

The Role of Mobility Patterns in Australian Aboriginal Homelessness

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One of the most strongly held features of Australian Aboriginal culture and identity is the obligation of kinfolk to look after one another. Those who might otherwise be absolutely homeless will often find accommodation with kinfolk. In this way, homelessness within the Aboriginal community is 'hidden'. The obligation of kinfolk to look after one another is expressed in patterns of mobility within Aboriginal family communities. There are important differences among types of homelessness and associated mobility patterns which may be culturally or socially legitimated, or not legitimated at all, within Aboriginal society.

This paper concerns the relationship between Aboriginal homelessness, household crowding and patterns of mobility. In it I provide an understanding of the way that kin relationships structure the management of housing the homeless in Aboriginal households in Broome, Carnarvon and Perth in Western Australia. I attempt to provide a nuanced ethnographic perspective aimed at clearly distinguishing the role of culture from the agency of mainstream society in shaping the homeless behaviour of Australian Aboriginal people.

Introduction

The link between Australian Aboriginal mobility patterns, homelessness and household crowding is recognised among Australian researchers and has to certain extent been examined in some studies (Altman 1978; Birdsall-Jones 2008, 2010; Habibis 2010; Memmott 2004, 2012). The link between mobility, crowding and homelessness arises out of the cultural imperative to provide aid and support to kinfolk in situations of need. This extends to the housing of kinfolk who would otherwise be homeless.¹

Studies of Aboriginal household crowding are important because one of the primary drivers of crowding in the Aboriginal context is homelessness among kinfolk. Not all crowding results from homelessness. For example, funerals bring together hundreds of kinfolk many of whom must be offered housing by the close kinfolk of the deceased. Generally speaking, however, crowding arising from funerals and other cultural matters (such as ceremonies) is short term. In contrast, homelessness lasts for years.

Public housing waiting lists in Western Australia (WA) vary from region to region but in the state capital (Perth), applicants for 2/3 bedroom family homes have been waiting seven to eleven years for a public housing home (Western Australia 2013a). While they are waiting, many of them will live with their housed kinfolk. Because of this, it may appear that the membership of some Aboriginal households is quite high in both Aboriginal and White terms when in fact a significant proportion of this membership consists of the long term homeless relatives of the householder.

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Aboriginal household crowding is a rule driven phenomenon in that it occurs according to patterns determined by kin relationships and these patterns are therefore predictable to a greater or lesser extent. The kin relationships of relevance in obtaining access to the homes of kinfolk are those founded in what many Aboriginal people refer to as 'rearing up'; the child rearing process. These are relationships which are established in the course of child rearing, growing up, and raising children. In order to access the rights accruing to these rearing up relationships, individuals must enact them, the geographical distance between them notwithstanding. Rearing up relationships are therefore performative relationships and maintaining them means the practice of regular and frequent travel.

Patterns of mobility are the result of long standing relationships between large kin groups and places. The relationship between Aboriginal people and place represents considerable time depth in the multigenerational lifespan of the kin group and to a lesser extent this relationship reflects the life experience of the individual. The relationship with place depends on group history more than on individual history because individuals acquire relationships with place by virtue of their relationship with the kin group.

This paper seeks to explain how the phenomena of Aboriginal household crowding and mobility patterns determine the distribution of homeless Aboriginal people over ranges of places specific to individual kin groups.

Mobility and Kinship

Aboriginal people travel regularly and often. Their pattern of movement is defined by the location of kinfolk within a region which includes but is not limited to traditional country. There are two other factors which act to shape the region of Aboriginal mobility patterns. One of these is intermarriage across kin groups which provides access to towns within the traditional country of affinal connections. The second is the fallout from 200 – 250 years of government policies specifically aimed at severing the link between Aboriginal people and land. These consisted of a program of transporting whole communities to places distant from their traditional land combined with a policy of removing Aboriginal children from their families to be raised in isolation from contact with Aboriginal culture (Biskup 1973; Haebich 1992; Ward 1987; Hodson 1987).

The work patterns and intermarriage patterns that resulted from the removal policies and processes have opened a much wider and more varied basis for regional association than traditional country. These policies were seriously damaging to Aboriginal culture, but ultimately they were unsuccessful either in suppressing ties to country or wholly eliminating Aboriginal culture. This was in part because the deep structure of Aboriginal culture endures (Sutton 1998). The term 'deep structure' is used here to refer to the principles of social organisation which underlie the current organisational structures of Aboriginal culture.² The particular principle I call upon here is the identification of lateral kin with lineal kin. For example, mother's sisters are equated with mother, and the mother's sister's children are equated with siblings.

