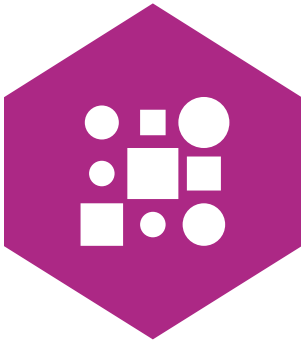




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Negotiating Private Troubles,
Public Issues in Northern Territory
Indigenous Australia

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Working the Gap: Negotiating Private Troubles, Public Issues in Northern Territory Indigenous Australia

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Abstract: This is a theoretical and methodological analysis of the positions and assumptions about Indigenous and non-Indigenous culture which currently form the basis of both policy and practice in Northern Territory settings concerned with 'closing the gap' in the fields of education and health services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, starting from the point of the experiences and narratives of individual professionals working in these fields. In order to critically analyse these practice settings, the authors introduce a theoretical and methodological toolkit to help 'make sense' of the policy and practice environments they work in and their own professional positions and sense of identity in these particular contexts, starting from the point of the position of the individual, through the use of narrativity. This toolkit builds on CW Mills' "sociological imagination." Both authors bring their New Zealand research, teaching and practice experiences to this analysis and to their daily work, working in these fields, first in New Zealand and currently in the Northern Territory of Australia and argue that through reflexivity or narrative research these often personal professional experiences can be considered in contexts of wider narratives and lines of inquiry to create possibilities for different perspectives and ultimately, resilience building and improved outcomes in this space.

Keywords: Sociological Imagination, Closing the Gap, Practice Experience, Indigenous Australia

Introduction

For the purposes of this analysis, "Closing the Gap" refers to a series of policies built upon the foundational National Indigenous Reform Agreement (2008) developed by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) in which COAG agreed to six ambitious targets to address the disadvantage faced by Indigenous Australians¹. Health and education policy and practice in the Northern Territory aimed at 'closing the gap' of Indigenous disadvantage, like all social policy, is premised on particular assumptions about the identities of the people and the communities these aim to affect. Social policy also constructs particular definitions of citizenship. Also implicit in this are particular assumptions about the identities of the professional practitioners who contribute to both the development of the policies and their implementation. How these identities interplay and coalesce leaves a space—a "gap" for a great deal of questioning and puzzlement.

The authors draw upon sociology, and more specifically, CW Mills' 'sociological imagination' (1959) as a theoretical and methodological tool to critically analyse and personally attempt to "make sense" of the policy and practice environments they work in—working in the "closing the gap" health and education policy settings of the contemporary Northern Territory of Australia.

One of the authors has used this toolkit and seen the dividends from this, in the settings of teaching social work students and in management practice in education and human services

¹ Closing the Gap, Prime Minister's Report 2013, 1–21. Goals for closing the gap: 1. Halve the gap in mortality rates for Indigenous children under five by 2018. 2. Ensure access to early childhood education for all Indigenous four year olds in remote communities by 2013. 3. Halve the gap in reading writing and numeracy achievements for children by 2018. 4. Halve the gap for Indigenous students in Year 12 attainments rates by 2020. 5 Halve the gap in employment outcomes between Indigenous and other Australians by 2018.

settings in Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom (Kelly and Stanley, 2012; Stanley and Kelly, 2008; Stanley and Kelly, 2010)The authors think it offers practitioners working in the puzzling and often challenging practice environments in education and health in the Northern Territory a ‘nuts and bolts’ mechanism that can easily be drawn on to enhance the analysis of puzzling social issues and our own professional experiences.

The Sociological Imagination

C.W. Mills’ sociological imagination offers a connection from personal troubles to public issues, and a clear methodological process for practitioners to better make such connections. It “enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society. That is its task and its promise. To recognize this is its task and this promise” (Mills 1959, 12).

Mills (1959) asks why things are the way they are at a particular time in history. What trends and situations have brought people and societies to these contemporary spaces? Or what are their historical and cultural conditions to bring them into being? What have been the individual and collective experiences that have brought Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians into embedded binary and oppositional patterns of relating, through fields of policy, within the current social system? Within these binary constructions, how do we experience the ‘other’ in day to day living and working as practitioners in this space and also, as citizens sharing a democratic social organisation? How do we bridge the gap between private and the public knowing of each other? And lastly Mills asks how are our personal experiences connected with the public problems of our larger society (Mills 1959)?

Mills offers up a way to begin this process: “How can you do this? One answer is: you must set up a file, which is, I suppose, a sociologist’s way of saying: keep a journal. Many creative writers keep journals; the sociologist’s need for systematic reflection demands it” (Mills 1959, 196).

