

# Managing Social Housing for Indigenous Populations

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## Abstract

This paper provides a conceptual framework for understanding why and how indigenous cultures require culturally specific management practices in social housing, using Australian Aboriginals to illustrate the ideas. The framework is adapted from the field of intercultural management and is used to reveal how social housing provision and management for Australia's indigenous population has largely failed to provide culturally appropriate solutions.

## 1. Introduction

Indigenous housing is a neglected area of research and analysis in most countries. The reasons for this are in some respects symbolic of the broader problems which indigenous populations confront within their societies, including their smallish numbers relative to the total populations, the invisibility of their problems (including housing problems) to mainstream populations and policy-making elites, and the lack of spokespersons or key influentials within their own communities to research, document and articulate their needs and problems (including housing) in a way which resonates with the wider society.

The objective of this paper is to provide a conceptual framework for understanding why and how indigenous cultures require culturally specific management practices in social housing, using Australian Aboriginals to illustrate the ideas. The framework is adapted from the field of intercultural management – an area conventionally associated with the corporate sector and mainstream populations, not with indigenous populations. However, before looking at this field of analysis, a brief discussion of indigenous populations and specifically Australian Aboriginals is required.

For the purpose of this paper, indigenous populations are those which are seen as the native population of a country or region **and** who maintain a contemporary culture which relates directly to their traditional culture. Thus contemporary Irish, Scots or Welsh, while many are still Celtic in origin, cannot be considered indigenous or native populations, as there remains little in their culture that is traditional. Native Americans in the United States, First Nations people and Ainu in Canada, Aboriginals in Australia, Maori in New Zealand and many tribal groups in Africa and Asia are indigenous both because of long established residency in their countries or regions and of continuing strong lineage of traditional cultures associated with that country or region. This definition does not require or suggest that such native populations were the original occupants of these countries or regions. Such has been the fluidity of migration over the centuries that it is not easy to identify the original occupants. It is, however, possible to identify those that have long established occupancy and who identify with a country, region or land through specific cultural practices. Thus Maori may not have been the

original occupants of New Zealand (they probably displaced some earlier group), but their occupancy precedes white colonisation by hundreds of years and their culture relates specifically to the attributes of New Zealand as a geographic area in a way that it has done for hundreds of years, that is, it derives directly from a spiritual relationship to the land and surrounding sea. The term 'indigenous' is used in this paper rather than 'native' because that, too, has cultural connotations. In Australia, and New Zealand, 'indigenous' is now the accepted term, as 'native' is seen to have overtones of colonialism and connotations of the 'primitive native'.

Around 450,000 Aboriginal people live in Australia (population 20 million); only 30 per cent live in major urban centres, compared to 70 per cent of all Australians. A substantial minority live in remote settlements in semi-desert environments. Australian Aboriginals face the most severe housing problems and the most adverse housing conditions of any group in Australia; housing conditions in remote areas are very substandard, although there have been improvements in recent years (Neutze 2000, pp. 486 ff.). They also have higher rates of poverty, unemployment, health care problems and alcoholism than the general population (Taylor 1994a, 1994b, 1994c; Neutze 2000).

Nationally, social housing (not-for-profit housing managed by government or community organisations) is around 5.5 per cent of all stock. As a result of severe social problems and housing need, Aboriginals are over-represented in such housing. Government housing accounts for 19 per cent of the Aboriginal population, and Aboriginal community managed housing funded by government accounts for another 13 per cent (Minnery, Manicaros and Lindfield 2000).

## 2. The Intercultural Management Model

This brief context provides the setting for introducing the framework of intercultural management. The intercultural management literature has emerged in the last twenty years or so to help firms deal with the difference in cultures of their customers and staff. Any social group will create a set of values, attitudes and beliefs which shape their behaviours and expectations. How, then, can we understand cultural difference? The solution is to try and distil some broad value attributes that coexist across all groups and attempt to categorise where any individual culture or group sits with respect to these values. Hofstede (1994, 2001) wove this into a framework for understanding cultural difference. On the basis of a survey of IBM workers around the world, he categorised a country's culture by where it was located on four core dimensions:

- Power/distance;
- Masculinity/femininity;
- Uncertainty avoidance;
- Communitarian/individualistic.

