

REMEMBERING OUR INDIGENOUS PAST:
Local talk as public opinion about Indigenous history

Kerry McCallum
School of Professional Communication
University of Canberra, Canberra, Australia

Abstract

May 2007 saw the 40th anniversary of the 1967 Referendum to remove from the Australian Constitution sections discriminating against Indigenous Australians. Publicity surrounding this event highlighted to news audiences the dramatic constitutional and policy shifts in the governance of Indigenous Australians and their relations with the non-Indigenous majority. Indigenous history remains a site of contested knowledge among historians and policy-makers, but also among members of the Australian public. This paper reports on a project that examined public opinion about Indigenous issues when it is understood as talk in local conversational terrains. Through their conversations, participants used 'local talk' of history as an important narrative theme to explain their understanding of Indigenous issues. They illustrated reflexivity about the ways issues such as the 'stolen generations' emerged onto the public agenda in media and political debate, and explained their understanding of the ways Indigenous history had been silenced and given voice in official Australian histories and in local dialogue. The paper argues that such fine-grained analyses of understandings of history in local talk can shed light on the development of Indigenous policy and explain why some historical issues resonate so strongly with contemporary news audiences.

Introduction

The phenomenon of public opinion is expressed in the present, but it is always informed by our understanding of the past; at times, public opinion concerns events or issues that occurred in the past. Nowhere is history more contested, or more the subject of contemporary public debate, than in the remembering of an Indigenous past. Debates about Indigenous history that were once the preserve of academic historians are now openly contested by political leaders and media commentators. In the late 1990s the question of the removal of Indigenous children from their parents was labelled the 'stolen generations' debate and fought on many planes in the Australian public sphere; more recently contests over the 'truth' about colonial invasion violence have been labelled the 'history wars' (Attwood 2005; Macintyre & Clark 2003). Even the 1967 referendum removing discriminatory sections of the Australian constitution has been framed and re-framed in the terms of current issues and debates. As Healy (2002, p. 126) says, we need, "...like a good historian, to understand the immediate and affective ways in which the cultural energy of remembering works in the present through history, myth, invention and magic".

This paper reports on a research project developed to better understand the shifting public discourses surrounding the relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Drawing on the theorizing of Herbst (1998; 2001), public opinion was conceptualised as a socially constructed phenomenon that could variously be understood as polled opinion, mediated discourse, mobilised opinion and ‘local talk’. While local talk has been the least conceptually developed construction, there is, nevertheless, a strong tradition in public opinion theory to understand public opinion this way (e.g. Tönnies 1971; Dewey 1946; Gamson 1992). My study was designed to understand how people in their local networks talked about the issues that were the subject of government policy, academic inquiry and media interest.

The study found that history was one of four narrative themes structuring local conversations about Indigenous issues. But how people talked about issues that had occurred in the past, and how they used the past to construct arguments and express opinions about contemporary issues, was complex. This paper briefly examines the key issues that have been the subject of public opinion about Indigenous history through mediated portrayals and polled opinion. It then describes the way I researched local talk about Indigenous issues, and the methods used to identify the narrative theme of history, before outlining ways history was used in conversation to discuss both past and contemporary Indigenous issues. Quotations are used to examine three broad competing narratives of History in local talk. These conversational narratives complement and shed light on contemporary mediated debates and academic discourses about Australian Indigenous history and historiography. For “...it is ultimately the dynamic tension between biography and history which stimulates the heartbeat of political narratives” (Andrews 2007, p. 209).

Contemporary mediated discourses

Reporting of Indigenous history by the mainstream media is driven by news values of conflict and reflects policy shifts and political debates. These acted as important

conversational resources for the people I interviewed for this study. Over the past ten years, four issues in particular have provided an important focus for public opinion about Indigenous history: the 1967 Referendum; the reconciliation movement, the ‘stolen generations’ debate and the ‘history wars’.

- In 1967 over 90 per cent of Australians – the highest number in favour of any referendum question – voted to amend two clauses of the Constitution that discriminated against Indigenous Australians. Media reporting of the Referendum on its 40th anniversary in May 2007 showed that while stories referring to the vote were framed within current debates about the ‘crisis’ in Indigenous society, it was nevertheless seen as exemplifying the historical moment that saw a dramatic shift in Australians’ awareness of Indigenous disadvantage and discrimination (See for example, *National Indigenous Times* 2007, ‘67: Special Commemorative Edition’, 31 May). Indeed, the 1967 Referendum continues to be portrayed as the high point of race relations in Australia (Kelly 2001; Lippmann 1994; c.f. Marr 2000; Attwood & Markus 2007).
- The Government program of reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians was prominent in media discourse throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. While the term itself was open to competing media and political framing over the 10 years (McCallum 2003), an important aspect was the principle of acknowledging and reconciling the violent nature of the colonisation of Australia and other discriminatory practices (PM&C 1991; Keating 1993).
- The release of the HREOC *Bringing Them Home* report in 1997 (HREOC 1997) sparked considerable public debate. Between 1997 and 2001, the ‘stolen generations’ or ‘sorry’ debate, regarding the need for an official Government apology to Indigenous Australians for child removal policies during the era of assimilation, can be seen as a dominant frame through

which the media interpreted most Indigenous issues, including reconciliation. The ‘stolen generations’ debate was also framed in terms of conflict between Indigenous leaders and government, and among non-Indigenous Australians. For example, images of Indigenous leaders turning their backs on the Prime Minister at the 1997 Reconciliation Convention framed Indigenous people as a source of conflict and provided an image of division that became the subject of public opinion polling.

