BALANCING INDIVIDUALISM AND COLLECTIVISM IN AN AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

Epochs have occurred throughout the history of the earth. A move from one epoch to the next can be considered to occur when there is a major transition which has a geological impact on all of life. A transition from the Holocene to the Anthropocene is now considered to have occurred in about the year 1800 with the Industrial Revolution. Dramatic changes to global conditions have occurred in a little over 200 years since then, with the consequent impact on the environment and all living things. Along with a geological change, a cultural transition has occurred. An individualistically oriented style of thinking has come to prominence with an objectification and exploitation of the environment. Yet, amongst Indigenous cultures, this change has not taken place. They retain a collectivist style of thinking and behavior and a deep respect for the land and all it contains. One of the values we can gain as participants in the Anthropocene is a recognition of these different types of knowledge existing in cohabitation, a comfortableness with an individualistic and relational identity occurring alongside each other. How much more valuable for this epoch to become an inclusive era when the collectivist perspectives from Indigenous cultures are appreciated alongside individualistic perspectives of developed nations?

Keywords
Anthropocene; individualism; collectivism; Aboriginal; Indigenous; cultural transition

INTRODUCTION

In *A Short History of Nearly Everything* (2005), Bill Bryson provides a potted and entertaining version of the history of the universe as perceived by humanity. He refers to the mystery of the cosmos, the vastness and intricacy of the universe as we understand it. Bryson mentions the "dangerous planet" and the development of "life itself". He provides a quick glimpse of the wonders of this earth and its changing nature through geological time. And he touches briefly on what are now considered the different eras or epochs.

As indicated by Steffen et al. (2011a), consideration of the defining of a new geological epoch takes place over time. There has never been a neat transition between what are now considered different ages in the earth's development. It is only in retrospect that scientists can look back and determine the different eras of time. Eugene Stoermer began using the term "Anthropocene" in the 1980s following interaction around this theme with Paul Crutzen (Crutzen & Stoermer, 2000). As recently as 1992, Revkin referred to "this new post-Holocene period" as the "Anthrocene" (Revkin, 1992, p.55; Steffen et al., 2011a, p.843). The commencement of the Industrial Revolution around the late 1700s (or 1800, if one wants to be precise, for example Steffen et al., 2011b, p.741) can now be considered the commencement of

what one day may be determined officially as the Anthropocene, some form of geological step-on from the Holocene. In a similar way, the previous transformation from Pleistocene to Holocene is now placed at the end of the Ice Age, about 12,000 years ago – but it may not have been so clear cut to a resident at the time.

These transition periods mark a transformation so profound that all of life is affected. With the dramatic changes to global conditions which have occurred in a little over 200 years since 1800, and its impact on the environment and all living things, it makes sense to recognise that a change in epochs has occurred. The transition from Holocene to Anthropocene marks the commencement of the "human imprint on the global environment" (Romm, 2015, p.2) which "rivals some of the great forces of Nature in its impact on the functioning of the Earth's system" (Steffen et al., 2011a, p.843).

Cultural Transition

It is important to recognise that these scientific determinations occur in retrospect. As we look back, we realise that a major transformation has occurred. All of us have a history. There is a geological footprint left behind in the material universe which is noticeable. But there is also a cultural footprint left behind by our ancestors. When we consider an Indigenous group, such as the Australian Aboriginal communities, their cultural history continues in the same developmental way as the different geological time periods. Their dreaming is more than an historically delineated period of myth or legend. The dreaming continues into the present day. What then is their place in the Anthropocene and how have they transitioned from the Holocene? And what does this say about other cultural groups? Would it be true to say that a cultural characteristic of the Holocene period was a collectivist way of thinking amongst human population groups? What of the transition of these groups into the Anthropocene?

There is a generally held understanding that a more individualistically oriented style of thinking has developed amongst Western and economically developed cultures in what may now be considered the Anthropocene. It is considered that this style of thinking can be traced back to the Renaissance era in Europe and the development of a more rational perspective which culminated in the Industrial Revolution. Masses of people flooded into metropolitan areas, resulting in the enormous dislocation of family structures and the breakdown of collectivist traditions. In contrast to this, amongst economically developing cultures, a more community based and collectivist style of thinking is still evident. This appears to remain true amongst Indigenous cultures and this is certainly the case amongst Aboriginal Australians.

Amongst economically developed and individualistically oriented cultures, there is also a disconnection with the land. There is a sense that the land and its material provisions are there to be exploited and raped rather than to be nurtured. Only beginning in the 1960s and 1970s did there even commence an awareness in Western nations that the raping of the land and its contents could have detrimental impacts on the continuation of life (Nordhaus & Shellenberger, 2007). Even today, many in the developed and individualistic nations continue with the same mindset that the land and its contents are for the benefit of humanity so the current environmental concern on the part of many is one of sustainability merely in order that the planet will remain in existence for the sake of humankind – rather than for the sake of the environment itself. This is so different to Indigenous ways of thinking.