The Model

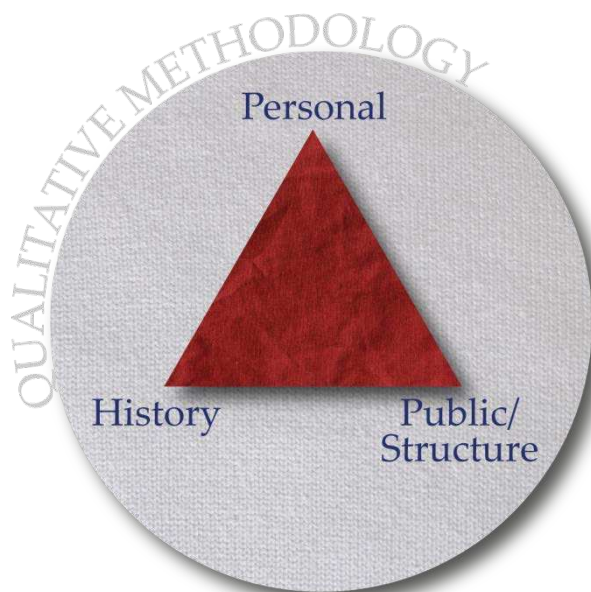


Figure 1. The Sociological Triangle

How to Use the Model

The first step is to begin from our own narrative accounts of our individual practice experiences. Mills states:

You must learn to use your life experience in your intellectual work: continually to examine and interpret it. In this sense craftsmanship is the center of yourself and you are personally involved in every intellectual product upon which you may work. To say that you can 'have experience,' means, for one thing, that your past plays into and affects your present, and that it defines your capacity for future experience. (1959, 196)

The next step is to stand outside our direct professional and personal experiences and narratives by drawing on collective narratives and historic analyses of both where we work and how we work (in terms of both geographic space and policy space); how these 'musings' intersect with the 'musings' of others, with our own experiences from different contexts, with public policy narrative, and with the narratives of other practitioners and policies in other contexts of space and time.

The third step alerts us to reflexive identity discourses and how these construct views of "reality" or of cultural identity, and the multiple layers of narrative – from personal to public to grand narrative and ultimately "metanarratives" (Somers 1994) within which we situate our own identities and those of policy "recipients"—Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. The reflexivity of the model asks us to consider our own relationships with our practice environments, communities, policies and the dominant ideologies about equality of access, cultural identity and ultimately, citizenship, within which we operate, as being at once biographical and contextual: "We stand and work within the context in which we are embedded" (Van Heugten, Kelly, and Stanley 2013, 15).

At a recent academic conference held in the Northern Territory on Indigenous Knowledges attended by both authors it was noted that all the presenters were Indigenous. The conference Chair was Indigenous. The panel was wholly Indigenous – a group of distinguished academics and elders. A common theme of the papers was around the observations of these presenters that the phenomenon of interest in cultural awareness and the impact of this on closing the gap, is a non-Indigenous problem, that increasingly Indigenous Australia is being called upon to support non-Indigenous Australia in coming to terms with their own individual discomfort about being white in 'post' colonial Australia.

Observing the predominantly white audience of academics from around Australia and around the world, as one by one we nodded, agreed, applauded and laughed along with the Indigenous academics' 'take' on non-Indigenous Australia's need for filling up on Indigenous culture. There was such recognition and support for what the presenters were saying. At one point an Indigenous man from the audience stood up and engaged with the speaker in a long dialogue. Most present could not understand and we will never know what the dialogue was about. The man's dialogue indicated a personal rather an academic response to the speaker. Yet, at the end of his talk, the audience nodded and agreed and vigorously nodded and 'hmmmed', as the presenter thanked the gentleman for sharing his story. In discussion after, the authors puzzled about how the response may have been if it was a non-Indigenous person, particularly a non-Indigenous Australian, or a non-Indigenous non-Australian, commenting on this dynamic; or how the same key themes of the day would have been received if presented by non-Indigenous academics. The separation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous was such a striking binary, and represented a reversal of the more traditional scene of non-Indigenous academics presenting to audiences of Indigenous. For example had the dialogue been from a non-Indigenous member of the audience, it is possible that there would be some engagement with points being made.