- By 2002 a new debate concerning the truth about Indigenous history had gained widespread media exposure. The voice of Indigenous people was virtually absent from the debate, which centred on claims by the academic Keith Windschuttle (2000a; 2000b; 2003; 1994) that critical historical accounts about frontier conflict between Indigenous peoples and colonial settlers/invasors were inaccurate and ideologically driven (Macintyre & Clark 2003; Attwood 2005).

Researching polled opinion about Indigenous history

The potency of Indigenous history as an object of public opinion is demonstrated through mediated debates involving not only academic historians, but Prime Ministers, public intellectuals and community representatives. This paper does not attempt to dissect the complex relationships between historical debates, mediated debates, government policymaking and polled public opinion about Indigenous history (See Attwood 2005; Macintyre & Clark 2003; Mann 2001; Windschuttle 2000a). Rather, academic analyses of public opinion surveys about these key issues set the contextual boundaries for my discussion of local talk as a process of public opinion about Indigenous history.

Opinion about Indigenous history has been the subject of quantitative opinion surveys, or polls. Goot and Rowse (2007; 1991; Goot 1998) have analysed published polls about range of historical and contemporary Indigenous issues. They examined public opinion polling from the time of the 1967 Referendum

(Goot & Rowse 1991) and found that, rather than measuring a 'positive' shift in favour of Indigenous Australians, polls showed that mainstream Australians supported the referendum questions on the basis that they would help alleviate disadvantage. They conclude that the general support expressed for 'political assimilation' at the time of the referendum did not amount to expressions of opinion in support of specific policy outcomes (2007, p. 59). Marr (2000, p. S5) also said that survey findings from the time of the referendum showed that Australians supported the idea of 'equality' and that the polls show that there was resistance at the time to any rights for Indigenous people based on race. The polling of attitudes and opinion during the 1960s highlights the ambiguity and complexity of interpreting past public opinion through the technology of polling.

Between 1990 and 2001, the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (CAR) funded polling of public opinion about a range of issues pertinent to the reconciliation process. Goot and Rowse (2007) paint a picture of highly contested public opinion based on CAR's polling, with results open to contestation and responses highly sensitive to question wording. They note that there was a tendency to reduce attitudes towards reconciliation to views about whether the Prime Minister should apologise to the 'stolen generations' (p. 130). More significantly, opinion surveys were open to direct manipulation by political interests with the resultant skewed findings of public opposition to an apology inserted in media reporting and public debate (see also McCallum 2003). Goot and Rowse's analyses illustrate the limitations of quantitative polling for fully understanding public opinion about such a complex and controversial issue as Indigenous history. The study of local talk illustrates that, in their local conversations, Australians are not so ignorant and confused as polling would suggest, but they display reflexivity about the manufacture of public opinion by the media and political elites.

Studying public opinion as local talk about Indigenous history

Herbst (1998) argued that we should look beyond the hegemonic understanding of public opinion as the aggregation of polled individual opinion. She saw public

opinion as a socially constructed phenomenon whose meaning shifts over time and which can variously be understood as polled opinion, the opinions evident in mediated discourses, effective or mobilised opinion, or the opinions expressed by social groups in conversation. Understanding the content of media texts and the historical and contemporary policy environment governing Indigenous people are valuable for mapping public discourses about Indigenous issues, but methods that do not acknowledge media audiences can never fully explain public opinion about an issue. Conceptualising public opinion as local talk has been largely ignored in contemporary theorizations of public opinion, but has a long tradition in the study of public opinion (Tönnies 1971; Dewey 1946; Gamson 1992, 1996).

My research examined the particularised, contested nature of social group conversations about Indigenous issues, in order to better understand this important issue in Australian public debate and to extend public opinion theory. I designed a research project to capture ‘everyday’ conversations about a range of topical issues relating to Indigenous peoples and politics. I conducted over 50 individual and group interviews with some 116 participants across New South Wales (NSW) between October 2001 and May 2002. Unlike focus group research, I interviewed people from existing social groups in their own local settings. Interviews followed a life history approach, using a loose interview protocol. This method allowed participants to set the scene of their own experience of Indigenous issues and encouraged them to relay stories to explain their understanding. Towards the end of the interviews, both groups and individual participants were shown a series of ‘cues’ of mediated images of prominent contemporary debates. Interviews were recorded and analysed using grounded theory techniques. The study did not seek to quantify participants’ responses against particular variables, but to identify themes within the talk (McCallum 2005; see also Augoustinos, Tuffin & Rapley 1999). Participants talk was found to be structured around four broad narrative themes: identity; history, racism and responsibility.