**Power/distance** refers to the degree to which people accept unequal and authoritarian power or the degree to which they believe in a more even distribution of power and more democratic power relations. Thus the scale of potential values would be:

*Very authoritarian/hierarchical.....Democratic/dispersed power.*

Countries with a long tradition of a hierarchical class based society with powerful centralised governments would be to the left side of the scale. Those with a tradition of a less hierarchical and less class based society, and with a dispersed (for example, federal) form of government and a more participative and democratic political process, would be to the right side. Indigenous societies whose processes of decision making are ones of consensus through debate within the clan, such as Australian Aboriginals, would also be to the right side of the scale.

**Masculinity/femininity** refers to the degree to which a culture may be seen as patriarchal, tough, aggressive and placing value on defined gender roles and on the exercise of power. In situations of conflict or management, the emphasis is on arguing it out or fighting. The alternative is a group or society that places value on gentleness, tolerance and interchangeable gender roles, and on negotiation and consultation. The scale would be:

*Masculine*.....*Feminine*.

Countries (the minority) which emphasise the feminine are those where industry emerged in such a way as to give greater importance to women or where survival required cooperation between men and women. Hofstede's (2001) research suggests that the Scandinavian countries and a few South American countries are the only ones to the right of the scale, although not all are to the extreme left of the scale. Indigenous populations are less easy to locate as they often have very defined gender attributes and can be aggressive and traditionally warlike, for example, Maori, but they can also be gentle and consultative, for example, Australian Aboriginals.

**Uncertainty avoidance** is about the degree to which a society or group can tolerate unfamiliarity, uncertainty and social change. There are societies that avoid these by structuring a set of rules and beliefs. These high uncertainty avoidance countries become rule and regulatory bound and will express high levels of anxiety when faced with change or anything that threatens what they are used to. Countries without long traditions and rules and procedures that have emerged over hundreds of years tend to be low in uncertainty avoidance. High uncertainty avoidance countries include those with a strong adherence to religion and with a dependence on formal rules and administrative practices of governments. Low uncertainty avoidance countries include Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, Hong Kong and the Scandinavian countries, while high uncertainty avoidance countries are Japan, China and much of the rest of Asia, the Middle East and Mediterranean countries. The scale here would be:

*Highly risk or change averse*.....*Tolerant of change*.

Finally, **communitarian/individualistic** trade-offs are about whether a society emphasises cooperation towards common goals, group loyalty, teamwork and social wellbeing, or individualistic behaviours such as competition, self-help and wealth maximisation. Individualistic societies believe in smaller government, self-help, free markets and open competition. Communitarian societies place greater value upon extended family and obligations to society or the group rather than the individual, and tend to be more accepting of a larger role for government, more tolerant of those who are less well-off, much more willing to work collectively towards common goals, and value things less in term of money than other intrinsic values, for example, the public good or wellbeing. The continuum here would be:

*Individualistic*.....*Communitarian*.

By virtue of basic survival needs and a traditional existence in non-marketised societies, virtually all indigenous societies are very much to the communitarian side of the scale.

While these appear to be a comprehensive set of human value dimensions which would transcend any society or culture, Hofstede's analysis is driven first by understanding the difference in values and behaviours between cultures as they shape business and consumer behaviour and second by a concern with broad cultural aggregates, for example, British versus Chinese, rather than differences within cultural aggregates. It is perhaps for these reasons that it appears to neglect one other important dimension, which we might call **environmental connectivity**, that is, the degree to which a society or culture is grounded in a relationship to its physical environment. In the tradition of Hofstede's analysis, I would posit this as another important defining element of culture. This can be illustrated by societies such as the United States and Australia where most people have little connectivity to the physical environment, other than as a backdrop to their daily lives or an encumbrance to be overcome by the application of technology (such as the motor vehicle, air conditioning or the contemporary home which pays no heed to issues of orientation to the sun, use of landscape, shade, surface run-off, retention of natural vegetation or use of local materials). On the other hand there are societies, for example, Japan, and certainly subcultures within societies, including most indigenous populations, whose lifestyle decisions and belief systems incorporate elements of or reverence for the natural environment and therefore have higher environmental connectivity. The scale here would be:

