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**Service provision and service
providers in a remote
Queensland community**

J.D. Finlayson

No. 133/1997

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DISCUSSION PAPER

Series Note

Service provision and service providers in a remote Queensland community

J.D. Finlayson

No. 133/1997

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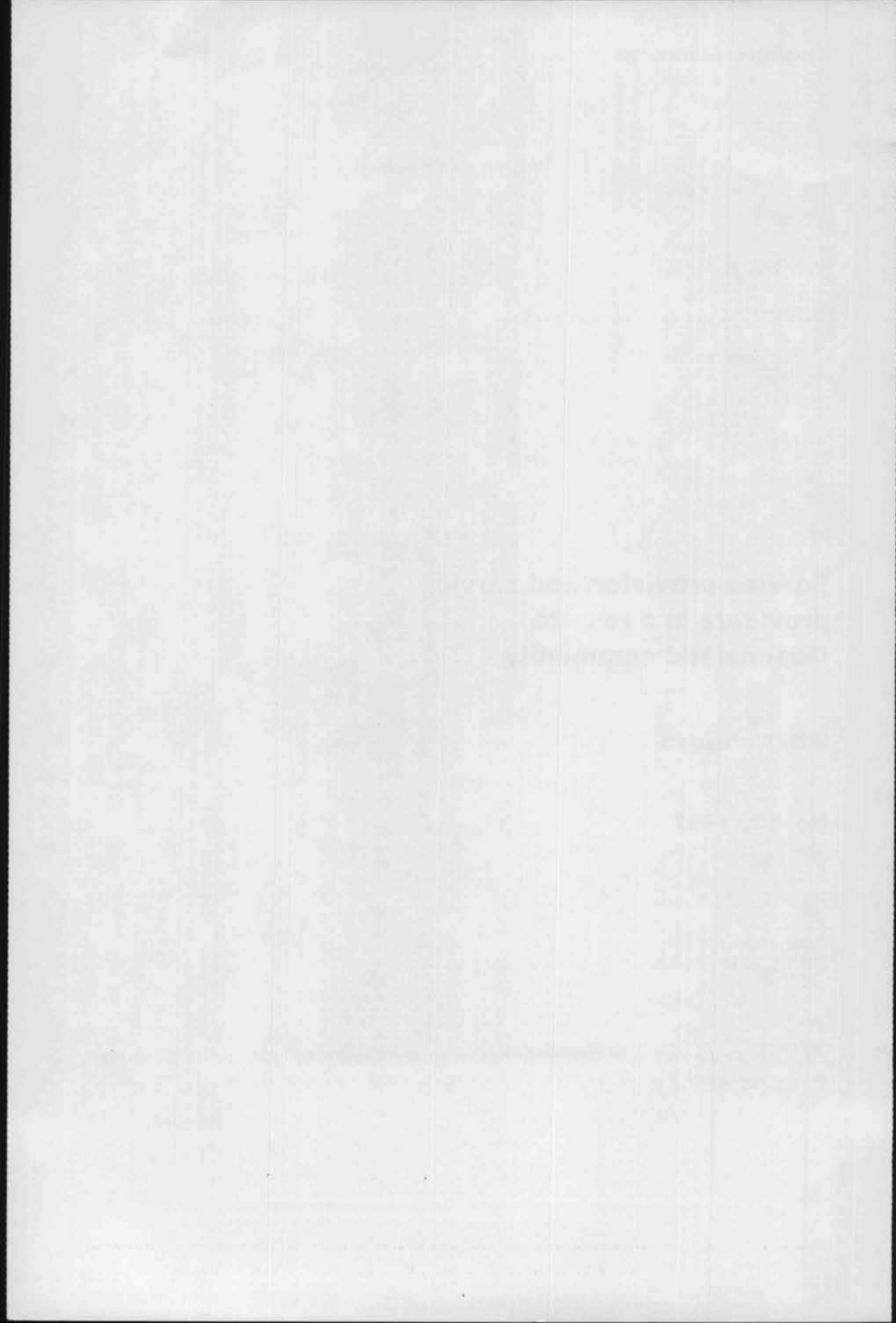
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Summary

- This Discussion Paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork funded by a Central Starter Grant from La Trobe University.

- The purpose of the project was to explore the relationship between perceptions of cultural differences and government service delivery in a remote Aboriginal community. Non-Aboriginal service personnel were the focus of the investigation.

- Much of the paper exposes an ethnographic description of an otherwise unpublicised area. Little is, in fact, publicly known of how service staff balance their personal and professional lives in remote locations and as participants in another's cultural milieu.

