

VALUING WORK: BEYOND THE ECONOMIC BENEFITS OF EMPLOYMENT

If we can fix unemployment, we can fix most of the other problems among Indigenous Australians, writes **Anthony Dillon**

Employment not only brings financial independence and choice, it also contributes to self-esteem.

—Closing the Gap: Prime Minister's Report 2016¹

Few would doubt the benefits of paid employment: it pays the bills and puts food on the table.² Being engaged in productive work was a normal feature of traditional Indigenous society, so nothing new is being suggested here in discussing the importance of work for Indigenous people; rather, just a return to what Indigenous people once knew.

Consider the words of Yolngu leader Galarrwuy Yunupingu from Northeast Arnhem Land:

In our world we hunted with success or we did not eat, we exchanged gifts with friends so that these friends would respond with gifts that we valued . . . We laboured every day. Under the early mission system we worked or there was no pay. We contributed or we were left aside.³

Consider also the words of Northern Territory MP Alison Anderson when discussing the benefits of employment beyond the financial:

It is not just about the money although the money is good. It is about status and respect, about responsibility and dignity. It is also about growing up and not being a child any more, about becoming an adult,

so that children, real children, can depend on you. We need more of such adults in our Indigenous communities.⁴

Adding to Anderson's insights, a major longitudinal study of the non-pecuniary costs of unemployment has asserted that employment is a source of social relationships, identity in society, and individual self-esteem.⁵ Echoing these observations, a recent report by the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research has noted that in addition to the obvious economic benefits of employment, there are what the report's authors call 'second round benefits' such as improved mental and physical health, improved children's developmental outcomes, and higher rates of home ownership.⁶



Dr Anthony Dillon is a post doctoral researcher at the Institute for Positive Psychology and Education at the Australian Catholic University. He has both Indigenous and non-Indigenous ancestry, and is actively involved in applied psychology research into mental health and Indigenous well-being.

These second round benefits, particularly the psychological or mental health benefits, are the focus of this article. Not because they are necessarily more important than the economic benefits, but because they are often overlooked. It is the high rate of unemployment among Indigenous people that contributes to the higher rates of crime, violence, child neglect, and alcohol and substance abuse.⁷ In short, if we can fix unemployment, we can fix most other problems. There are other means of contributing to the well-being of the broader community, but engaging in (paid) employment is often a very effective way of doing so in the modern world.

Get people into jobs and we will make significant inroads towards addressing suicide and a host of other problems affecting Indigenous people.

In this article, it is not my intention to solve the unemployment problem, but to emphasise the importance of employment beyond the economic benefits. Neither is it my intention to re-analyse historical injustices that have contributed to the unemployment problem we see today. It should also be noted that whilst the focus of this article is on Indigenous people, much of what is said applies to non-Indigenous people too.

Employment provides a sense of purpose

When I read the words of Yunupingu, quoted earlier, I am impressed with ‘we exchanged gifts’. To me, this speaks of the importance of people making valuable contributions to the society or community in which they live. Knowing that one makes a valuable contribution to others is the bedrock of healthy and robust feelings of high self-worth. Executive Chairman of the Australian Indigenous Chamber of Commerce, Warren Mundine, has said that ‘[s]ocial stability requires that people embrace the idea of contributing to their communities.’⁸ This is consistent with recent research into psychological well-being which notes that ‘to be considered optimally functioning in society, one must also contribute meaningfully to society’.⁹

Similarly, in his recent book *What Makes Us Tick?*, social researcher Hugh Mackay argues that ‘Work gives us something to do, something that *proves* we are useful’,¹⁰ while Nyunggai Warren Mundine, again, has stated: ‘In classrooms and in jobs, that is where our Indigenous youth belong.’¹¹ Get people into jobs and we will make significant inroads towards addressing suicide and a host of other problems affecting Indigenous people. Yes, people need money to survive but they need so much more: ‘man shall not live by bread alone’.