*High environmental connectivity.....Low environmental connectivity.*

Hofstede's categorisation, with modifications (including the above), can also be used as a way of understanding different cultural values and needs within a country as much as between countries, and hence its adaptation here for indigenous cultures resident within the mainstream culture of their respective countries. It is important to point out that there is no necessary connection of dimensions, that is, countries and cultures do not consistently line up along left or right hand sides of the value dimensions. However, it is also important to recognise that the value dimensions do not operate independently; particular behaviours or values of a cultural group may flow from a relationship between two or more of the dimensions. The next section uses Hofstede's modified intercultural management model to analyse some of the issues and problems of indigenous housing management in Australia.<sup>1</sup>

### **3. Environmental Connectivity and Aboriginal Housing Management**

Whereas issues of land ownership (other than those of private property rights) are largely irrelevant for most housing needs groups, they can be very important for indigenous populations. Before white settlement, Australian Aboriginals had a close spiritual relationship to the land and sea and managed a harsh and unyielding environment in an environmentally and socially sustainable way. However, the white colonialists did not recognise any indigenous land ownership or land management practices, and progressively occupied their lands from the nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. The Aboriginal population were largely confined to designated reserves, missions and stations, with their lives and housing conditions controlled by non-indigenous managers.

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<sup>1</sup> The ideas in this paper may be self-evident to any indigenous population; however, the paper emerges out of the need to provide intercultural teaching material for Australian social housing workers.

These were on the most marginal lands and in the most remote places within each of the states and territories. Housing was non-traditional (white man's houses) and often substandard, although rent was rarely charged. This long period of segregation and control not only undermined traditional Aboriginal culture in terms of housing and relationship to the land, but also exposed many Aboriginal people to some of Western culture's less attractive behaviours and practices, including the consumption of alcohol, to which disproportionate numbers became addicted, and to diseases that had previously been unknown among them (White 1977; Office of Housing Policy 1995).

In the mid-twentieth century there was a period of assimilation whereby the controls over Aboriginal people were relaxed and they were freed from their locational and housing constraints. Without skills, many could not find employment and therefore did not have the income to afford adequate private rental or ownership, hence many applied for government housing. However, as only minimal levels of funding were provided for state Aboriginal housing, many people who moved off the reserves were forced to seek inadequate and inappropriate housing in the private market. Typical locations were the then run-down areas of inner cities, and the cheapest housing in non-metropolitan cities and towns. Others provided their own solution by building shacks and shantytowns on unutilised land around country towns, normally without any services. Little of this housing was of a form consistent with cultural needs or which enabled expression of their close spiritual connectivity to the land (White 1977; Office of Housing Policy 1995).

In the 1970s an era of **self-determination** began and is still evolving today. Initiated by the federal Whitlam Labor government (1972-75) and supported by subsequent governments, these years saw the allocation of funds for the Aboriginal community to manage their own housing, as well as increased funds for government housing agencies to expand housing for indigenous populations. There were differences in the degree and pace at which states and territories supported these federal government initiatives but, broadly speaking, by the 1990s the Aboriginal community was moving towards self-determination in housing (National Housing Strategy 1992). However, given that the previous hundred years had provided no experience in self-management or provision of land to construct culturally appropriate housing, it was not surprising that there have been management mistakes and abuses within both government housing and the Aboriginal community housing sector. Australia and its indigenous population are still in a very early learning stage of how to provide and manage housing which is consistent with the cultural needs of Aboriginals but which recognises the damage caused by having disconnected them from the land and having created an economic and social mire from which it is difficult to escape.

#### **4. Indigenous Housing Management in Communitarian and Individualistic Societies**

A traditional communitarian society is made up of a relatively closed group composed of known others, with outsiders not easily accepted into it. Thus the extended family is extremely important with the Aboriginal 'clan', or embracing kin connections, which in Western cultures are tenuous but which have real meaning in Aboriginal culture. The extended family unit consists of not only parents and children but also brothers and sisters, grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins and other relatives, and is the building block of society. The clan or network of family affiliations in most indigenous societies provides a sense of identity and comprises a web of responsibilities and obligations

encompassing economic and housing support for members. By contrast, individualistic societies have no strong sense of identity and belonging beyond the immediate family. Even cousins are a relatively distant part of family.