- The paper sheds some light on the experiences of this group and its impacts on the constitution of a service and its delivery to the community.

- Although managers and administrators of service agencies hold influential positions in communities, they are also a minority population and cultural group. The impact of their minority status is differentially felt; single women and families are most severely affected by a general lack of social support and the pressures of locational disadvantage.

- Inevitably, individuals were caught in a balancing act between the pressures of negotiating a credible professional existence with the tensions of personal adjustment to the lack of facilities, professional and social support, managing cross-cultural social relations and 'feeling safe' in a unknown 'frontier' environment. These tensions often consumed the energies of service staff to an overwhelming extent.

- Service agencies are certainly aware of the difficult working conditions and the need to engage appropriate staff. The issue of staff selection is much discussed, especially since staff turnovers are high and continuity of service and expertise is fragmented. Departments search for the 'right person' to fill positions but tend to do so without any clear vision of who the 'right person' might be and what conditions would facilitate their effectiveness.

- Poor morale beset many staff. They believed that 'nothing would ever change'; few incentives existed to promote indigenous self-management through training programs, and individual staff who challenged the status quo were considered 'dreamers'. A common view was that Aboriginal residents were incapable of effectively operating the services.

•   A variety of motives attracted staff to remote locations. Money was an important incentive. But for young people, work in these communities was often the only employment option they had. Others accepted employment because it represented a stepping stone to fulfilment of a personal goal (such as educational opportunities; funds for overseas travel; promotion).

•   To lessen the tensions between personal and professional life for staff, service agencies need to address the following areas; staff selection criteria; staff orientation and education programs; mentor support; performance monitoring and accountability to community as well as departmental criteria; development of social infrastructure to deal with the problems of locational disadvantage (such as boredom).

Introduction

Morphy (1997) provides a comparative discussion of the frontier worlds of remote Australia depicted in the novels of Harney (1961) and Chatwin (1987). He points out that despite their different historical contexts, both novels reveal a segregated world of colonial social relations encompassing Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. Consequently, Morphy suggests that even in the late-twentieth century, race relations should be understood as a dynamic of the frontier; although the pastoralists and settlers of the nineteenth century have been replaced by another generation of non-Aboriginal people in other roles such as teachers and bureaucrats, and land council personnel. Chatwin in particular, describes how the new gatekeepers play the same structural role as their predecessors as they police the racial and social divide. In this way, social knowledge of self and other, between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal society, continues to operate through 'a glass darkly'.

For Morphy, the fascination of Chatwin's and Harney's works is that they record material which is otherwise missing from accounts of what constitutes the Australian frontier and the mundane interactions and experiences of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people living and working together.

Unfortunately, few published accounts of the experience of white Australians' experience living and working in remote frontier areas have been widely available until recently and are varied in their analysis and reflexivity (see Long 1992; Macleod 1997). There has always been a genre of writing centred around white men in the pastoral industry, however less is publicly known of the lives of contemporary white men and women representing the administrative and bureaucratic complexity of the welfare state in geographically and culturally remote areas (see Sackett 1990).

This paper makes a step towards bringing the experiences of such people to light. Their experience both personally and professionally has profound implications for sustaining efficient, economical and viable service delivery. Policy-makers have expended time and energy on devising service delivery in culturally appropriate and accessible terms. However, the idea that attention to the needs of the personnel involved might be critical to a sustainable service is only beginning to gain acceptance.

The case study

By using a case study approach, the wider issues of service provision and the selection of service personnel can be clearly illustrated. Policy literature on service delivery has tended to be directed by concerns with increasing and unrecoverable long-term costs of service provision in contexts of locational disadvantage. In contrast, less has been said of the impact of locational disadvantage in *social* terms; notably in relation to options for developing sustainable and efficient

service delivery to indigenous clients in remote communities across the range of government services.

This paper provides a critical interpretation of the structure by which human services are currently provided in remote contexts. The case material is a telling commentary on the recruitment procedures for staffing services in remote Aboriginal communities; and the nature of the people engaged as staff.

This is the study of a remote Aboriginal community in north Queensland. The community's geographic isolation fostered a heightened feeling of living inside a 'total institution' for many of the non-indigenous residents. There is an external truth to this perception since entry to the community requires official permission from the governing body or community council.

Non-Aboriginal staff frequently described their lives in terms of being confined and the remark was applied across a range of areas. In part, this perception stemmed from an acute awareness of lack of access to the facilities and the choices routinely available in urban life, and the lack of personal privacy associated with a 'fish bowl existence' in a small community.

