

Social Identity Within Life History: A Portrait of Young Indigenous People in Australia's Neo-colonial North

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Abstract

This paper is about social identities of young Indigenous people in contemporary Australia, based on fieldwork in the rural community of Yarrabah, in Queensland, particularly on ethnographic interviews with women and men in their twenties and associated *in situ* fieldwork. I explore how diverse social discourses have influenced the social identities of young Indigenous people in contemporary Australia. The influence of historical discontinuity resulting from the impact of colonialism on these social identities is explored, as well as how this has framed the cultural and familial continuity/discontinuity. Historical discontinuity is shown to be a crucial socio-cultural context for self-representation and life narratives for these young Indigenous people. Forms of discontinuity are apparent in the diverse discourses and experiences they bring to their life-histories, most visibly through their stories about social institutions such as the family, the school, the mass media, the community, and the church. This new material shows how Indigenous value systems, broadly understood by the participants to be based on collectivism, constantly come into conflict with Western values based on individualism. While the young Indigenous people of Yarrabah do continuously interact not only with multi-cultural Australia but also with global influences, they are constantly aware of their own distinctiveness in both contexts. And they remain vulnerable to the often invisible and broadly manipulative racist discourses promulgated around them; vulnerable especially by their modes of internalising stereotypical images of Indigeneity in contemporary Australian society but always conscious of that influence on their self-perception.