In another professional development workshop led by non-Indigenous Vocational Educational Training (VET), trainers on the creation of iPad movies at an academic conference in Darwin, one of the authors was a participant. The participants were given instruction and then sent out to create their own mini iMovie and present this back, individually, to the rest of the small group of participants. One by one the movies were presented and polite but still critical feedback was offered by both the trainers and the rest of the audience. Toward the end of the presentation session a group of Indigenous women who were students of the trainers and of some of the participants, attending the conference, arrived late. They were quickly encouraged to carry out the same exercise, given direct instruction from the trainers and some well-meaning participants, while the rest of the participants waited and watched. Once a very short movie was completed, by the women as an entire group, rather than as individuals, as had been the case for the rest of the participants, they presented their film, not speaking to it and the whole room applauded and nodded their heads and smiled. One white female academic gave a short speech, highly commending the women. None of the previous presentations received applause. When it came time for the feedback, only the trainers gave this and from the perspective of the author, it seemed similar to the tone of a primary school teacher speaking positively to a group of children about their work. The feedback was all positive, rather than critical, as had been the case for the other participants. The author was puzzled by this differential and somewhat patronising treatment by non-Indigenous Australians of the Indigenous women. It is examples like these that are noted regularly and puzzled upon, but never talked about or explored with the individuals involved, and certainly not in a room equally occupied by Indigenous Australians. Both examples illustrate an inequity in the way these relationships are enacted. In the first example there was deference to the speaker without recognition or inquiry about the value of his talk or an understanding of the point he was making. The ‘puzzlement’ in the second example could be interpreted as an overly accommodating or solicitous response to the late comers, negating opportunities for an equal exchange of ideas or critique.

How does Mills’ ‘personal troubles—public issues’ equate with “closing the gap policy?”

The “personal troubles” explored in these examples, suggest that “closing the gap policy” might require a rethinking and analysis of how historically embedded binary relationships of difference shape contemporary interactions in health and education settings. ‘Imagining’ a different kind of relationship as an approach to ‘closing the gap’ might be based on an understanding of interactions that are characterised by shared, equal negotiated relationships and mutual respect rather than perpetuating historically embedded binary relationships. ‘Closing the gap’ happens at the centre of policy development as well as at the margins. The examples described in this article address the ‘gap’ at the margins. We take the steps provided by the model to consider how practitioners can be positioned - professionally in the public narrative, as advocates of the policies within which we operate, but sometimes as challenging the ideological assumptions and values that inform policy; sometimes as feeling powerless to effect change through ‘closing the gap’ strategies, models and programs; and even at other times as ‘outsiders’ to the multiple policy contexts of ‘closing the gap’ in the Northern Territory.

The beauty of the triangle for the practitioner is that through the method of narrative and reflexivity – from personal to public, the starting point can be anywhere. Often, the only point we know to start from is that of individual experience. Often this is in the form of stories about professional puzzlement about what is going on around us and how this is somehow different than what we have experienced and worked in before.

Both authors work in the fields of education and health management and teaching, in the very complex Northern Territory ‘closing the gap’ environment. Both presenters have come recently to practising in this space, in many ways as ‘outsiders’. Both are puzzled by the playing out of cultural assumptions in policy and practice and the ‘gap’ that continues to exist between a collection of ‘closing the gap’ policy objectives and programs, and outcomes. It is through meeting in private spaces that the authors and others working in similar roles or similarly

complex environments identify these gaps and explore ways to make sense of the complexity and the ‘personal troubles’ often experienced, sometimes as individuals working in isolation, or feeling they are working in isolation.

There are a different stories about what ‘closing the gap’ means and for the authors as newcomers to the Australian health and education sector there is a need to make sense of what this means for our work environments. While seemingly similar to ‘closing the gaps’ policies from ‘home’, in our adopted environment there is much to cause anxiety and puzzlement as we attempt to make sense of what we see around us. Mills offers, “As a social scientist, you have to control this rather elaborate interplay, to capture what you experience and sort it out; only in this way can you hope to use it to guide and test your reflection, and in the process shape yourself as an intellectual craftsman” (1959, 196).

What connects the three lines of inquiry in the sociological imagination into a tool for change, are ‘explorations of contexts and discourses akin to those used in qualitative research and analysis’ (Van Heugten, Kelly, and Stanley 2013, 15). Reflexivity or research is one way of bringing these experiences and lines of inquiry together to create possibilities for different perspectives and outcomes. ‘Beyond this understanding, the sociological imagination, through qualitative research, may encourage the development of a more critical understanding of how definitions, perceptions, research and policy agendas’ (Van Heugten, Kelly, and Stanley 2013, 8), and suggested remedies for ‘Closing the Gap’ are constructed. Kowal and Paradies also identify the value of practitioner ethnography – by those living and working in the contradictions—for yielding insight (2005).

By contributing to counter narratives that challenge the dominant narratives in health and education practice environments, communities and in social policy, practitioners are encouraged to think more deeply about things they may have ordinarily taken for granted, such as the ideological notion that our daily practice is contributing to closing some literal or metaphorical ‘gap’, improving the lives of Indigenous Australians. Equally this encourages us to challenge our understandings around failure or at least to accept our puzzlement and at times frustration, when we may see ourselves as powerless in contributing to “closing the gap.”