Complaints were made of the limited recreational pursuits available in the location (confined to fishing, hunting and camping). Many female staff saw these pursuits as catering exclusively to 'male' interests. One man agreed; 'it is [the community] a man's world'. Indeed, even women who were interested in the available outdoor activities felt they still required male help to participate in these pursuits (for example, launching a boat; shooting).

Interviews indicated that individual's experiences of living and working in a remote and culturally different environment were clearly a product of gender as well as age, marital status and geographic isolation. For example, a number of single women complained of being alienated by the environment and marginalised by lifestyle options. These women also felt that their single status in such a small social pond made them objects of uninvited male sexual interest and provided an additional pressure in their work and home environments.

However, both single and married women found it difficult to establish themselves. A number of women who had accompanied their husbands to positions were frustrated by their loss of independence, income and status. Some of these women found it personally difficult to cope and cited as critical factors the lack of female company to confide in or to gain support from. In interview, one single woman explained how difficult she found the white community social life, especially the lack of companionable women of her own age group, and also social groups were cliquey and difficult to break into. Confronted by this difficulty, her solution was to work six days a week. But this strategy was not necessarily productive as she then had the problem of balancing involvement with work, with care of herself. Depression loomed as a constant threat. Some of her angst also stemmed from lack of work satisfaction as she felt undervalued and taken for granted by her male colleagues.

Perhaps more than any other social unit, families felt burdened by the limitations of the physical and social environment. Certainly parents felt confronted by the limited recreational and educational opportunities available to their children. They were constantly aware that their families were a minority in an Anglo-Australian social world where most staff were single people; often families were effectively cut out of social gatherings.

Across all gender, social and age groups, personal safety was a common fear; especially in terms of the level of institutional support likely to be provided by the organisation for whom they worked and their union. Case-study evidence suggests that the combination of the factors mentioned above, such as gender, age, as well as attitudes to social and cultural difference, significantly influence staff attitudes to their daily work, including their capacity to respond to, and accommodate difference. Personal adjustment was also a capacity affected by these factors.

In summary, the interview responses of service personnel illustrate an all-consuming awareness of the fact of living and working in a frontier environment, where they comprise a social and cultural minority. For many staff the associated issues with this dominate their capacity to live effectively and deliver a professional service.

The context for service provision

Some writers have described the relationship between appropriate service provision and service provider in transactional terms; as a relationship of brokerage between the service agent and the client involving the mutual manipulation of meanings (see Howard 1982 for brokerage as a political strategy). Other writers have found Goffman's (1961) model of a 'total institution' an apt description of life for non-Aboriginal staff in remote Aboriginal communities. Comments from staff interviewed in the case study confirm their experience of remote communities as isolating and totally encapsulating environments.

In their ethnographies of remote Aboriginal communities, Tonkinson (1974; 1978) and Trigger (1992) identified recurring problems of service delivery in cross-cultural contexts. They describe the prevalence of two separate worlds determining the operation of institutions and administrations in remote areas (see also Rowse 1992). They also note the high degree of inter-agency conflict endemic amongst non-Aboriginal staff resident in these communities and how, consequently, coordinated approaches to community service delivery are almost impossible to achieve.

In this case study, substantial increases in the level of government intervention and an associated influx of non-Aboriginal staff in the post-mission context, has widened the social distance between indigenous and non-indigenous residents. The idea of a common vision for the community through coordinated inter-agency policy has yet to be developed. As Tonkinson and Trigger discovered elsewhere, intra-agency tension is a common factor of service delivery in remote

indigenous communities. It is destructive as it undermines the potential for community self-determination or self management.

Professional issues raised in interviews as problems working against the progression of a sustainable service were the hierarchical staff management styles encouraged in some agencies, and the intimidation of younger, inexperienced staff by more experienced staff. Other factors were an unrealistic emphasis on accountability to indicators with no relevance in the particular setting; an unachievable policy of continuity in staffing when staff were given little incentive to stay; and finally, no serious consideration or incorporation of self-determination for Aboriginal clients. External support for specific program implementation was often minimal. Moreover, staff saw no correspondence between the particulars of their agency work and broad-based strategies for community development.

The study community

The study community's locational remoteness is increased during the monsoon season. Regular access by plane is difficult at this time. However, in the dry season the geographic isolation is less pronounced. People travel to and from the community by motor vehicle, and an air service operates three times a week to regional centres. A weekly barge service brings in fresh foodstuffs, dry-goods and equipment. At the time of the field work there were two groups of residents; about 900 indigenous people, and up to 100 non-Aboriginal people. The population of the latter fluctuates because many service personnel are on short-term contract work.