Talking about Indigenous history

The history of relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians was a recurring and consistent theme across group conversations and in individual interviews. The following excerpts from the conversations I recorded for this project illustrate the complex nature of remembering Indigenous history through the lens of contemporary debates. Among older people, talk of history centred on their ignorance of Indigenous history and their growing awareness of history through mediated debates. Many older participants took the view that Indigenous people were invisible in Australian society when they were growing up, with many city people claiming never to have met an Indigenous person. Ron grew up in Western NSW in the 1940s and 1950s, in towns where there were almost certainly some Indigenous families living in town or on the fringes, but said:

There were no Aboriginal people [where I grew up in New South Wales], and I was taught no Aboriginal history at school, so I didn't know anything about them until I was much older. (Ron, older, Western NSW)

A number of older participants referred to childhood friendships with people they had known to be Indigenous, but they typically commented that they had very little awareness of what being Indigenous might mean, or how Government policies might have impacted on Indigenous lives. Older participants claimed to have been taught little if any Indigenous history at school, Indigenous issues were not topical in the media, nor were political issues relating to Indigenous policy discussed. The comments of one older participant help to explain how for non-Indigenous participants, issues seem to have 'appeared' in their lifetime.

It was a different context to today. There were no discussions about Aboriginals as an issue. There was no real reason, and no real desire, to talk about Aborigines, except in a so-called, joke-making context. It was not a live issue, because people weren't being threatened by them, they weren't competing for jobs, they weren't drinking in the hotels in Port Melbourne, I can tell you. It's of far more topical interest now, than it was in those days. (Eddie, Older, ACT)

In contrast to Eddie's reflexive comments acknowledging both presence and distance of Indigenous people in his past, a small number of participants had grown up in close contact with Indigenous people and this had typically led to strong childhood memories and a lifelong interest in Indigenous issues. A few relayed specific events in their lives that were the direct consequence of past policies or past treatment of Indigenous people. The following narrative was recorded from an interview with a group of women who had known one another for many years. Valerie told this story early in the interview when participants had been asked to explain their experience of Indigenous issues.

I have connections with Aboriginal people, because I have a half sister and brother, who were Aboriginal. My father had them before marrying my mother. They lived on the station he owned in the Northern Territory. The children were now my mother's responsibility so when he died she brought the girl back with us. The point is, it was rather sad, because it was never spoken of, and when we returned home after my father died, in the 1930s, my mother, who was a wonderful woman (.) never spoke of her (...) Whether it was a sign of the times ... so [quietly] we thought she was our maid. (Valerie, Group interview, older, ACT)

Valerie's story was certainly a disclosure of her past to her peer group, which established a collective frame for the group around the complexity of dealing with silence and shame about Indigenous issues of the past. This group's conversation illustrated their collective memory of an absence of Indigenous issues until the 1970s, but also their contested understanding of that absence and the gradual emergence of Indigenous issues on the public agenda over the past thirty years.

Saying Sorry and moving on in the narrative of progress

The absence and emergence of public discussion regarding past policies concerning Indigenous Australians has been addressed by a number of writers.¹ Reynolds (1999) used his own intellectual journey as a vehicle to trace the

¹ See Attwood (2005), Macintyre and Clark (2003), Goodall (2002), Haebich (2001), Manne (1998), McKenna (2002), Reynolds (1990; 1999), Rowley (1970) and Stanner (1968).

emergence of Indigenous issues into the Australian consciousness. Of particular concern to Reynolds was the public ignorance of frontier violence during Australian colonisation. Many of the participants in my study had taken a similar personal journey to the public one described by Reynolds to learn more about the history of Indigenous Australia that they felt had been hidden from them.

For me, for the white people, it [reconciliation] means getting the truth, and letting it get through, and seeing if, with the right information, we can go about changing attitudes and behaviours. But when the truth has not been told for years and years, many of us weren't aware of the truth in history. (Ron, older, Western NSW)

I think perhaps our conscience was touched by getting to know how badly Aboriginal society was suffering. Knowledge and awareness of the destruction of their society. (Doris, Older, ACT)

That journey to learn the truth in history was a complex one, for with the breaking of the silence about past Indigenous policies and actions – known as a ‘critical’ Indigenous history – came the wider discussion of Indigenous issues, and the questioning and rejection of the critical interpretation. Haebich (2001, p. 87) has said that the claim to have ‘not known’ is never completely innocent, a point which was not lost on many of my participants. Some expressed resentment that they had known so little about Australia’s past.

Int: *What about when you were at school, did you learn anything about Aboriginal issues?*

Mike: *Certainly for me, a few would have been mentioned, Kennedy and Jacky Jacky, and certainly they were just a sideline to the white explorer who got in the history book. But now as an adult, I can see how ridiculous explorers were. Burke and Wills, Aboriginals had lived for thousands of years in all those areas and they go up with how many horses, and/*

Marlene: *Died [laughs]/*

Mike: *Because they thought Aboriginals were stupid, or inferior beings, or weren't even human beings, yet they knew the country inside out. My attitude has changed in the past few decades.*

Int: *What brought that about?*

- Mike: *Probably research I was doing for genealogy. Reading about different things, massacres come to mind, Tasmania and the colonisation, and what happened to Aboriginals from Governor Phillip on/*
- Marlene: *The Myall massacre, Port Stephens (.) they wouldn't talk about it.*
(Group interview, middle-age, Western NSW)

Mike had learned about Aboriginal history through genealogy and Marlene refers to local oral history, but it was more typical for participants to describe their growing awareness of Indigenous issues as mediated ‘public’ issues—topics about which someone might express an opinion. Most participants who used the Progress narrative argued that Indigenous issues had never been the subject of immediate political involvement, but that exposure through the media and in public debate had led to awareness and concern. They were reflexive about the way an issue could move from being completely absent from the public agenda to becoming a topic available for public discussion—both through the media and in local talk.