² This usage has a somewhat more direct relationship with Chomsky's original usage of the term than is generally the case in some social science literature (Myers 1987). While he eventually abandoned the notion of 'deep structure' (Zwart 1998), Chomsky's usage indicated a linguistic formulation of 'deep structure' as the core semantic relations of a sentence which are reflected in the surface structure (Harris 1995; Chomsky 1995; Chomsky, Hauser, and Fitch 2005). My usage indicates that the principles underlying social organisation are reflected in the arrangements of social relationships.

As I will show, this principle has far reaching effects on the conduct of Aboriginal social life.

Particular configurations of kin relationships may vary between language groups, but the overall form of the operative collectivity of kinfolk may be characterised as a family community (Birdsall 1988). This is a tightly knit set of kinfolk who cooperate socially, economically and politically. In most Western Australian town and city dwelling groups, this family community is recruited ambilineally but with a matri-bias from a large group of cognatic kinfolk all of whom claim descent from a named apical ancestor.

The set of towns/cities among which the family community is distributed and between which kinfolk travel is termed by anthropologists a 'mobility range' (Memcott 2004). The places within a mobility range can be hundreds of kilometres distant from each other and this presents the problem of how to maintain continuity of social organisation and the unity of the kin group as a community. The only way to resolve this problem is a practice of regular and frequent travel among the towns of the claimed region.

Aboriginal social life is bounded by an institution of reciprocal obligation. Rules of common practice define the specific rights and obligations pertaining to specific role relationships, eg. mother/dependent child, dependent child/mother and in the adult years, mother/son, mother/daughter, daughter/mother, son/mother and so on (Birdsall 1988). Among the town and city groups of my acquaintance, the mother's sisters are equated with the mother and mother's sisters children are equated with siblings. Women and girls in particular refer to their female matri-cousins as sisters. In one inland group, the Wajarri of the Burringurrah community, this identification of cousins with siblings is more clearly bilateral. Here, cousins are referred to as 'cousin-brother' and 'cousin-sister' (Habibis 2010). In any case, these are strong relationships and their strength is maintained through the practice of regular visiting. In consequence, these relationships tend to shape the overall pattern of visiting as well as creating the avenues of support which are available to people in times of need and trouble (Birdsall-Jones 2008; Habibis 2010; Memcott 2012).

People visit one another for a variety of reasons. Generally the reason and mode of visiting is reflective of gender and time of life. Women visit their adult daughters to maintain a strong role in the upbringing of their grandchildren. If the daughter is living in a place dominated by her in-laws her mother will visit her to ensure that her rights are protected. These rights include a woman's right to respect, personal safety, the economic integrity of her household, and the mothers' right to hold the primary authority in regard to her children. Women visit their mothers reciprocally and also their sisters in order to ensure the ongoing relationship between their children and the children's extended family. Older adolescent boys and young men spend a number of years travelling widely, usually around the broad region known to their own extended family, but some may travel more widely still. Usually there comes a point at which young men judge that this time of life is over and they return to their home communities and more or less settle down. Some men become involved in Aboriginal law matters and may continue to travel extensively around their region. The most general reason for visiting is for funerals, which concerns all age groups of both genders. All of these reasons for travelling are expressive of Aboriginal culture. (Birdsall-Jones 2007; Habibis 2010; Memcott 2012).

People may also need to travel for a variety of reasons that arise out of points of social interaction with the wider society. For example they may need to visit kinfolk who are in hospital or in prison, or for reasons connected with their own or their children's health, education, sporting events and so on. While not cultural, these points of interaction are certainly social and so we might refer to such instances of social interaction as providing social reasons for travel in that while they are carried out in a way that involves kin lines, the agency driving mobility in this regard rises out of the wider society and not Aboriginal culture.

