

Socialisation and the Shaping of Youth Identity at Docker River

Pauline Fietz

PhD Candidate, Anthropology, Australian National University

Paper presented at 'Imagining Childhood: Children, Culture and Community',
Charles Darwin University Symposium, Alice Springs, September 2005.

Older Aboriginal children, or Aboriginal youth, are conspicuously represented as teenage mothers, dope smokers, petrol sniffers, binge drinkers, criminals and suicide victims. They are commonly equated in popular consciousness with poor levels of literacy, employment and health, and for their increasingly high incidences of substance misuse, violence and incarceration.

Based on 10 months of ongoing anthropological research with young people at Docker River, a community 800km south west of Alice in Pitjantjatjara country, this presentation seeks to penetrate beyond such one dimensional representations to look at how identity is constituted and shaped by interactions of youth among themselves, but also with others within their world.

The concept of youth as a distinct phase of the life stage is often, in the context of social policy and associated government response, characterised by notions of 'youth subculture' and the 'youth peer group'. These models, one an outgrowth of sociology and the other a construction of social psychology, have tended to frame popular and governmental understandings of young Aboriginal people

The meanings of age status categories for young Pitjantjatjara people at Docker River and elsewhere are undergoing revision, affected by changes to ritual and social Aboriginal institutions of adolescent development, and the influence of mainstream developmental experiences, such as schooling and recreation.

Despite these changes, my research indicates that descriptions of 'youth' practice are overdetermined by ideas of subcultures and peer groups, which may in fact have limited application to young people's lives at Docker River, where behaviour is not determined by criterion of age alone.

My research suggests that these models have, in many instances, poor explanatory fit, and need to be supplemented by understandings that take into account culturally specific features of youthful Pitjantjatjara existence, such as the role of multigenerational structures of socialisation, the fundamentality of cross-cutting dimensions of kin, and the content of those relevant cultural constructs which provide the necessary orientations for youth to live their lives.

This presentation will sketch the features of adolescent development at Docker River, outlining the effect of relationships of importance, and forms of behaviour and belief, which appear to shape the identity of young people. Based on my experience, I will further attempt to explicate how this type of insight can be extended within the modeling of effective Aboriginal youth programmes.

3. The Influence of the Youth Peer Group at Docker River

During the pursuit of schooling and recreation, young people participate in activities that cross kinship boundaries and are often of mixed gender. Many of these activities, most notably mainstream educative processes, physically separate young people of school-age from those multi-generational kinship structures in which socialisation and learning was managed in the past. Cohorts of same age, mixed gender young people are created by these shared experiences.

No doubt these emergent peer groups do impact on the behaviour and consciousness of young people. In appearance, demeanor and gestures, in distinctive uses of language, unique words and phrases and codes, young people express themselves in forms which tend to be exclusive to younger generations.

It is also the case that these new forms of expression are interpreted by older generations as challenges to authority systems and to conventions of behaviour.

However, it is my observation that these are primarily outward forms of expression, with nominal influence on the lives of young people. In contrast, the attitudes, values and imperatives informed by the powerful cultural logic of kin relatedness are not limited to generations. It is this relationality that constitutes the habitus of young people at Docker River rather than the singularity of peer groups.



A young woman digging goanna together with her mother's mother (kami)

Relationships of Care and Age Status Categories

During the period between childhood and adulthood young people at Docker River proceed through various developmental categories, assisted by particular close kin. The social obligation to look after, care for, nurture and nourish young people shifts between family members as young people move through the different age status categories. In order to be effective, policy and programmes which attempt to provide for the needs of Aboriginal youth must entail careful understandings of the way in which these relationships of care operate within families.

Data sets of children's domiciliary patterns, group composition, intra-group relationships, and detailed life histories form a picture of the experience of young people at Docker River, from which the key themes and structures of socialisation processes can be distilled.

This data supports the view that peer groups of children, organised according to principles of gender and family, remain the primary socialising mechanism for younger children. Adolescent peer groups, however, are not accurately depicted as consisting of cohorts of same age children. During this age status category, related groups of younger men and women are supported by older kin in what could be depicted as multigenerational clusters.