Romm (2015, p.1) discusses the Indigenous styles of collectively oriented knowing. Her understanding is that "selves are understood as 'selves-in-relation' to one another and to all living and non-living things, as part of the web of life" (2015, p.1). This style of relational

thinking and knowing has become foreign to the vast majority of members of individualistically oriented cultures. They have lost an understanding of what it means to be a citizen, with reciprocal rights and responsibilities to those with whom they share this planet (Rawls, 1971, p.214). Indigenous groups, on the other hand, have a strong awareness of community and the recognition of involvement with other participants in this community (Miller, 2013).

For members of an individualistically oriented society, the new epoch of Anthropocene has indeed become a new era where the accoutrements of daily life are considered as chattels and there is a disjunction between the individual and the other often competing members of society around that person. Compare this with members of a collectively oriented culture who see themselves as at one with other human beings but more importantly with the essence of life.

Aboriginal Relationality

As mentioned before, the dreaming for Aboriginal Australians is present-day. They interpret life in terms of the dreaming and this includes the relational context in which they live. So, when they continue to live in community, Aboriginal Australians understand their lives in terms of their particular world view. Their transition from the Holocene into the Anthropocene has not meant a severing from collectivism into individualism nor a break from relationality and connection into objectifying their surroundings. Never was this more evident to me than when participating in groups with Aboriginal community members who were discussing aspects of loss and grief.

Example: Seasons for Healing Project

Let me first provide a brief description of the *Seasons for Healing* Project and then I will draw out the implications in terms of what I understand to be a collective understanding of community and culture.

The *Seasons for Healing* Program is an educational loss and grief program, "to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults" (Good Grief, 2012, p.2). Two members of a community are selected and trained as 'companions', their role being to facilitate a small group of between four and seven people within that community. These co-companions lead the group through a program of four sessions, each session lasting approximately two and a half hours. Through participating in a range of activities, companions enable group members to appreciate the impact of change, loss and grief on their lives and to gain the language to better articulate experiences of change, loss and grief. Over a period of four sessions, participants "acknowledge the reality of their loss", "explore the range of feelings and reactions that come with loss", "adjust to their changed circumstances" and "explore the choices that enable participants to let go and move forward" (Good Grief, 2012, pp. 24, 46, 68, 88). Each session incorporates time for discussion, listening, contemplation, activities, and opportunities for writing and self-expression.

Through interaction, the construction of a group understanding of change, loss and grief was developed. The group setting meant that participants shared their views and, by this means, constructed a group understanding of how they could interpret and safely express their new understanding. "Focus groups are used to gather data which is generated in a discussion between focus group members with the help of the focus group facilitator" (Matthews and Ross, 2010, p.235). The very nature of focus group interaction is relational. This interaction between participants in the Program enabled a richer understanding for each participant of the issues which were both discussed verbally and communicated in other ways. The group

context allowed participants to provide their perspectives and ideas on change, loss and grief and these built upon what others were saying. The role of the researcher was that of "walking with" the participants on their journey of discovery rather than imposing an outside expert perspective as to how they should understand change, loss and grief. Hence, realities of both participants and researchers were "socially and experientially based" (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p.110).

Listening to participants describe their understanding and share their experiences was an enriching time for me as an outside researcher. Grief holds a significant place in the lives of Aboriginal people. Any form of loss a person experiences can lead to grief, and this was recognised by participants in the focus groups.

- "In Aboriginal culture, lots of people die. Sometimes we bury one next month, sometimes ten in a month. Grief takes over our whole lives" (B, northern Adelaide).
- "There are other kinds of loss - identity, land, belongings, where we fit in with all this" (M, southern Adelaide).

I came to recognize that grief is not an unfortunate addition to life, as it is often viewed from a western perspective. For Indigenous people, it is an intimate and enduring part of who they are. From my perspective as a non-Indigenous person, this spoke to me of relational identity, so different from the individualism of western cultures.

'Yarning' is an important part of Aboriginal culture. It refers to sharing one's life story or personal journey. It was recognised as a means of individuals sharing parts of who they were for the benefit of the group. So this was incorporated more fully into the program.

- "When you are sharing a story - you need more time to yarn. Obviously there are things people want to say… We are story tellers" (P, northern Adelaide).

Several of the groups commented on the need to keep the group together throughout the program. This was linked to the recognition of the importance of yarning and the relational nature of engagement. A relational way of thinking and knowing leads to a "communication without words" within the groups which indicated an unspoken understanding and awareness of other participants. It was my observation that Indigenous focus groups operated at a different level to non-Indigenous groups and was a reflection of the collectivist way of thinking.