Another socially legitimated form of mobility occurs when people are forced to travel, not to visit their kinfolk, but to find shelter in the homes of kinfolk. The majority of Aboriginal people live in poverty and have little or no reserves of savings to draw on in the event of an unexpected expense, which happens from time to time over the career of any household. When this happens in Aboriginal households it may lead to the loss of housing through non-payment of rent or because the house is rendered uninhabitable through non-payment of water, gas and electricity bills, leading to the loss of these utilities. On such occasions, Aboriginal people ordinarily will call on their housed kinfolk to provide them with housing. They use the kinship structures and the rules governing kin-based relationships in Aboriginal society in this process. However, the need itself does not arise out of Aboriginal social structures but out of the relationship between Aboriginal society and the wider Australian society. The visiting they have done on the basis of Aboriginal culture and society serves to strengthen the relationships that Aboriginal people call upon in time of need. This is regarded as a legitimate way of using kin relationships (Birdsall-Jones 2007, 2010; Memmott 2012).

Policy Driven Homelessness

A significant driver of Aboriginal homelessness in metropolitan Western Australia is the Department of Housing's Disruptive Behaviour Management policy, commonly referred to as the 'Three Strikes law' although it is not a law but a government and departmental policy (Western Australia 2013b). The Three Strikes policy is representative of a general trend in social policy development in which a punitive turn appears to have been developing for some time (Daya 2013). The policy sets out three levels of disturbance; dangerous behaviour, serious disruptive behaviour, and minor disruptive behaviour. Behaviour deemed to be dangerous results in immediate proceedings to evict; serious disruptive behaviour results in eviction after one verified report; minor disruptive behaviour that is verified by the WADoH results in one strike and where three strikes are accrued within a twelve month period eviction will occur.

The policy in its present form was introduced in 2011 and since then there have been a steadily rising number of evictions primarily concerning Aboriginal tenants of the public housing provider (Australian Broadcasting Corporation 2011; Harris 1995). Research interviews suggest that the majority of evictions occur as a result of minor disruptive behaviour such as noisy children, loud parties requiring police attendance and domestic disputes (Memmott 2012).

Interviewees spoke about the way in which Aboriginal culture is in effect contravened by the Three Strikes policy with particular regard to the obligation of kinfolk to provide shelter to their homeless relations. Essentially, people understand the effect of the policy as being evicted for providing for their families.

And they condemn me from having the kids in the house. Cause when another family got three strikes, they went to Homeswest [Western Australian housing department]. And I told them well you can come and live with me, and live in the kitchen. Cause they was homeless (Memcott 2012, 131).

This is a question of whether or not to contravene the dictates of Aboriginal culture. Could one adhere to the dictates of respect for family that constitutes one of the strongest themes in Aboriginal culture, without invoking the Three Strikes policy thereby putting one's own housing in danger? The effects of this policy were predictable and the misgivings its introduction excited appear to be playing out. However, we do not yet have sufficient research telling us how the fallout from the Three Strikes policy is being managed within Aboriginal communities in Western Australia.

Gray areas

The distinction between homelessness and visiting is sometimes difficult to see. For example an extended period of travel and a certain amount of irresponsible behaviour is an expected aspect of behaviour for older adolescent boys and young men (who are collectively referred to as 'the boys'). They not unusually drink to excess and can be noisy and unruly in consequence. Within limits this is within the expected range of normal behaviour for the boys. However, their behaviour quite often goes outside the limits which households can be expected to tolerate and the boys must be moved on. For the period of their grand tour, they appear to be homeless; however, they could go back home any time they wish (Birdsall-Jones 2010; Memcott 2012). This situation displays characteristics of homelessness as well as visiting, and a culturally legitimated range of normal behaviour as well as a culturally non-legitimated imposition on the domestic resources of the family community. There is one other cultural driver of Aboriginal homelessness.

Deserting the home is a well-known response to a death in the family in some north Australian Indigenous communities. Contrary to common belief in non-Aboriginal Australia, it does not often occur among 'tradition' oriented groups and it occurs even more rarely among town and city dwelling groups. Deserting the home on account of a death among the household, according to Aboriginal people from groups among whom it occurs, should not be regarded as a requirement or a customary practice, and only some people do it. It is better to regard it as a response to the death of very close kin which is within the lexicon of expressing grief among Aboriginal people. In course of one of the research projects investigating homelessness in which the author (Birdsall-Jones 2010), one of the participants was a man from a Kimberley community who had been brought up from a very young child by his older sister who was therefore like a mother to him. When she died, he said that he simply could not go on living in the home he and his partner and children had shared with her. This man and his partner decided to leave their jobs in their community and make their home in Broome.