Administratively, the community is a local shire council with elected councillors and subject to state-wide local government ordinances. The daily administration of council responsibilities is managed by a non-Aboriginal shire clerk with staff recruited from the ranks of mainstream local government. All State government services (such as education, law and order, communications, and health) are represented. The earlier dominance of the church is now confined to social outreach programs for specific needs-based groups such as women, youth and the aged. At various times the church has also funded a resident community-development worker.

Community services

Until 1997, the indigenous community operated a company and associated enterprises for their benefit. These included a general store, a clothing shop, fuel depot, and out-station support unit. The airline, also owned by the company, provided charter services to out-stations and regional centres. However, the company has never employed significant numbers of indigenous residents, but instead, has provided non-Aboriginal residents with opportunities for employment. In some cases, this policy has been justified by the need for specialist skills to

service the company in areas such as accounting and financial management, and technical qualifications (in the case of the company's aeroplanes). Some would argue that the company's delay in Indigenisation is deliberate since it enhances their potential to attract staff if they can offer non-indigenous couples the employment option of a double income. Employment for both husband and wife is an attractive prospect for both employer and employee in remote communities. Not surprisingly, most of the non-indigenous married couples were fully employed in the community. The exception was a woman who deliberately chose household duties over employment; nevertheless, her skills would have made her immediately employable.

In the late 1980s, the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme was introduced. During fieldwork, two projects operated for residents; one was sponsored by the shire council, while the other was administered by the company. The work associated with these schemes was, at best, 'make work'. It provided for a limited range of community services such as clearing rubbish outside the community store, gardening, maintenance of the public areas adjacent to shire buildings, and collecting household garbage. Few opportunities existed for semi-skilled or skilled work and where these were available, non-indigenous labour was routinely brought into the community.

In contrast, under the mission's administration, the community successfully operated ventures such as a bakery, butchery and a market garden; and supplied all mission households. Mission work certainly encouraged residents to 'earn' their rations, but it also encouraged community and individual self-sufficiency. Consequently, much of the mission work, unlike that offered through the CDEP scheme, was purposeful and positively contributed to community self-sufficiency and individual self-esteem.

Unfortunately, few community projects implemented either by governments or the company have been unproblematic. For example, the school has been boycotted by parents and students in protest at the education offered; health services are frequently disrupted by difficult patients. The police are criticised over management and handling of social problems. No service delivery, it seems, operates in isolation from the wider social problems endemic in the community. These problems range from high levels of alcohol consumption, domestic violence, gambling, extremely poor health, limited employment and youth boredom. Such on-going social difficulties constrain the capacity of service staff to perform their work and impinge on their ability to manage their relationships with the 'other'.

Consequently, the quality of service delivery is a function of the stability and the capacity of the personnel staffing it to perform in fraught social circumstances. Few employees of government agencies are prepared to stay beyond the two years of their contracts. Some services experience a rapid staff turn-over; for example, the employment turn-around for police and nursing staff varies between two-weeks and three-months service stints. For many services, it is not simply a matter of engaging suitable staff, but of attracting *any* staff at all.

Why work in a remote community?

Interviews conducted with staff across a range of service agencies deny any single reason for accepting work in a remote Aboriginal community. However, there were commonly recurring themes; in particular, the potential to earn large sums of money in a short period of time. Salary packages offer remote area allowances, subsidised housing rentals, potential for overtime and higher duty allowances, to name a few of the attractive extras. Several people had accepted positions solely for financial reasons. Often their decisions were personal strategies for dealing with specific projects (such as home mortgages; repaying educational expenses; or acquiring funds for overseas travel).

Of equal importance to the financial compensation of remote employment were opportunities to extend an individual's skills base and to perform at a level of responsibility beyond that available in mainstream situations. Junior staff mentioned this advantage particularly. However for some junior staff, such as those in the teaching profession, remote area teaching was often the only employment option offered to them because of ceilings on state staffing numbers.

Unfortunately, although vocational inducements were often an initial incentive, they were not necessarily as promising as they first appeared. Some staff were clearly expecting service in a remote community to fast-track their career promotions and options. However, several individuals commented that their parent agency had misinformed them, even misled them, on exactly how employment in a remote area would advance them.

Generally, only a minority of people said they actually enjoyed working in remote situations. Often these people had previously worked in remote areas or with indigenous communities. Less publicly discussed, although certainly raised in interviews, were the deeply private reasons which led particular individuals to remote communities; drinking problems; marital breakdowns; difficulties with the law; long-term unemployment; even a latterday missionary zeal.