I remember hearing about racial issues and thinking I had never met a ‘coloured’ person. It never occurred to me that I knew an Aboriginal person well. (Pauline, Group interview, family, ACT)

Pauline’s use of the word “coloured” reflected the changing language regarding race issues in Australia during the 1960s and 1970s, and suggests that the movement in support of equal rights for African Americans had increased interest in Australian Indigenous issues, in both public and local discourse. Her comment is supported by Curthoys’ (2002) study of the 1965 ‘Freedom Rides’, which detailed the influence of the American Civil Rights movement on young Australian activists to engage with and promote issues of Australian Indigenous discrimination and rights. Media coverage of events such as these during the 1960s helped to increase awareness of Indigenous issues in the public debate.

As Indigenous issues achieved greater media attention, a number of discrete issue frames emerged that focussed directly on historical or past events. Some participants remembered specific incidences when their awareness of Aboriginal issues grew. One older person had been taken to her a talk by ‘Nugget’ Coombes in the late 1960s. Another remembered the airing of a documentary profiling living conditions in Queensland fringe camps. The growing political importance of the Indigenous rights movement, made publicly available through television, was an important source of knowledge about Indigenous society. These remain potent collective memories in towns throughout Australia and important points of reference for expressing opinions about contemporary issues. The 1967 referendum was an important reference point for one group:

- Luke: *In the 1967 referendum, Bega was one of two areas, that actually voted no in the question for the referendum/*
- Belinda: *Bega has a fairly racist background ...*
(Group interview, middle-age, Far South Coast)

The Government program of reconciliation during the 1990s highlighted Indigenous history as an important site of political debate and public opinion. The emergence of the ‘stolen generations’ or ‘sorry’ news frame - whether the Prime Minister should apologise for past child removal policies – framed the discussion of participants who drew on a Progress narrative of history. Almost every participant who viewed a cue in the form of a newspaper image of the People’s Walk referred to the ‘stolen generations’ debate. The following discussion between a group of family members after viewing mediated images of the People’s Walk for reconciliation is typical of the complex understandings about public policy expressed in local talk about the ‘stolen generations’ issue.

- Pauline: *I didn’t go and I felt so guilty, I saw the marchers crossing the bridge/*
- Steven: *It made me realise more of what was going on, and to think about the injustices, afterwards. Other countries have given an apology without*

saying we're personally responsible. The Australian Government is financially responsible for the Aborigine...It's an acknowledgement that we as people who came to Australia after they came to Australia say they had a bad deal. When I talk about sorry I mean reconciliation.

(Group interview, family, ACT)

Pauline continues the narrative of regret about past treatment of Indigenous Australians to explain her support for the walk. Mickler (1998, p. 261) has argued that it was not until the early 1990s that public discourse came to associate past policies and current disadvantage “to grand political resolutions and historical reconciliation” (see also Keating 1993; Attwood 2005, p. 28; Manne 2001). Participants whose conversations told this story of Australian history argued that it was the responsibility of the current generation of Australians to make amends for the injustices perpetrated by past generations on the indigenous inhabitants of Australia.

But the following excerpts illustrate that saying sorry in the Progress narrative is something that will be done on the terms of non-Indigenous Australians, enabling them to move forward and away from the past (LeCouteur 2001, p. 150).

Valerie: *I just wished he'd say sorry and be done with it, and then we wouldn't have all this continuous going-on. He only had to say one word/*

Pat: *I'm sorry, I can't agree with that, because I am not prepared to say sorry for something I didn't do and had no part of. I regret that it occurred, but ...*

(Group interview, older, ACT)

Reconciliation for me is being able to get over what happened before and move forward together, and I don't think we've done that, because we haven't even talked about what happened before. We don't need to hear the stories, just acknowledge them. (Sonja, Middle-age, ACT)

Understanding the processes of Indigenous history was an important theme in the Progress narrative. The desire for closure of a difficult issue and progress towards a unified Australia underscored the talk of most participants who supported a formal apology. Sonja, above, typified the Progress narrative when she expressed the opinion that acknowledging past wrongs would enable the Australian population to progress past this time of conflict and division.

The re-writing of history in the Imperialist narrative

The Progress narrative of history was sharply contested by a number of participants in this study who adopted a narrative of settler imperialism to explain their understanding of Indigenous history. Older participants using an Imperialist narrative argued strongly that ‘life was better then’ partly because racial difference had been less marked. In the following conversation, Marg uses the word ‘fashionable’ as a conversational device to emphasise her belief that the focus on Indigenous issues had been constructed for political purposes. This exchange highlights the contentious nature of the emergence of Indigenous issues onto the public agenda.