What happens when one is not employed?

Psychiatrist William Glasser, in explaining mental health problems, has suggested that a fundamental requirement for sound mental health is the need to feel worthwhile to others and ourselves. Glasser explains that failure to fulfil this need contributes to what is commonly called ‘mental illness’.¹² As most people would already know, employment is often a very effective way of providing a sense of self-worth. So clearly, not working impacts on mental health. Perhaps the impact is not readily apparent, but it is real nonetheless.

Returning to Mackay’s quote above, employment gives us something to do. It may not always give us the option to do what we want to do, but doing anything, where hopefully one can see some purpose, has to be better than doing nothing. The good book says that idle hands are the devil’s workshop. We have all seen those images of a rundown community where the adults are not working. No matter what the colour of the occupants, those communities are not pleasant; they are often hellholes.

When people have a sense of purpose, then life is worth living. A job can provide purpose. People without purpose are like ships without a course—they eventually end up a wreck. Not working has flow-on effects to family and children. Reporting in *The Australian*, Helen Morton remarks that without employment opportunities and occupational role models, the ‘bright eyes of children’s hopes and dreams quickly fade.’¹³ With regard to the distressing topic of youth suicide, young people flourish when they live in happy and supportive environments. Such environments are an normal outcome when adults are engaged

in meaningful employment and the children are in school.

It is true that in some locations in Australia there are few opportunities for paid employment. There may be some opportunity to provide service to one's community, but in some places people have been robbed of the opportunity to provide service because they are given passive income in the form of welfare. When given welfare, it is not too difficult to see that the motivation to provide a service, especially if there is not financial reward for doing so, is diminished. Certainly there is a time and place for welfare, but it should be a safety net only and not a hammock! Or, in the inspirational words of Nyunggai Warren Mundine, once again, 'Welfare should not be a safety net, it should be a trampoline—sending people back into employment and self determination.'¹⁴ While welfare may enable a recipient to *survive*, it often robs them of the opportunity to *thrive*. To thrive requires connection with others.

Consider the words of Canadian Indigenous man Calvin Helin in his book *Dances With Dependency* with regard to welfare:

Some Aboriginals contend that we should take the welfare and transfer payments because they are 'free'. As seductive as this might appear, a resounding axiom of Nature is 'nothing is ever free'. Whatever comes to you without having to put out some effort always requires some compensation—just one that is not immediately visible.¹⁵

The Canadian experience that Helin describes is just as true for the Australian Indigenous experience. It is clear that many people, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, are getting by (some are even very comfortable when they pool their welfare earnings) without having to 'put out some effort'. You do not need a degree in psychology, nor do you need to have visited a community where welfare is the source of income for the majority of its people, to understand the devastating effects of welfare.

Real jobs

Based on what I have written so far, it is tempting to think the best way to help Indigenous people immediately is to get them into a job—any 'job'. I did say earlier that doing something is better than doing nothing, but this requires some qualification. It is desirable that the 'something' is meaningful. The jobs people do should be real and not pretend jobs. As Alison Anderson points out:

We need to phase out all the jobs we created for Aboriginal people: the teaching assistants and the special positions for Aboriginal police and healthcare workers, and all the rest. They imply that Aboriginal people cannot do normal jobs. We need to replace them with real jobs that require real education, jobs that are not dead ends but that could lead on to other jobs, including jobs in other places if that is what some people want.¹⁶

There is a time and place for welfare, but it should be a safety net only and not a hammock!

Having a job should communicate the message, 'What I do makes a difference.' With some of the special 'indigenised' jobs that Anderson gives examples of, this may not always be true. I am generalising here as there are many jobs that have a specific Indigenous focus and that serve a real purpose such as interpreters and hospital liaison officers. But the low expectations that accompany some indigenised jobs risk sending the wrong message, especially to children: for instance (following Anderson), they may not dream of becoming a teacher because they may believe that Indigenous people can only become teaching assistants. While such jobs provide income and status, they may not necessarily provide people with a full sense of purpose and meaning.