The Mills triangle offers practitioners a way of understanding the structural and ideological embeddedness of these personal experiences, and the experiences of those we work “with,” “for” and “on.” It can be a leap for practitioners, often caught up in the day to day practice, “getting by,” to think about how the structural analysis provided by this model, can be used in a manageable and applied way to both help us “make sense” of our work and to consider our power to effect change and “close the gap.” How has history, power, individual experience, structure (economic, political, ideological, including binary definitions of culture) intersected to make this particular interpretation of an issue, such as a ‘gap’ and our combined effort to close it, at this particular time and what is my role as practitioner in this? And even further, why I am not feeling as if I am experiencing success?

Thus theory becomes method and practice and if carried further, the practitioner has the power through reflexive narrative to connect the individual practice experience to the sets of narratives at play in the construction of the practitioner’s own professional identity and the identity of other individuals experiencing similar situations. This ultimately can be very empowering for the practitioner.

The act of recording and sharing experiences can help practitioners who otherwise feel isolated, puzzled and at times frustrated, to begin to make links between their own practice experiences in an organisation or a community and the wider social policy context and wider structural inequalities within which their practice and the organisations they practice in, work.

For busy practitioners, it is recognised that pursuing qualitative analysis toward critical discussion may seem too time consuming, yet from the experiences of the authors, these conversations are often happening anyway, behind closed doors, in coffee rooms, around dinner tables; as a random collection of personal and professional ‘venting’. We argue that collecting

these experiences moves the repetitive and personalised patterns in the direction of deeper qualitative enquiry needed to enable more effective solutions to be found, to bridge the multiple gaps in the current Northern Territory health and education context.

Conclusion

The sociological imagination offers a rich and open mechanism for thinking about the issues of practise in environments such as the current ‘closing the gap’ policy and practice in health and education in the Northern Territory of Australia. As Stanley and Kelly argue, “if we are to advance debates about how these shifts and changes affect the vulnerable, the very least we will need is a sound sociological analysis of the issues” (2008, 16).

Mills’ “sociological imagination” provides both a theoretical and methodological framework for practitioners and policymakers working in this field, to think about and redefine the ‘problem’—“closing the gap” and practitioner positions and power in this, as something greater than the individual, while also “making sense” of the impact on the identities of individual practitioners working in these spaces, of reconciling the multiple narratives and experiences at play, including those of the “closing the gap” policy recipients—Indigenous Australian communities and individuals.

This model provides one toolkit to help practitioners. While the two authors are located in different public institutions in the Northern Territory, it is through sharing narratives about working in and around this shared space and similar spaces working in New Zealand, that Mills’ sociological imagination began to provide a methodological toolkit to reflect on shared experiences. The toolkit, already practised in other settings by one author, has greatly assisted in the ‘making sense’ of our work in these environments, and experiences.

The sociological imagination toolkit offers a method for widening the analysis of what is before us, and our own private conversations, to locate what can feel distressing and perhaps unclear, and trace these experiences to our place in an organisation, a community, a policy environment, a culture or wider social context. Narrativity is the tool through which this is achieved. Through connecting ‘personal troubles’ experienced as practitioners to the ‘public issues’ we work within, structural reform, informed by organisational experience, collective memory, and alternative discourses’ can happen and assist individual practitioners, organisations and policies. Through the sociological imagination and collective qualitative findings, what can be seen as isolated and personal experiences at work can be usefully worked to shift power for change. It is through qualitative analysis that the meanings individual practitioners bring to their experiences of operating within wider policy such as “Closing the Gap” can help to reveal what is working, what is not, and the contexts within which these processes occur, to contribute to wider reform. These contexts are also the products of particular economic, political, historical and cultural events and processes, and hence, Mills has a lot to offer a critical analysis of trends in addressing Indigenous disadvantage in health and education access in the Northern Territory, and the role and position of individual practitioners in this.

The agenda of closing the gaps may offer a framework for changing the national story by ensuring that change happens at the centre of policy development and as well as at the margins.

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Individuals ascribe meanings to their personae, or meanings are ascribed to them by others and through processes of social categorization. Sometimes these processes are classified as exclusionary, either on a person to person affective basis, or through systemic or structural exclusion, hence classifications such as racism, sexism. At other times, inclusive remedies are prescribed to the injustices of differences, including for instances equity, access, multiculturalism, tolerance and recognition. This journal explores the social, historical, cultural and psychological dynamics of identity.

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