Some of the 'boys', the man's cousin-brothers, came along so that the man would not be 'too sad' while he was getting over the death of his sister. Together, they went first to the woman's aunt's house. Because they were in Broome, the boys wanted to get drunk and have parties. When this started, the aunt requested the man and his wife to make the boys leave. Because the boys had come with them especially to be with their cousin-brother, the man and his wife felt obliged to leave the house with them. They had nowhere else to go and so they arranged with the aunt that the children could

remain with her and then took the boys with them to make a camp together in the sand hills across the road from the big hotels along Roebuck Bay.

Figure 1: Homeless man, Broome, July 2008



Photo: Birdsall-Jones

Figure 2: Young men visiting Broome, July 2008



Photo: Birdsall-Jones, Broome, 2008.

You can't say no to your family.

The couple were obligated to the six young male cousins of the man because they came to 'keep him company'. Although the boys were enjoying themselves, they also had a duty and a matter of sincere feeling. They had to watch their cousin-brother to make sure he did not become 'too sad'. Part of the mourning response to the death of very close family in their Indigenous society is that the principal mourner may not eat properly. One of the women informed us that for some period of time a person who is so sad will not feel able to eat meat and will choose to eat only fish. If this goes on too long, someone has to do something about that, and the way this happens is that someone must push some meat into his face so that he'll get the smell of it and he'll want to eat meat again. The person who would do this most likely would be one of the man's cousin-brothers. In the photo of the man in figure 1, this is the significance of the fish he is holding.

In any case, the couple were bound culturally to accept responsibility for these young men as long as they reasonably could. Even though they were camped in the sand hills instead of living with their children in the aunt's house, they accepted this. Smiling, the woman said, 'You can't say no to your family,' and the man nodded, and repeated after her, 'You can't say no to your family.'

However, there are circumstances which make it more likely that people will say no to their family. One such circumstance occurs, as at the woman's aunt's house, when a group of the boys exceeds the limits of the householder's tolerance of drinking and related behaviour. In addition to this, research into Indigenous home ownership has revealed that Indigenous people who own their own homes are more likely to deny housing to their homeless relations and also to relations who are casual visitors and who have housing elsewhere (Szava and Moran 2008). Indigenous people who are in employment and who have private rental housing have also reported controlling access to their homes in the same way (Birdsall-Jones 2007). This is not a complete denial but rather controlled access. It is not surprising, given the way that kin obligation is embedded within Indigenous culture, that both employed Indigenous people in private rental housing and Indigenous home owners have difficulty in explaining their reasoning to their relations who expect to be housed upon request.

Sometimes it is hard to own a place: it goes against trying to help your family and people; I can starve to pay the loan but how do you explain that to other people? [i.e. family] (Szava 2008).

Street-roaming children and child home abandonment

On account of alcohol abuse, the home may become the venue for gatherings which result in intoxication, and sometimes violent behaviour, which may include the physical and sexual abuse of women and/or children in the household. Children are sometimes at risk from visitors as well, in particular when their parents are not in a condition to be sufficiently aware of what is happening in their home. In response to these circumstances, children may leave home.

This behaviour begins as temporary and, when the circumstances improve, the children return. However, if the home continues to operate as a venue for alcohol and/or drug abuse, these circumstances may drive the children away permanently. Some children in this situation find shelter with various relations around town. In the process they have learned to protect themselves through fighting, and to support

themselves by engaging in ‘humbugging’³, and robbery through breaking-and-entering. In the process of fending for themselves by these means, they become involved with the judicial system. Hardened by their life on the street, gaol is not necessarily a fearful prospect. Indeed, prison can represent a semblance of stability. Some say they look forward to it because of the provision of regular meals and good accommodation in the juvenile justice system. When this occurs, it can function to set future behaviour patterns that can lead to a cycle of arrest, conviction and imprisonment over the individual’s life.

People may take up a lifestyle in which substance abuse becomes the dominant theme. As a result, they abuse their kin-based relationships as well as their substance of choice. Children whose parents are devoted to this kind of lifestyle may leave home because of the violence and disorder that occurs in the wake of drinking parties and drug-taking. While these children may begin by moving among the homes of their kinfolk within the town, some will travel far more widely around the region of their extended family as they grow older.