- Marg: *But this was before Aboriginal Affairs was fashionable, they were just children/*
- Pat: *I taught a number of Aboriginal children early in my teaching career ... But you know, it really didn't make any impact, they were just there, there was nothing significant or different/*
- Marg: *There were no programs for anybody in those days/*
- Pat: *They were just part of the group, nothing stood out. There wasn't any clash/*
- Valerie: *People hid things in those days, it wasn't just if you were Aboriginal. I don't think anyone resented Aboriginal people if they went to work. I don't think there was any of that feeling. I think it is just in recent times/*
- Ann: *And society was generally a bit poorer, 40 years ago, and now the division has widened ...*
(Group interview, older, ACT)

A strong theme emerged among some older participants that history had been re-written to the disadvantage of the non-Indigenous majority. A group of older people from Canberra, some of whom had been post World War II migrants, developed a strong collective framing of history, arguing that it was pointless to dwell on past treatment of Indigenous people as European civilisation was ‘superior’ to the Indigenous culture and had ultimately benefited Indigenous people. The following conversation took place among the group after they had been shown the image of the People’s Walk.

- Adelaide: *I would have walked [in the People’s Walk] but my husband took me away. I thought it was important because the Aborigines probably felt we were expressing some sort of message. I wanted to, not because it would make me feel good, but it might make them feel a little bit better. And I signed the Sorry book/*
- Gunter: *There’s nothing wrong with the idea of reconciliation. It’s a gesture, I suppose. I would not sign the sorry book. I think there must have been murders, but many of those massacres didn’t take place, they are a myth. I do not believe that police ran out and shot hundreds of Aborigines/*
- Maria: *According to Mr Windschuttle! We went to hear Keith Windschuttle at the Press Club. According to Windschuttle, Threlkeld was always short of money and grossly inflated the numbers of the massacres.*
- Alan: *If you read the early history of Australia it is absolutely crystal clear that the government of the day, with orders from the colonial office, had strict orders to look after the Aborigines. There is a sketch from Maquarie’s time—if a white man kills an Aboriginal he’ll hang and vice versa. There was never any official policy. I’m sure there were murders, but if there were, I’m sure they were pursued and people were convicted/*
- Maria: *I would think there were probably massacres, because the settlers kept moving out, and things could have happened. I do read Keith Windshuttle in *Quadrant*, don’t worry (!)/*
- Gunter: *When children of Aboriginal mothers and white fathers were taken away, the plusses outweigh the*

minuses by a very great margin ... The Prime Minister shouldn't have said sorry because more good was done than bad.

(Group interview, older, ACT)

Although this interaction was initiated by Adelaide, who was deeply committed to Indigenous reconciliation, the group developed a strong narrative based around an oppositional reading of the Bridge Walk image. These participants engaged with the 'history wars' debate, rejecting the critical view of Indigenous history that had influenced the Progress narrative. They demonstrated the most extreme rejection of revisionist Indigenous history and the strongest denial of invasion violence found among the talk of participants in the study. Alan expressed an unwavering faith in the truth of 'official' history and rejected that this might be revised or contested, appearing to concur with Blainey that:

Although there are occasional 'blemishes' in Australia's history, particularly in its treatment of Aboriginal people, by and large the Australian story is a story of historic achievement in the face of extraordinary odds. (McKenna 2002, p. 31).

McKenna (2003, p. 383) noted that former Prime Minister Howard also rejected the "black-armband" view of Australian history in favour of a slightly "blemished" narrative of "heroic achievement". The most influential and strident of the 'dissident historians' is not an historian but a former media studies scholar, Keith Windschuttle (Attwood, 2005, p. 65). He lamented "... how deeply the notion that Australian society was founded on deadly violence against Aborigines has penetrated the mentality of those who shape popular opinion" (Windschuttle 2000b, p. 8; see also (see McGuinness 2000).

Maria: *It was when this lost generation was becoming popular/*

Adelaide: *Stolen!*

Maria: *So-called(!) stolen generation. This woman on the radio said she had wonderful memories of the mission—we slept under the roof and we were dry. To think about it, to live in a gunya ...*

(Group interview, older, ACT)

Illustrating a detailed knowledge of the public debates surrounding the ‘stolen generations’ issue, Maria blamed Indigenous practices and traditions for making the removal of part-Indigenous children from their parents the inevitable course of action for white authorities. Through her language she denigrated the media-framed ‘stolen generations’ debate and emphasised the contested nature of the claims that Indigenous people had been devastated by the Government policy of child removal. Throughout the interview, these participants argued strongly that Indigenous people had benefited from assimilationist policies. It could be argued that such views held by older people were the result of opinions established in the 1950s and 1960s. As Doris explained:

At that stage [in the 30s and 40s when the policy was implemented] it was very much the current feeling that the Aborigines were a dying race and we had to save them ... As students, we discussed the taking of children from their parents and felt that it was a government initiative that was very much kept from us. But it appeared justifiable, when you saw the pictures of the children entering the missions ... (Doris, older, ACT)

Doris, who was deeply committed to a number of Indigenous rights causes, was reflexive about the way understanding of historical events and processes could change over time. While she herself had adopted a more critical view of the process of assimilation, she was aware of the argument that assimilation had been justified and necessary because earlier policies of protection had shattered Aboriginal societies and had left “stranded individuals, bereft of social support or cultural integrity” (Hasluck, cited in McGregor 2002, p. 43; see also Meagher 2000). The perspective expressed by Maria was not merely a reaction to an academic argument, however, but was strongly grounded in the personal experience of members of the group who migrated to Australia following World War II. These participants strongly supported the policies of assimilation of *both* migrant and Indigenous Australians. Many Australians remain firmly wedded to the concept of a single Australian identity based on the dominant British culture.