Kinship or clan is an important (for many Aboriginals, the most important) organising principle of the group. In an individualistic society, social organisation is established partly around the nuclear family but is complemented by formal organisations such as the workplace or school. The concept of the nuclear family meshes nicely with that of the individual dwelling and 'home' (the haven for the family), but the extended family cuts across this, with 'home' being the campsite or cluster of buildings rather than any individual dwelling. The importance of clan as an organising principle highlights the point that Aboriginal culture cannot be seen as uniform and homogenous. While sharing broad principles of cultural identity, there are differences by clan, which are often a source of tension or conflict.

Recognition of the communitarian culture suggests housing practices and policies consistent with this, and communitarian values and needs can be a major problem of social housing management in societies where the dominant values (including those related to housing) are individualistic. In Australia there has been a long history of failure to design and provide housing for indigenous populations that recognises their communitarian values, with most housing provided being conventional mainstream stock. While this problem has received greater recognition in recent years and more new housing is being designed consistent with communitarian principles, it is still problematic. Such principles include:

- Where possible, housing should be grouped in low density environments in a way which allows for communal gatherings, gardens and play space, rather than single detached dwellings on their own allotment or block;
- Where they are developed as single sites, it is best to do so in an arrangement that creates a sense of community;
- Dwellings should allow for flexible use, including large bedrooms that can cope with higher occupancies when required or common rooms that can be used for both living and sleeping purposes;
- Design should recognise the importance of outdoor areas including carports, as these are important for social occasions, for example, family or clan gatherings, and their use relieves pressure on internal areas;
- Facilities such as toilets and stoves should be of commercial rather than residential quality, as intensive use by large numbers (a house may be occupied by a dozen or more people rather than a small family unit) means premature wear and high asset management costs.

Other key considerations are appropriate spaces for younger and older children, outdoor food preparation and cooking, and provision for additional sleep-out wings. The difficulty for social housing agencies is how to provide such stock, particularly in urban areas. In addition to the problems of land assembly for communitarian provision, there are the problems of potential infringement of planning controls (premised around a conventional dwelling) and resident opposition.

In Aboriginal culture, the particular form of spirituality (high environmental connectivity) and the concept of clan (communitarianism) fuse to create an outcome where a family death means much more than in, say, Western culture. It is an occasion for clan members to gather, not just for the funeral, but perhaps for days afterwards. Among some Aboriginals, it also means the vacancy (often for months) of the dwelling in which the dead person lived. Both the gathering of clan and the abandonment of the property may have implications for the cost of running a social housing agency. Firstly, it is difficult to exact a rent from a property in which nobody lives, leading to arrears on that property; and secondly, the overcrowding of a dwelling at the time of a gathering (a death can draw clan members from across Australia) can increase maintenance costs, as a result of blocked sewers and damage to plumbing ware that was not designed for such intensive use.

Regular payment of rent and associated arrears is also a problem in the Aboriginal community and to some extent can also be explained by communitarian and high environmental connectivity traditions. Firstly, some Aboriginal people do not believe they should be paying for what they see as communal or collective property or land to which they have a spiritual connection and which they 'own'. They are therefore antagonistic to attempts to extract rent from them. Secondly, most indigenous households are poor by comparison with non-indigenous households; when combined with limited budgeting skills (not required in their traditional communitarian society), it does not take much to create a situation leading to arrears. Moreover, the costs associated with the arrival of clan members or the need to visit clan, perhaps for a gathering, can make it difficult to pay rent on time. Some prestige among indigenous Australians derives from being seen to be able to accede to the cultural requirements to share money and goods (Martin 1995), even if this may result in a rent problem. There is the dilemma created by clan conflicts or tensions being brought to the management of certain Aboriginal managed housing organisations. While these are funded by government to be accessible to all Aboriginals, a specific clan can capture the management. This can create problems of acceptance and legitimacy among tenants who are not part of that clan, with one response being a reluctance to pay rent or to pay on time. Finally, the long tradition of control and regulation which severed Aboriginals from the land and where governments or religious institutions imposed white housing upon them created a context where many had no tradition of rental payment and a belief that, if it was imposed on them, why should they pay (Wigley and Wigley 1994, p. 7).