Meantime the adults who are leading the lifestyle that goes with substance abuse can lose their homes through non-payment of rent or by falling afoul of the three strikes policy. They will have to call on their housed kinfolk to obtain shelter. Given their compromised lifestyle, their presence in a household is too disruptive to be tolerated in the long-term and after a time they will be asked to move on. Because they have no homes of their own they travel widely around the region of their extended families staying with various of their kinfolk, progressively wearing out their welcome and moving on as they go. Rarely, they may refuse to move on and back this up with violence or the threat of violence. In these circumstances, the inhabitability of the home declines and individuals may desert the home to find safer shelter elsewhere.

The substance abusers are utilising the same network of kin relationships as those who have fallen on hard times. However, this way of using kin relationships is not regarded as legitimate, and despite the fact that kin relationships structure the pattern of mobility among substance abusers, this behaviour is not regarded as an expression of Aboriginal culture by Aboriginal people (Birdsall-Jones and Corunna 2008).

Conclusion

In general terms, we see here three genre of mobility; culturally legitimated, socially legitimately and that which is not legitimated.

Table 1: Drivers of mobility and associated housing requests

<i>Culturally legitimated visiting</i>	<i>Socially legitimated housing requests</i>	<i>Non-legitimated</i>
To maintain strength of relationship among kinfolk	Loss of housing through unexpected expense, unable to manage household economy, failure to pay rent/bills	Loss of housing through failure of household economy, domestic order owing to substance abuse lifestyle
Law business	Loss of housing amenity	Inability to secure ongoing membership in a household because of effects of substance abuse
Funerals	Abandonment of home through	

³ Humbugging means to engage in increasingly menacing demands in order to obtain money or goods from another person.

	need to escape violence or abuse
Deserting the home of an important family member who has died	School or sporting events, health and medical needs, etc.

Visiting of the kind listed in the table above under the heading ‘culturally legitimated visiting’ has the effect of strengthening the bonds of kinship and Aboriginal culture. The practice of providing shelter to kinfolk in need of housing, under the heading ‘socially legitimated housing requests’ is one of the reasons that the bonds of kinship and culture must remain strong and the process of strengthening them must be ongoing.

Then, there is a third pattern of mobility, under the heading ‘non-legitimated’, which is connected with the substance abuse lifestyle and which utilises the same Aboriginal social structures as the first two. However, this third pattern of mobility puts great strain on the network of kin relationships and expends the resources of households to no good purpose. Kin networks which experience this kind of strain may be unable to perform some of the most important functions of Aboriginal extended family groups which include principally the support of family members who need help for legitimate reasons, most particularly women and children escaping from violence or who have suffered the loss of their own housing through other causes.

All of these patterns of mobility can lead to household crowding. However, some of this crowding is for a limited term, while some of it is long-term. For example, we should consider the experience of getting ‘stuck’. This is what happens when people who intended to make a limited-term visit for some legitimate purpose find they have no money for their return journey. Their car breaks down and they can’t afford to have it repaired, the people they got a lift with become unavailable for the return journey, or they haven’t the money for the return bus fare, or some similar event. While they are stuck, they are homeless and must either rely on their relations’ continued willingness to house them or live out of doors.

The reason for distinguishing social causes from cultural causes is so that we can properly understand Aboriginal mobility and homelessness. Mobility that arises from cultural motivations generally serves to strengthen the fabric of Aboriginal society by permitting people to perform their obligations to their kinfolk in a positive way. Mobility that arises from agents of mainstream Australian society, that is, from the Aboriginal response to the ways in which the wider society impacts deleteriously upon the Aboriginal world, may not serve such a constructive purpose. Aboriginal people must depend on their network of kin in time of need, but they must spend their own social capital in order to do so. As well, the kinfolk on whom they rely are placed at a disadvantage with regard to housing amenity and household economic organisation when this happens.

There are two cultural drivers of Aboriginal homelessness and these are

1. home abandonment in response to the death of a beloved member of the household, and;
2. The ‘grand tour’ undertaken by the boys.

All other drivers of Aboriginal homelessness come from the wider society.

The management of homelessness within Aboriginal society depends on strong, viable kin relations. In order to produce and maintain these relations, Aboriginal people engage in patterns of visiting. The destinations and the frequency of these visits are carefully calculated with the objective of achieving the sufficiency of contact among kinfolk necessary to maintaining key kin relations over the long term life of the family community.

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