The way history is represented is an important aspect of the progression towards that goal.

Unlike most older participants, who exhibited detailed historical knowledge, younger participants most commonly used contemporary media frames as resources to explain their understanding of complex historical issues. The following exchange between youth in Dubbo demonstrated the strength of the ‘stolen generations’ issue to frame understanding of both Indigenous history.

- Shauna: *Because we've talked about the Stolen Generation, they hold a grudge because of what we did to them, but we hold a grudge because of what they did to us, so/*
- Alex: *I think it's wrong that they keep asking Johnny Howard to say sorry (yeah) because it's not John Howard's fault/*
- Janine: *There's rules everyone should follow, and/*
- Alex: *It shouldn't be split up, it should be for everyone*
- ...
- (Group interview, youth, Western NSW)

For the youth living in small regional towns who were interviewed for this study, knowledge of the past had little bearing on their construction of the local Indigenous people as a ‘dangerous other’. While they claimed to have been taught about Indigenous history, including the removal of Indigenous children from their parents, they did not accept the impacts this might have on their Indigenous peers. Several groups rejected the concept that the colonisation of the Indigenous culture might have placed contemporary non-Indigenous Australians in a position of power, focussing rather on current, everyday, racial conflict, and justifying their opposition to reconciliation and other government policies. They argued that non-Indigenous people did not need to take responsibility or apologise for past practices against Indigenous people because Indigenous people already get ‘special privileges’ from the government.

These personal stories explained participants' understanding of the complex issue of the past policy of child removal, and together constructed the Imperialist narrative. Through the media's narrow frame of the 'stolen generations', participants were able to explain that they did not accept that Australia's history had had long-term negative consequences for Indigenous Australians. Some argued strongly that the policies of child removal had, in the long run, been beneficial to Indigenous Australians. Drawing upon an Imperialist narrative, they concluded that 'dwelling on the past' would not help alleviate current disadvantage and would only accentuate contemporary problems of racial division.

The Struggle continues – a marginalised narrative

The final narrative of Indigenous history contrasts starkly with the narratives of both Progress and Imperialism. The Struggle narrative, used by only a small minority of participants, focussed on the lasting consequences of the colonisation of Australia and policies such as assimilation and the removal of children from their parents. Most participants agreed that it was negative to dwell on history. Instead of arguing that non-Indigenous Australia needed to apologise in order to progress towards more unified society, those drawing upon a Struggle narrative focussed on the need for a more permanent recognition of past injustices. Some called for compensation and the need for Australia to 'pay the rent'. Historians, anthropologists and public intellectuals have recognised the relationship between past policies and current disadvantage (Mickler 1998). For these people, past injustices such as invasion violence, the taking of land and forced removal of children from their parents had had permanent consequences for both the indigenous and the non-Indigenous population. In a United States' context, Streich (2002, p. 525) drew on the work of Elazar Barken to argue that forgetting historical injustices was 'unnecessary, impossible and politically problematic' (See also Haebich 2001; 2002).

A small minority of participants in this study, mostly activists for Indigenous causes, expressed the view that the struggle for recognition of past wrongs was far

from over. For example, Wesley gave an oppositional reading of the text when he was shown the newspaper image of the People's Walk.

To be honest with you, I don't believe in reconciliation. Reconciliation is coming back together and we were never together. Our country was settled on war, and it still continues to operate on conflict. (Wesley, Middle-age, Western NSW)

Wesley's view stood in stark contrast with the way the government program of reconciliation was understood by most other participants. He expressed a marginalised discourse in the local talk of Australians about Indigenous issues (Mudrooroo 1998).

Conclusions - reflexivity about public opinion and historical process

Through the telling of stories and dialogue with peers, my participants' illustrated the multiple and conflicting narratives of history that operate in local talk. This paper has illustrated some of the relationships between the broad narratives evident when people in their local social settings talk about history, and the narrower mediated frames such as the 'history wars' and 'stolen generations'. Participants drew on personal experience, local talk and mediated frames to develop their understandings of Indigenous Australian history. Indigenous history is a public issue that was understood through personal experience for only a few participants. Historical literature, political or elite discourses and media debates were all important capital used in the history narratives of local talk. Elite discourses acted as conversational resources that framed the way participants talked about public issues in their local social networks. Local talk about history is, nevertheless, epistemologically distinct from academic or political discourses and media frames.

Historians of Indigenous history have been greatly pre-occupied with the impacts of the narrow framing of mediated debates on the discussion of complex historical matters. In particular, they have been concerned about the way the 'history wars'

debate was played out in through the public media. As Attwood, (2005, p. 51) explained, “The growing popularity of Aboriginal history...drew it increasingly into the public sphere where it became a public history – a history which is produced and consumed, used and abused in an array of public contexts”. Goodall (2002, p. 17) warned that the narrow media framing of Indigenous issues forced complex narratives into narrow debates in public adversarial conditions. She said that this was detrimental to the sharing of histories, and was most likely to close down discussion of competing interpretations of history, pushing different parties further into opposing corners of simplistic polemic.