Example: Dadirri

A distinct aspect of collectivist awareness amongst Aboriginal communities is *dadirri*. Atkinson refers to *dadirri* as "a deep contemplative process of listening to one another in reciprocal relationships" (2000, p.1). She speaks of consciousness-raising:

> The relationship between the inner life – deeply ingrained cultural traditions – and the outer conditions of the social and natural environment that has helped shape the inner world, becomes explicit (2000, pp.4-5).

And this is done in a community setting.

> A big part of *dadirri* is listening…Listening invites responsibility to get the story – the information – right and to be in right relationship. However, listening over extended periods of time also brings the knowledge that the story changes over time as healing occurs when people experience being listened to and having their pain acknowledged (Atkinson, 2000, p.8).

According to Atkinson,

> *Dadirri*… at its deepest level is the search for understanding and meaning. It is listening and learning with more than the ear, but also from the heart…*Dadirri* is the process of listening, reflecting, observing the feelings and actions, reflecting and learning, and in

> the cyclic process, re-listening at deeper and deeper levels of understanding and knowledge-building (2000, pp.8-9).

The process of listening and learning with the ear but also from the heart is important to capture. And then reflecting and re-listening, using more than one's ear but also one's spirit. What appears to be important is to remove one's judgmental and negative or suspicious attitude. Rather, one should sit quietly, observe and listen, and then reflect. Ungunmerr speaks of *dadirri* as "inner deep listening and quiet, still awareness" (1995, p.179). *Dadirri* is relational and collectivist. One needs to move from the individualistic to a relational perspective to be able to appreciate *dadirri*.

Balancing Individual and Collective Interests

One of the concerns which comes with an anthropocentric way of thinking is the hegemonic promulgation of individualism. Just as humankind has had a profound "impact on the functioning of the Earth's system" (Steffen et al., 2011a, p.843), so the powerful voices of western nations have had a profound impact on Earth's cultural understanding. Ritzer suggested that a McDonaldization has taken place, an homogenisation of cultural perspectives. As Ritzer commented, bureaucracy in the western world means that people have become "dehumanized", "rational systems are dehumanizing" (2004, pp.27, 134). Indeed, Pieterse suggested that one view of cultural difference is that "global interconnectedness leads to increasing cultural convergence" (2009, p.4). There has been a "worldwide homogenization of societies" (2009, p.51) and an "homogenization of consumption patterns" (Ritzer, 1993, p.154). This has tended to bury Indigenous perspectives of collectivism under the weight of individualism and the objectification of the relationship between humankind and its surroundings.

In contrast to this, McIntyre-Mills refers to "the benefits of balancing individual and collective interests through socio-cultural solidarity and collective action for this generation of life and the next" (2014, p.46). It would appear that, as a generalisation, Indigenous societies have largely retained their relational cultures and their collectivist perspectives in the balance of life. It would also appear that, as a generalisation, western societies have developed an objective culture and an individualistic perspective which diminishes the life chances of the current and future generations. On current balance, the individualistic perspective far outweighs the collectivist perspective. If we are indeed to develop a "social contract which protects citizens", and particularly "those who are voiceless", then "the balance between individual and collective concerns needs to be redressed" (McIntyre-Mills, 2014, p.48-49).

Within the way of thinking of Aboriginal Australians, there continues a strong connection to land and community, and this is even more the case as one travels from metropolitan areas to more rural and remote communities. An attitude pervades these communities that they share this land with all its inhabitants, including animals, rocks, plants and trees, water and earth. The land is regarded as precious and there is a spiritual connection to the land. So the collectivist attitude amongst Aboriginal Australians differs markedly from the attitude of non-Indigenous Australians.

Thus a balance needs to be struck between an individualistic perspective and a relational perspective. Cultural difference means that one needs to be reflexive in one's understanding and interpretation of the one culture as interpreted by another (Kovach, 2009). What are "the methods of knowledge production" within cultures and how do "particular knowledges achieve legitimacy and authority at the expense of other knowledge" (Nakata, 2007, p.195)?

Converging Two Divergent Views

During the Anthropocene, we have witnessed the development of an hegemonic western perspective imposed on a variety of cultures and an homogenisation of the individualistic and objective perspective brought by western imperialism. This has begun to change in recent decades. There has come a recognition of the validity of world views other than a rational western worldview. Indigenous authors are promoting the recognition of their worldviews, not to replace the western perspective but to sit alongside with equal credibility (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012).