Unlike in individualistic cultures, material wealth accumulated by members of a collectivist society is more likely to be seen to be owned by the collective of people rather than by individual households, and is allocated on the principle that all have some right to collective or community wealth, goods and services. Thus a social housing dwelling allocated to a specific family, that is, the lease holder, may be seen by other indigenous households as a 'community' dwelling. While the property is allocated to a designated individual or household who is responsible for rent, anyone who sees themselves as family or clan may claim their right to enter and use the facilities even if the 'owner' is not there. Growing numbers of Aboriginal tenants do want to define the whole house as their own, and bar up windows, attach security doors and have locked gates accordingly. However, if other clan members believe that clan responsibilities outweigh personal autonomy, they may break into the dwelling and not perceive that they are doing anything wrong. Even if the tenant takes individual responsibility for the dwelling and its fittings, so long as other family members do not accept this notion, a property may still be damaged. The leaseholder in these circumstances may be placed in an arrears situation as a result of the cost of the property damage and may even be at risk of loss of tenancy.

Contributing to higher than normal rates of property damage and high asset management costs is the different attitude of many Aboriginal persons towards children. In traditional Aboriginal society, the harshness of the environment and the obligations towards community required the children to be self-sufficient at an early age, and with responsibility for care spread across the community as a whole. While children are encouraged to be independent and autonomous, Western notions of discipline that tend to be imposed by the nuclear family are not exercised by the community. This creates a situation where children in their day-to-day play may unintentionally damage or vandalise property to a greater degree than equivalent Western children. This is yet another asset management issue to be addressed.

## **5. Masculinity/Femininity and Housing Management**

The masculinity/femininity trade-off refers to the degree to which a culture may be seen as masculine and placing value on clearly defined gender roles and on the exercise of power, including through more aggressive language and action. The feminine side is a culture placing value on gentleness, tolerance, interchangeable gender roles, negotiation and consultation.

Indigenous societies are typically but not exclusively patriarchal or masculine. Aboriginal culture is masculine in the sense of clearly defined gender roles but is less so in terms of emphasis on aggression as a problem-solving process. Older men (the elders) have certain rights and privileges. For many Aboriginals, white economic development and associated land appropriation have marginalised their roles as providers, and many find themselves unemployed and with no clear role in their own community. This context, allied too often with high alcohol consumption, overflows into higher than average crime rates and levels of domestic violence. The disproportionately high numbers of Aboriginal women presenting to homelessness services is testimony to this. Thus one of the major social housing management problems in respect of Australian indigenous communities is dealing with domestic violence.

Continuing domestic violence, anti-social behaviour (for example, excessive drinking) and associated crime can lead to conviction of a crime and being sent to jail. If the convicted person is the lead tenant, the tenancy is put at risk, or even if not the lead tenant, through loss of income, the household's tenancy may still be threatened. The historical evidence suggests that, in jail and away from their community, there is little chance of rehabilitation, and the person returns to the community to continue their behaviour, which creates ongoing management problems for housing agencies. In short, a Western justice system has done little to address an underlying problem. In the last few years, however, there have been experiments with new forms of justice, notably Circle courts (in New South Wales) or Koori courts (in Victoria), whereby offenders are kept in the local community rather than going to jail. Instead of going through conventional justice processes, they are tried by a magistrate, local elders and Aboriginal justice workers; if pleading guilty, they are kept within the local community and bound to accept behaviours imposed upon that community. While these are only pilot projects, a justice system linked to indigenous culture is showing early signs of success. Aboriginal community housing agencies, as key agents of Aboriginal community, are likely to have to be involved in such a system as a way of sustaining both the community and tenancies.

## 6. Power/Distance Relationships and Organisational Decision Making

Ways of decision making are expressions of the exercise of power, and of cultural beliefs about how that power should be exercised. Different cultures may approach a common decision-making problem, for example, issues of housing management, in very different ways. Perhaps paradoxically given the high masculinity values of Aboriginals with respect to power/distance relationships, they are at the democratic participative end of the scale, rather than the authoritarian end. While mainstream Australian culture is not particularly authoritarian, the exercise of power through decision making is very much more task oriented. Communication and meeting procedures are therefore conducted in ways aimed at accomplishing a specific task, for example, to make a decision about a new housing development. By contrast, given the importance that Aboriginal people attach to community, their communication and meetings can be as much about reinforcing and establishing congenial social relations as about the specific task. Conversation need not be focused on the task at hand but may embrace a range of other topics, with non-Aboriginals often getting frustrated at the apparent inability to focus on the core issue.

