ideas are the drivers of inequality. These drivers are clearly at work in determining how people come to be positioned in some social networks and not others.

The sociological basis of what we do must be sound before we assess the relationship between social capital and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander inequality. We argue here the need to explore the connections between social capital and identity. Social capital tends to be described in terms of linear characteristics. You either have a lot or little. Perhaps social capital, like identity is not that simple.

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Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants in this project for their time and enthusiasm. We gratefully acknowledge the financial support of Health Promotion Queensland. Special thanks go to Stephanie Jacob, Iris Smith and Joy

Grogan for their work on the project. Sadly, Iris Smith passed away in February 2003 having made a lifelong contribution to the Brisbane Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community.

¹ We predominantly refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as a broad category of identity. We acknowledge the enormous social diversity within this category and seek to describe the ideas and experiences of those people who generously gave time to us, rather than present a quintessential identity.