But the public debate has not been the discoverer of these fully formed histories. Instead, it has shaped and largely created them. The polarization of these histories is the product of the politicized public forums in which they are deployed. The adversarial nature of the political struggle has transformed what were complex personal and collective memories into simple polemics (Goodall 2002, p. 13).

Macintyre and Clark (2003, p. 12) said historians were ill-prepared for the polemic style of the media: “As the History Wars developed, they became the staple fare of tabloid media and talk-back radio, but they also found a ready outlet in the quality press”.

But the concerns of academic historians are somewhat over-emphasised when one considers the process of public opinion when it is understood as local talk. Analysing the broader narratives embedded in local talk is vital to understanding everyday ‘lay’ knowledge about the history of race relations in Australia. My study shows that while participants used elite discourses and media frames as resources for their conversations, they also showed a reflexive understanding of the way issues were discussed by political elites and the way the media framed those issues. Several participants openly observed that the ‘stolen generations’ debate had been framed by the media, and that calls for an apology, while an important part of the response to the Bringing it home report, clouded many important issues.

The following conversation between a particularly self-critical group illustrates that the way younger people approach the study of history differs vastly from the way older participants understand history as a ‘true’ record of the past.

- Lisa: *You learn about stuff from talking to other people, and from the news, and all that sort of stuff. You probably learn more about it at home than you do at school. At school it’s just/*
- Brad: *Facts/*
- Lisa: *At home you can have opinions ...*
- Leo: *You have to make your own opinions about what happened/*
- Lisa: *At school, they don’t teach Koori stuff as though it’s an opinion, they teach it as fact/*
- Brad: *History’s the wrong word for what we learn/*
- Rachael: *History’s just an opinion.*
(Group interview, youth, Far South Coast)

Goodall (2002, p. 10) found that some of her respondents also recognised that “... histories are not sequences of stable facts which can be added and subtracted to reach the unarguable truth, but are instead interpretive narratives”. Macintyre and Clark (2003, p. 16) also said that “Australians do not regard history as a form of inaccessible knowledge, nor do they see it as the preserve of experts”.

Most significantly, analysis of participants’ talk of history illustrates reflexivity about the development of public issues. Through their talk, participants argued that Indigenous history had only become a topic of public opinion in recent years, and that in their youth they simply had no knowledge of Indigenous issues about which to have opinions. Participants’ understandings of their own life experiences changed as they looked back over time and relayed memories from their past. Some who said they had no experience of Indigenous people in their youth developed a memory based on the new knowledge they had gained. Participants illustrated reflexivity about public opinion processes, as they described the way Indigenous issues had evolved from non-existent in their consciousness to becoming a matter of wide public discussion. They referred to the development of public concern about Indigenous issues broadly, and the subsequent development

of discrete ‘Indigenous issues’ that became the subject of public opinion. Participants were reflexively aware that the ‘stolen generations’ debate and the History Wars were two issues that could not have been discussed without Indigenous issues becoming more prominent in public discourse. They also acknowledged the sponsorship of particular frames by political leaders and prominent public spokespeople.

Participants in this study drew on broadly contested narratives to express their understanding of Indigenous history and its significance to the discussion of contemporary Indigenous issues. Based on their study of polled opinion, Goot and Rowse (2007, p. 154) said that “for most Australians the past...is of no significance when thinking about what policies would be best for Indigenous Australians now and in the future”. My study of public opinion, based in conversational narratives, does not accord with their conclusion. It finds that while many people wished for the resolution of racial division and some were reluctant to acknowledge the significance of history, most were able to not only appreciate but articulate their understanding of the relationships between past policies and current divisive issues. The conclusion drawn by Goot and Rowse suggests more about the method of ‘knowing’ public opinion – through polls that can only access one opinion at a time, often in response to media framed issues – than it says about the ability of Australians to explain their understanding of the relationship between past and present. Participants in this study gave complex readings of Indigenous history, drawing on all available resources – academic debate, political discourses, fictionalised accounts and mediated issue frames. The fine-grained analysis of understandings of history in local talk can shed light on the development of Indigenous policy and explain why some historical issues resonate so strongly with contemporary news audiences.