In their social composition, as much as in their skills and educational background, the community of employees showed diversity. Unfortunately it was not exceptional to find that some staff had neither aptitude nor experience suitable to their present position. No doubt the drive to attract staff outweighed professional concerns. An extreme example of inadequate staff selection was the engagement of a husband and wife team who responded to an advertisement in a Commonwealth employment agency in Alice Springs, Central Australia. The male partner was flown, at Commonwealth expense, to an interview in this remote Queensland community. To prepare for the interview he and his wife first visited the Alice Springs library in search of information about the community and its location. They also contacted the regional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission office for assistance.

Despite their efforts, the man was totally unprepared for what he encountered when he alighted from the plane. He was shocked by what he saw as

social degradation and the unexpected levels of community poverty. His surprise deepened with the lack of any informed questions from the prospective employer about either his skills or qualifications for the position, and the overwhelming interest as to whether or not as a prospective employee, he had a criminal record.

Almost without exception, staff felt they had to some extent, been lured into remote employment through inducements or on the basis of misleading information. Many had heard in advance of the community's reputation for violence, substance abuse and the potentially difficult, and possibly personally dangerous contexts in which they could expect to live and work. Professional unions were generally active in supporting members, however, and on at least one occasion had assisted when departmental support for staff was slow to resolve an issue.

The State education department alone seemed to be frank about the difficulties staff would face in such a community. They attempted to deal with the issue, and at the same time to reassure potential employees, by arranging for new recruits to discuss their concerns with a teacher with experience of the community. The orientation program was followed by a series of inservice meetings during the initial teaching term. In these meetings, teachers were supposedly given help with issues arising directly from their now first-hand experience in the new environment. But once again, interviewees were careful to point out that the real information about how to handle certain cross-cultural situations was given in-camera.

There seemed to be no induction program to inform new council, health and police staff. At the time of fieldwork in 1995, a new and separate recruitment process for selection of remote-area nurses was mooted. The first step was to establish a remote-area nursing unit as part of a wider strategy to attract individuals with appropriate personal and professional skills. One health official took the view that advertisements like those placed by overseas aid agencies might appeal to the 'right person'. Implicit in this view was an awareness that staff were encountering out-of-the-ordinary personal and professional circumstances in such work.

Fear of the 'other'

The issue of personal danger was taken seriously by parent agencies. All education staff, including those newly appointed, seemed well-informed about the history of sporadic, but violent incidents by students and the community toward individual staff. However, one interviewee expressed a different view of workplace danger. He acknowledged the fear many of his colleagues had of the indigenous population, but explained the source of this anxiety in terms of the lack of sustained personal contact with the broader community. In his view, anxieties about personal safety were exaggerated and people ought to be 'more adult' about such issues. Yet most staff continued to live with an everyday sense that they were potentially under threat from personal violence.

The majority of staff housing was encircled by high cyclone fencing topped with barbed wire provided for and installed by either the shire council or the parent agency. In most households, people doubled their security by keeping a 'watch dog' to ward off potential vandals and thieves (said to be children). Almost without exception non-indigenous residents padlocked their gates. Admittedly, loss and damage to property was not unusual when homes were left vacant over weekends or vacations and most non-indigenous residents were in constant fear about both their personal safety and the security of their property. Not surprisingly, these tensions affected relationships with Aboriginal people and bred suspicion.

Many Aboriginal people were understandably offended by the symbolic evidence of how much they were feared. A couple who did have contact with Aboriginal residents in the course of their daily work explained that at one time they had regularly been visited by an Aboriginal workmate who just 'wanted to see what was in their house'. The workmate make little conversation during the visit and only stayed about 20 minutes, but was driven by a frequently expressed curiosity about the contents of the non-indigenous couple's home.

In contrast to their European neighbours, few indigenous people had cyclone fencing around their homes; although many people kept dogs to alert owners of the approach of strangers (both actual and imagined and both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal). Some non-indigenous staff explained that they kept dogs to 'keep the children out of trouble'; a notion of protecting people against themselves.

Relations with the 'other'

A further source of anxiety for resident non-indigenous staff was the question of the social boundaries between themselves and their clients: were social relations strictly those of the service provider and the client, or could/should there be a further, personal dimension to the relationship? Few people gave confident answers to these questions. Inevitably most people either from ignorance or fear, kept to their own company (this was especially true of couples). Single people were more likely to risk social experimentation.