The process of coming to a decision is also very different from Western culture where decisions are essentially made through debate over alternative solutions and with associated critical comment, normally with the decision making confined to key people chosen on merit, with this merit defining their authority in the meeting. It can therefore be difficult for members of indigenous communities to participate in such processes when they believe that criticisms and differences of point of view should not be openly expressed, where argument is viewed not as healthy debate but as a threat to social relations, and where evaluating alternatives simultaneously, rather than working through them sequentially, is an alien concept. This is how many Aboriginal people see white decision-making processes.

Decision making in Aboriginal communities tends to be public, with people speaking in a serial fashion, each building on the argument of another until an idea is accepted or rejected. Another option or idea is then put up and a similar process undertaken until a consensus emerges. The time periods for this process may be very different from mainstream processes, reflecting the value which Western culture places on time (decisions should be arrived at quickly). Those making the decisions, for example, a housing agency's management committee, are more likely to be chosen because of their position in the community or clan, such as elders or those in a relationship to an elder. Judged by Western standards, these may not be the best people, as they might not have the education or skills for the job, that is, they may know little about financial, tenant or asset management. Judged by Aboriginal standards, they are the right people as they have community acceptance and support, at least from clan members affiliated with these representatives.

In larger committees, such as a regional committee of housing agencies, membership has to have widespread representation so that all clans or communities are involved. Again, by Western notions, these may be unwieldy, but a leaner and less representative committee may have no community legitimacy. In some of these committees, there may also be a significant lack of literacy and numeracy skills. Any instructions and regulations therefore require material that is easy to read and in non-technical language.

Language itself is a form of power and there are important indigenous cultural divides around language. Some of this is because language is the vehicle for expressing values or cultural differences and partly because forms of language can define a culture in its own right. How ideas are expressed, intonations, even what is not said are important dimensions

For many Aboriginals, English is a second language, or they have modified it to suit their own needs. Australian housing workers often fail to appreciate that many Aboriginal tenants do not understand, accept or comprehend the meanings or values that are taken for granted by housing workers. For example, some Aboriginal English conveys meanings in different ways from conventional English. There can also be differences over how language is expressed. The forceful use of language by way of orders and directions is anathema to some Aboriginals, who are used to more gentle and indirect forms. Assertive language by housing workers may elicit a prompt answer, but it is not likely to be a frank or real response. Rather, it is a way of ending an embarrassing or awkward conversation.

Body language is also used as a code for people to communicate, but this varies between cultures. In mainstream Western culture, people typically use their body to draw attention to themselves by standing in the centre of a room or adopting a position at a meeting where they will command attention or be easily seen. By contrast, Aboriginal values tend to view self-promotion of one's presence as bad manners, and therefore they adopt mannerisms of introversion. What might be interpreted by non-indigenous people as shy or, more negatively, 'shifty' behaviour, to an Aboriginal may be simply good manners. To assume that people who exhibit retiring or introverted body language have nothing to contribute to debate, or are uninterested in doing so, is wrong. It is important to draw them into the conversation and to respect their views.

This brief overview of cultural difference around the exercise of power suggests that Western managerial notions may have little relevance for indigenous communities. Even worse, they may lead to decisions which are misplaced or inappropriate and actually compound problems. The challenge is to evolve organisational structures and decision-making procedures which will be consistent with cultural values but lead to effective and efficient outcomes. This cannot be achieved overnight.

## **7. Conclusion**

While the intercultural management literature as embodied in the work of Hofstede has been written for different purposes, it can nevertheless provide a useful framework for understanding indigenous cultures and the implications for social housing management. In the Australian context, it highlights that social housing provision for Aboriginal populations still has a long way to go in creating a culturally appropriate housing form. While there are other impediments to better housing outcomes, including the constraint of providing communitarian housing in an individualistic society, there are growing signs that a better understanding of Aboriginal culture can produce better housing.

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