References

- Andrews, M. (2007). *Shaping history: narratives of political change*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Attwood, B. (2005). *Telling the truth about Aboriginal history*, Sydney. Allen & Unwin.
- Attwood, B & Markus, A. (2007). *The 1967 referendum: race, power and the Australian Constitution*, Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press.
- Augoustinos, M., Tuffin, K. & Rapley, M. (1999). 'Genocide or a failure to gel? Racism, history and nationalism in Australian talk', *Discourse and Society*, vol. 10, no. 3, pp. 351–378.
- Curthoys, A. (2002). *Freedom ride: a freedom rider remembers*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
- Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C) (1991). *Aboriginal reconciliation: an historical perspective* (<http://www.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/displ/au/other/IndigLRes/1991/2/5/.html>, accessed on 1 April 2003).
- Dewey, J. (1946). *The public and its problems*, Chicago: Gateway.
- Gamson, W. A. (1992). *Talking politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gamson, W. A. (1996). 'Media discourse as a framing resource' in Crigler, A.N. (ed), *The psychology of political communication*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, pp. 111–132.
- Goodall, H. (2002). 'Too early yet or not soon enough? Reflections on sharing histories as process', *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 118, pp. 8–24.
- Goot, M. (1998). 'Australia's 'Stolen Children': which poll would a poll-following Prime Minister have followed?', *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, vol. 10, no. 4, pp. 349–361.
- Goot, M. & T. Rowse (1991). 'The 'backlash' hypothesis and the land rights option', *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, vol. 1, pp. 3–12.
- Goot, M. & Rowse, T. (2007). *Divided Nation? Indigenous affairs and the imagined public*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press.
- Haebich, A. (2001). 'Between knowing and not knowing', *Aboriginal History* 25, pp. 70 – 90
- Haebich, A. (2002). 'Imagining assimilation', *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 118, pp. 61–70.
- Healy, C. (2002). 'History, culture and media magic', *Australian Historical Studies* 118, pp. 121-126
- Herbst, S. (1998). *Reading public opinion: how political actors view the democratic process*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Herbst, S. (2001). 'Public opinion infrastructures: meanings, measures, media', *Political Communication*, vol. 18, pp. 451–464.
- Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission 1997, *Bringing them home: report of the national inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families*, Canberra.
- Keating, P. (1993). 'Australian launch of the international year of the world's indigenous people, Redfern, 10 December 1992' in Australian Labor Party, *Major speeches of the first year*, Barton, pp. 209–13.
- Kelly, P. (2001). 'Unfinished business' in Masters, D. & S. Spencer (ed.), *100 years: the Australian story*, video recording, Sydney: ABC.
- LeCouteur, A. (2001). 'On saying sorry: repertoires of apology to Australia's stolen generations' in McHoul, A. & M. Rapley (eds), *How to analyse talk in institutional settings: a casebook of methods*, London: Continuum, pp. 146–158.
- Lippmann, L. (1994). *Generations of resistance: Mabo and justice*, Melbourne: Addison Wesley Longman.
- Macintyre, S. & Clark, A. (2003), *The history wars*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press.
- Manne, R. (1998). 'The stolen generations', *Quadrant*, Jan–Feb, pp. 53–63.
- Manne, R. (2001). 'In denial: the stolen generations and the right', *Quarterly Essay*, vol. 1, pp. 1–113.
- Marr, D. (2000). 'Betrayal', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 May, pp. S1–5.
- McCallum, K. (2003) 'Walking and talking reconciliation: an analysis of the role of local talk as a construction of public opinion on Indigenous issues in Australia', *Australian Journal of Communication*, vol. 30, no. 2, pp. 115–132.
- McCallum, K. (2005). 'Local talk as a construction of public opinion on Indigenous issues in Australia, unpublished PhD thesis, Canberra: University of Canberra.
- McGregor, R. (2002). 'Assimilationists contest assimilation: T.G.H. Strehlow and A.P. Elkin on aboriginal policy', *Journal of Australian Studies*, Sep, pp. 43–54.
- McGuinness, P. P. (2000). 'Aborigines, massacres and stolen children', *Quadrant* Nov, pp. 2–4.
- McKenna, M. (2002). *Looking for blackfella's point*, Sydney: UNSW Press.
- Meagher, D. (2000). 'Not guilty', *Quadrant*, Nov, pp. 26–34.
- Mickler, S. (1998). *The myth of privilege: Aboriginal status, media visions, public ideas*, South Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press.

- Mudrooroo (1995). *Us mob: history, culture, struggle, an introduction to Indigenous culture*, Sydney: Angus & Robertson.
- Reynolds, H. (1990). *The other side of the frontier: Aboriginal resistance to the European invasion of Australia*, Ringwood: Penguin.
- Reynolds, H. (1999). *Why weren't we told? A personal search for the truth about our history*, Ringwood: Penguin.
- Rowley, C. D. (1970). *The Destruction of Aboriginal Society*, Ringwood: Penguin.
- Stanner, W. (1968). After the dreaming, The 1968 Boyer Lectures, Sydney.
- Streich, G. W. (2002). 'Is there a right to forget? Historical injustices, race, memory, and identity', *New Political Science* vol. 24, no. 4, pp. 525–541.
- Tönnies, F. (1971). 'The power and value of public opinion' in Cahnman, W. J & R. Herberle (eds), *Ferdinand Tönnies, on sociology: pure, applied and empirical*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 251–265.
- Windschuttle, K. (1994). *The killing of history: how literary critics and social theorists are murdering our past*, Sydney: Macleay.
- Windschuttle, K. (2000a). 'The break-up of Australia', *Quadrant*, Sep, pp. 8–16.
- Windschuttle, K. (2000b). 'The myths of frontier massacres in Australian history, part 1: the invention of massacre stories', *Quadrant*, Oct, pp. 8–21.
- Windschuttle, K. (2003). 'The fabrication of Aboriginal history'. *The Sydney Papers*, Summer, pp. 21–29.