In the past, the church was possibly a common point of social interaction between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal residents. Today, this is not the case. Effectively, a notion of separate domains of social and economic life characterise community relations in the post-mission period, although at first glance the means by which separation is achieved and reproduced is not apparent.

If and when the question of social interaction was raised, non-indigenous people did so in the context of workplace situations or difficulties. The school, for example, was concerned to foster rapport with the parents of students. Yet neither the staff nor the parents generally had anything substantive to do with one another outside school hours. It therefore became extremely difficult to know how the school might encourage parents to become active in events or class-room

visits. Aware of this short-coming, the school employed indigenous teacher's aides and an indigenous school manager whose role in the children's education was highly valued. The presence and participation of these individuals went some way in redressing claims that the school was simply a 'white domain' unconnected with community life.

Knowledge of the 'other'

Effectively, many service providers shaped their daily interaction with clients through a prism of objectified views. Their day-to-day experiences in the immediate community simply confirmed, rather than unseated, their expectations. A couple in their first year of service in the community noted the huge disparity between what they had expected to find of traditional life in the community and what actually happened. They were disappointed that people were not 'living a traditional way of life'; although they did not explain what their expectations of this were. They also described their clients as 'very dependent' and were surprised at the low educational attainment. It was not clear that their orientation had given them any background information about either the history of the mission community or any anthropological appreciation of who these people were and how they continued to organise themselves according to traditional social and religious customs.

Staff with substantial work experience in the community were more inclined to offer assessments of the value of their role in the community. One person lamented the lack of correspondence between the vision of what their role and contribution to the community should be and community development. The same person was also highly critical of the isolation in which the different agencies undertook their work and the limited coordination between agencies to provide training programs to foster skills development. Furthermore, little external support was offered to staff to develop such programs; there was 'too much complacency about why things like training programs won't or don't work'.

A common sentiment from staff interviewed across all agencies was how inappropriate they saw self-determination as a community aspiration; many of them argued forcefully that indigenous residents were incapable of effectively engaging with the present set of agencies and their services, let alone managing them.

Some staff were blunt about the reasons why training schemes were rarely initiated or were allowed to fail. They claimed racism was an active ingredient in many of the professional encounters between service providers and their clients. They further suggested that the rhetoric about training for Aboriginal people was not only well-developed, but was regularly espoused before visiting bureaucrats. However, in their everyday experience they saw no real effort made to achieve any of this.

A new member of the staffing community refused to accept the situation in which she worked alongside an Aboriginal man whom she felt was perfectly

capable of replacing her. She attempted to involve her Aboriginal assistant in her administrative work. However, her colleagues soon expressed their disapproval by tacit discouragement and disinterest in her efforts. Another individual commented in interviews that the approach to training was probably mismanaged. He felt white staff 'aimed too high too fast in their expectations'; that they 'told people what to do rather than working with them' and that no evaluation of reasons for failure were made.

Cultural and social divides

The cultural and social divide in this community was not confined to the gap between indigenous and non-indigenous residents. A divide was equally prevalent amongst white staff. To some extent this is unexpected: one would expect people to seek one another in an isolated environment. However, this was not the case. Tensions between service agency personnel were often rife. Differences of opinion about how a service should be delivered and what role an agency should operate under were frequent sources of dissent. But professional differences (commitment to the job; level of engagement; reasons for accepting the position) were not the sole cause of conflict.

On professional issues, some staff interviewed were critical of the operation of agency services and the way in which clients were managed; a few were concerned about the quality of a service, and a smaller number still voiced concern about their ability to do their work and offer a professional service. None of these concerns were addressed to the satisfaction of the complainants despite continual reference to these issues. In fact, individuals who repeatedly raised such matters were quickly ostracised and labelled as 'trouble makers'.

Nor was there any apparent advantage taken to implement economies of scale in community development or service provision. One person spoke of the lack of coordination between agencies when he offered to teach Aboriginal people a first-aid course—a practical skill for those living on outstations. The course did not eventuate because the Council failed to organise it; a situation which it was claimed was replicated over and over again. What was lacking was an established structure to maintain a program.

Factionalism and disagreements amongst staff of the various agencies and between agencies were rife and spilled over into out-of-work socialising. What social interaction did occur was usually confined to intra-agency relationships, although some staff made it a rule not to socialise with anyone outside working hours. One person explained that there were 'a lot of staff who ended up as part of your social group that you wouldn't normally mix with'. Indeed, in her view, some of these people were racists and openly made comments about their Aboriginal clients such as 'they're talking their gibberish again'.