To redress the balance between individual and collective concerns, there needs to be a recognition of the equal value of these different world views. One type of knowledge is not wrong and the other right, they are not mutually exclusive. Nakata uses an interpretive approach to speak of the cultural interface, which recognises that Indigenous knowledge is "positioned within a contested terrain of competing knowledge relations" (2007, p.199). What is important to Aboriginal people is not categorising the different approaches used to gain knowledge. What is important is the recognition of the value of different types of knowledge. According to Nakata (2010), Indigenous knowledge and western scientific knowledge are different but both are important. The end result of these types of knowledge is important and this is that the interests of Indigenous people are preserved. Someone with an individual approach to knowledge should not approach an Aboriginal community with a collectivist approach and disregard that community's worldview with the understanding that her/his approach to research cannot be challenged (Hollinsworth, 2012). The days when this occurred should be long past. But it may still be the case that some westerners come with an assumed/unchallenged knowledge base and impose this on others, including people from Aboriginal communities. Researchers need to critically assess their own worldview before inflicting themselves on others. The focus has changed from "knowing about" to "learning from" the community with whom one deals (Hollinsworth, 2012, p.5).

Entering the research sphere from an Indigenous paradigm, Martin speaks positively of the relational nature of Indigenous research, and says, "I am often confounded by the levels of trust that have been established, and I attribute this to using a research framework of which relational ontology, epistemology and methodology are a necessary condition" (2003, p.16). It is also important that a researcher recognises participants as people who relate in a relational way. According to Gunaratnam, "Relationality (refers) to the epistemological break with thinking of 'race' and ethnicity as unitary, hermetically sealed, homogeneous categories of difference" (2003, p.20). This means that individuals within a people group are not identical. What this also should mean is that respect is accorded to participants and that a researcher from outside the community genuinely hears what the community is saying and the different perspectives amongst community members. When a researcher works with a group of people from a different cultural or sub-cultural background, including an Indigenous background, the researcher should not assume knowledge and should be comfortable with difference.

Romm expresses an important truth: "The (re)credentializing of Indigenous knowledge systems and styles of knowing does not imply that all 'knowledge' (and ways of acting) as proffered within Indigenous systems has to be accepted" (2015, p.10). As McIntyre-Mills comments, it is only as research "strives to foster and manage diverse forms of knowledge", that we can hope to "address complex socio-environmental challenges" (2014, p.8).

Researchers have traditionally been powerful people of privilege and belonged to "a given race". They have belonged to the dominant rather than the subservient culture. As Tuhiwai Smith states: "(Researchers) have the power to distort, to overlook, to make invisible, to exaggerate and to draw conclusions based…on assumptions, hidden value judgements, and often downright misunderstandings" (2012, p.178). So there is a responsibility on the part of researchers to recognise the power imbalance and consequently to accord a rightful sense of power to those being interviewed. As Tuhiwai Smith also says, these researchers are "in receipt of privileged information" from participants (2012, p.178). Too often, researchers have "come into Indigenous communities to collect their stories to disappear without a word coming back or any benefit returning to the community" (Brydon-Miller et al., 2011, p.390). In terms of Indigenous communities, Tuhiwai Smith makes a strong comment: "The way in which research is implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism remains a powerful remembered history for many of the world's colonized peoples" (1999, p.1).

To redress the balance between an individualistic and a collectivist cultural perspective, between a western world view and an Indigenous world view, what is important is to recognise the validity of both. Indigenous groups are not seeking compensation but equal recognition to enable a convergence of these two divergent views. In this way, the Anthropocene will be characterised by a mutual respect and a harmonious recognition of the value of different world views so that the interests of Indigenous peoples are preserved.

CONCLUSION

Epochs have occurred throughout the history of the earth. A move from one epoch to the next can be considered to occur when there is a major transition which has a geological impact on all of life. The transition from the Pleistocene to the Holocene is regarded as having taken place about 12,000 years ago. A transition from the Holocene to what has been designated the Anthropocene is now considered to have occurred with the commencement of the Industrial Revolution and is conveniently placed at the turn of the nineteenth century BCE. Dramatic changes to global conditions have occurred in a little over 200 years since 1800, with the consequent impact on the environment and all living things.

Along with a geological change, a cultural transition has occurred, particularly amongst western or developed nations. An individualistically oriented style of thinking has come to prominence with an objectification and exploitation of the environment. Yet, amongst Indigenous cultures, such a profound change has not taken place. They retain a collectivist style of thinking and behavior and a deep respect for the land and all it contains.

One of the values we can gain as participants in the Anthropocene is a recognition of the different types of knowledge existing in cohabitation, a comfortableness with an individualistic and relational identity occurring alongside each other. During the early stages of the Anthropocene, there was an hegemonic bombardment from early industrialising nations which attempted to consume and even ridicule the cultural perspectives of developing nations. How much more valuable for this epoch to become an inclusive era when the collectivist perspectives from Indigenous cultures are appreciated alongside individualistic perspectives of developed nations?

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