Conclusion

Having a job obviously pays the bills: this is true for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Also true for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people is that being employed is often an effective way to promote sound mental health. But we also know that Indigenous Australians are more likely to be unemployed. We know all too well the other statistics that do not paint a good picture—poverty, violence, suicide, alcoholism, child neglect and more. Employment will go a long way towards addressing these problems.

Given that traditional Indigenous people embraced a holistic conceptualisation of life, employment should be seen as a normal (as opposed to a white man's expression of assimilation) part of life for Indigenous adults as it encompasses the material and spiritual dimensions of life. Indeed, for many thousands of Indigenous Australians (paid) work is a normal part of life. The challenge for us, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, is to ensure that all healthy, able-bodied Indigenous adults have the opportunity to work. We are headed in the right direction, so let's continue the momentum.

Endnotes

- ¹ Quote from *Closing the Gap: Prime Minister's Report 2016* (Commonwealth of Australia, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, February 2016), ch. 3, p. 26.
- ² Although this is true for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, the focus of this paper is on Indigenous people. Indeed, much of what is said in this paper applies to non-Indigenous people, even if not explicitly stated.

- ³ Galarrwuy Yunupingu, 'Fair Exchange the Key to Indigenous Prosperity', *The Weekend Australian* (5-6 November 2011), p. 18.
- ⁴ Alison Anderson, 'Real Education, Real Jobs', in *In Black & White: Australians All at the Crossroads*, eds. Rhonda Craven, Anthony Dillon and Nigel Parbury (Ballan, Vic.: Connor Court, 2013), pp. 339-352.
- ⁵ Liliana Winkelmann and Rainer Winkelmann, 'Why are the Unemployed So Unhappy?: Evidence from Panel Data', *Economica* 65:257 (1998), pp. 1-15.
- ⁶ Matthew Gray, Boyd Hunter and Nicholas Biddle, *The Economic and Social Benefits of Increasing Indigenous Employment* (Canberra: Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, 2014).
- ⁷ 'The Indigenous employment rate fell from 53.8 per cent in 2008 to 47.5 per cent in 2012-13. This occurred in the context of a general softening in the labour market over this period. The overall employment rate for all Australians fell from 73.4 per cent in June 2008 to 72.1 per cent in June 2013...'. *Closing the Gap: Prime Minister's Report 2016*, p. 27.
- ⁸ Warren Mundine, 'Four Giant Steps Towards Closing the Gap', *The Australian* (10 August 2013).
- ⁹ Robert J. Vallerand and Noémie Carbonneau, 'The Role of Passion in Optimal Functioning in Society', in *Theory Driving Research: New Wave Perspectives on Self-processes and Human Development*, eds. Dennis M. McInerney, Herbert W. Marsh, Rhonda G. Craven and Frédéric Guay (Charlotte, NC: Information Age, 2013).
- ¹⁰ Hugh Mackay, *What Makes Us Tick? The Ten Desires That Drive Us* (Sydney: Hachette, 2010), p. 137.
- ¹¹ Warren Mundine, 'Work Key to Justice Crisis', *The Australian* (9 January 2013).
- ¹² William Glasser, *Reality Therapy: A New Approach to Psychiatry* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990).
- ¹³ Helen Morton, 'Break the Adversity Cycle', *The Australian* (7 April 2015).
- ¹⁴ Warren Mundine, 'Our People Need Careers', in *In Black & White*, eds. Craven, Dillon & Parbury, p. 335.
- ¹⁵ Calvin Helin, *Dances with Dependency: Out of Poverty Through Self-Reliance* (Woodland Hills, CA: Ravencrest, 2008), p. 120.
- ¹⁶ Anderson, 'Real Education, Real Jobs', pp. 344-45.