Staff who had lived and worked in this or other Aboriginal communities for several years were sensitive to the issue of appointments of inappropriate staff. In their view, inappropriate staff were first and foremost people without any

background to fit them for the experience of isolation and difference, and without any preparation for promoting or handling trainees. Unfortunately, most people who recognised this issue as a problem seemed powerless to effect a change in the parent agency or in the local service. In part this was because their views were a minority position in assessments of service provision which responds to mainstream criteria.

Home sweet home?

New staff felt confronted by several sources of diminished quality of life. Initially, they missed the ready access to recreational facilities they had enjoyed outside the community, and for some people this gap was never bridged. People were also concerned about personal safety and the security of home and personal property. Many of the staff houses were advertised as 'furnished'. But one woman wished she had brought more of her own household belongings since the kitchen only had 'two cups'. Others had tried hard to furnish their home to create a haven with their own furniture, drapes, and keepsakes.

The disparity in the quality of accommodation provided (and the rents asked) by different government departments fuelled intra-agency friction. While some staff had units or free-standing houses with yards, others were forced into old, poorly maintained accommodation with limited basic facilities (for example no television, telephone, microwave oven).[1] Staff without their own vehicle (whether car or boat) found escape from the community impossible on weekends.

In interviews people complained about the numerous small things which counted in their assessment of coping with life in a remote area. For example, they mentioned the inconvenience of out-of-date national newspapers (which made responding to employment vacancies elsewhere problematic); lack of redress for poor morale; no incentives to stay in the job; widespread boredom; no access to ABC radio; and difficulty accessing the community post office and no access to express post.

Surprisingly, no one mentioned the issue of food. This was because almost without exception, no non-Aboriginal staff shop at the community store. Instead of shopping locally on a needs basis, each household organises a three-monthly 'bush order' of fresh fruit, vegetables and meat together with dry goods, to be delivered by barge from the regional centre.

One interviewee estimated that she spent $1,300 on food for a family of four (two adults and two children) for a three-month period. She bought $500 to $600 worth of meat anticipating that this would last for about six months and would be supplemented from recreational fishing. In common with some other householders she also bought large drums of flour to bake bread, cakes and biscuits.

All non-indigenous households had huge domestic freezers. In this way, they could avoid the high prices and questionable quality of goods in the community store.[2] By contrast, few Aboriginal houses had refrigerators, let alone freezers and

most domestic cooking had been replaced by daily buying of food from the community 'take away'.

Tom's experience

The experience of one young man newly arrived to work in the community is instructive. This individual had previously worked in a remote Aboriginal community so to some extent he might have been 'prepared'.

Tom (a pseudonym) was single and newly graduated. He had worked for a short time in another remote community and chose his present work for the financial opportunity it gave him to pay-off education fees. On his estimate of the salary, this could be done within three months. He had no immediate intention of staying beyond that point because remote-area service would not advantage his career prospects which could ultimately, only be realised in a mainstream service environment.

No one met him on his arrival. No accommodation had been organised in advance and he was forced to camp for a month in a run-down, abandoned flat with no television (a means of escape) and no telephone. In Tom's view most people would have 'thrown in the towel' under these conditions. However, he managed because he had 'brought his own swag and mosquito net and twelve books'. Tom had also had a stint of army life and saw that as useful preparation for dealing with the living conditions he now encountered.

Tom was critical of the conservative attitudes to service delivery prevalent amongst his colleagues. In his opinion, some of the older-aged staff thought little about issues of community health delivery. They seemed to 'just want to provide a service and keep it functioning'. Yet from his experience in a similar setting, Tom was aware of viable and effective service alternatives. Professional differences were perhaps to be expected. But Tom also found that inter-personal staff relations were often fraught. Before he took the job he was warned, 'you'll either get on with remote area [staff] or hate them'. Tom rejected the idea of taking sides because of differences in the personalities of staff. He simply wanted to take advantage of his window of opportunity to learn more clinical skills; incorporate the experience into his career path, and earn needed money.

Although people with previous experience of remote areas or of Aboriginal communities would be expected to fair best this was not necessarily true. A woman accompanying her husband to a service position tactfully described their two-year stint as 'character building'. They had both worked in isolated communities.

On the other hand, a service provider of many years residence in the community blamed staff for many of their problems; they were 'of their own creation'. His recipe for success was not to cross the social divide between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people; and not to walk about the community on certain nights (when drinking is heavy). Yet staff who had worked in other remote Aboriginal communities also knew it was possible to enjoy cordial social relations with Aboriginal people. One such individual, who had previously worked in

communities in the Northern Territory, had arrived in the present situation with expectations for positive social relationships with Aboriginal people. But she was disappointed on a number of fronts. Perhaps it was because of the different community management styles she had observed between that in the Northern Territory and that in Queensland.

Conclusions

The ethnography in this paper points up only the 'tip of the iceberg' in terms of issues of policy in service delivery. The experiences outlined here present a direct challenge to questions of how to implement effective and sustainable services. The paper offers a glimpse into an arena which is normally masked by service providers and, not unsurprisingly, made opaque by staff themselves.

Much of the detail addresses the personal dimension of a service provider's life in a remote community, in order to illustrate the nature of the everyday experience of a minority group. Most non-Aboriginal people see themselves as living in isolated communities akin to a frontier. Their comments in interviews confirm that isolation and minority group status drastically affects their ability to perform beyond simply staffing a 'functioning service'.

In this community as elsewhere, the system of service provision has been reproduced in each new generation of service staff. The reproduction occurs in the minutia of mundane practices and procedures characteristic of how 'things operate' and the ways in which social relationships are managed. Reproduction also occurs simply because practices are never challenged either by staff on the ground or by the bureaucracies who sponsor them.

Few staff I interviewed had any idea of the community's indigenous history or the countless reports, assessments and evaluations of programs and policies and community-development projects that had started and failed there. Somehow, for each generation of service staff, the immediate was the only moment that mattered. Policy and action were for now; the community's past and future were irrelevant. This approach to community administration and service provision was, in my view, not only endemic, but deeply embedded in collective and mundane practices to the extent it was rarely questioned or discussed. Imbedded in such attitudes is an acceptance of the hopelessness of the Aboriginal situation and probability that nothing will ever change for the better.

Yet not everyone interviewed found their experience of community service alienating. For some people, the lifestyle was compensation enough. There were also staff who thought deeply and seriously about their role in the community and what alternatives might exist for changing present dynamics. Unfortunately, no parent service agency offered systemic support nor a structure for such thinking and within the community itself these people were marked by their peers as 'different and difficult'. Inevitably they left. In this sense, the community divide noted by Tonkinson (1974) and Trigger (1992) was not simply between the white

and black sectors, but was endemic in staff relations generally. The contested notion of the purpose a service provider served, especially in a context where self-determination was a policy goal, undoubtedly widened rifts between individuals.

What is compelling about this case? First, it exposes what service staff actually experience on the 'frontier'. Conversely, it indicates the knowledge gulf in which service delivery is developed and managed. These issues are of critical policy relevance to governments charged with providing services to remote communities and in contexts where indigenous socioeconomic conditions require a radical turn-around of present trends (see Taylor and Altman 1997).

Discussions with bureaucrats in parent service agencies (various State and Commonwealth government departments), suggests an awareness that something is wrong. Their policy remedy is a constant search for the 'right person' to staff the service. In part, a sustainable service does depend on appropriate staffing. Who then is the 'right person' and what can be learned from this case study about how to distinguish first, the professional and personal characteristics of the 'right person', and second, the contexts in which such an individual could be recognised and operate effectively?

Policy options?

For the study community, the greatest threat to effective and accountable service delivery is bureaucratic apathy. The depth of complacency with the status quo of service relations and service quality is alarming. Indeed, a continuing inability to challenge current practice or implement any one of the myriad recommendations from project and program evaluations over the years, speaks volumes. Few service staff believed the circumstances could change; similarly, staff keen to train and employ Aboriginal people were repeatedly told it is an impossible task.

A start must be made in practical terms. For example, the selection process for service staff could be overhauled. Orientation programs have to be realistic. New staff need full information about the social and cultural environment of their prospective employment. They also need on-going professional (and possibly personal) support to deal with confronting social situations encountered for the first time. Performance monitoring of the service and staff will need to address the particular circumstances of cross-cultural service delivery and not simply operate as an adjunct to mainstream services. Community-funding priorities need to be adjusted. Endemic community boredom has to be prioritised. It must be addressed over and above concerns about 'community development' expressed solely as better infrastructure.

Finally, there has to be practical outcomes and progress made in relation to policy objectives of 'self-determination' and 'economic empowerment'. In a community where all the full-time paid employment is monopolised by non-indigenous people these slogans are empty. Jobs for non-indigenous people in

remote communities should not be treated by administrations and government as sinecures.

Notes

1. Staff accommodation usually comprises fully or partly furnished housing.

2. In 1995 these were the prices for the following goods in the community store: $6.00 for a whole pumpkin; rockmelon $6.40; two sweet corn $2.60; a container of mushrooms $5.90; a large tin of powdered milk $9.60.

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