For girls, older, close female kin, particularly mothers, older sisters, cousins, and grandmothers occupy importance relationships of care for the developing girl. Where a young girl is lacking in a close female kinswoman to provide the requisite care, I have often heard the lable *tjitji mungutja* (an adjective used to describe unwanted or abandoned baby animals). From an early age, girls are encouraged by their matrikin, to care for and nurture infants. Motherhood is a highly valued identity, and conception and having a child is often deliberately pursued, with or without the acquisition of a sanctioned partner. 50 percent of the young women at Docker River have given birth to a child by the time they turn 20.



A young woman looks after her sister's daughter (left) and brother's daughter (right).

Adolescent boys continue to undergo initiation, selected by senior male relatives according to the combination of their perceived social and physical maturity.

Post initiation, the co-initiates *ngalungku* have specific obligations to assist and cooperate with one another. In this they are supported by older brothers, close cousins and uncles. At Docker River, the *ngalungku* sleep and eat together, travel together, and collaborate in the pursuit of resources and stimulation. The *tjamu* or grandfathers of the young men have special relationships of responsibility to provide the young men with the necessary social resources, and make the requisite ritual arrangements, in order to ensure the young men make a complete transition into adult male life.

The effect of fractured relationships of responsibility

Older generations often emphasise the central role of these relationships of responsibility in the process of adolescent development, and attribute the emergence of risky or socially harmful behaviour to inadequate performance of this obligation.

My research findings also indicate that when these relationships of care within families falter at critical moments in the identity development of young people, the effect on the behaviour of that young person can have serious outcomes.

The example of a young 13 year old girl, Lily, is illustrative. I recorded that during the Summer holidays this girl spent almost every night in a different house. Female family members who stand in the role of care-giver to Lily were noticeably lacking – her own mother oscillated between bouts of drinking in Alice and periods of mental illness, other classificatory mothers were also absent from the community, and no grandmothers remained living. On the side of patrikin, Lily's own father and father's brother were both in jail and all father's sisters live in Alice town camps. Lily would rotate herself across her large network of extended kin in the community. In addition, she opportunistically insinuated herself into the centre of all her social interactions, manipulating others to focus maximum attention on herself. A survival strategy, these techniques had been devised by Lily as the best means to maximize her chances of accessing safe residences and resources. By spreading herself around the largest network possible, she was able to activate one of multiple potential kin affiliations to ensure she had a place to sleep and food to eat. Despite the resilience, independence, and intelligence that these strategies demonstrate, Lily is roundly recognised as significantly socially impaired, highly manipulative, an inadequately socialized young girl.

The flip side of 'sharing of caring' or having many people supposedly looking after you, is that no one responsible adult was ensuring that this child received proper care. Here, an over reliance on a broader and broader kinship network proved incapable of providing the child not only with the practical dimensions of care, but, more significantly lacked in the provision of the moral and ethical support which underpins the Pitjantjatjara socialisation process, and is necessary for the production of a whole person.

Another example concerns the group of *ngalungku*, who had since their initiation been residing together in the house of a man who stood in the relationship of grandfather to

several of the young men. Young uncles were also present in this house. Through a series of events, the solidarity of this group was interrupted as some of the young men were taken to further business to another community to the west. They did not return to Docker for some time. In their absence, the remaining members of the group of Docker River *ngalungku* seemed disoriented and rejoined other groups. Two, who had been occasional sniffers prior to initiation, began openly sniffing with the group of chronic sniffers (when they had not previously been seen sniffing in public). This occurred at a critical moment in the adolescent development of these young men. The families of these two young men attributed this behaviour to the failure of their *tjamu* to uphold their ritual responsibility to nurture and look after their newly initiated kinsmen to ensure they were properly incorporated into the system of adult male life.



Two ngalungku participating in a cultural heritage clearance trip across Lake Amadeus under the supervision of a group of old men, including grandfathers

My research shows that fractured relationships of responsibility, frequently masked by the rhetoric of caring and sharing, can impact dramatically at crucial developmental junctures in the lives of young people.

Patterns of behaviour within families and across generations

Non-interventionist indigenous child-rearing techniques involve very little in the way of direct instruction or discipline and instead can be said to emphasise more subtle behavioural modelling within families.

At Docker River I believe it is the case that learning by imitating the behaviour of older family members is the key determinant in identity formation of young people, and peer group socialisation has much less influence. The intergenerational transmission of behaviour and practice within families can take many forms – and these can be both positive and negative. Thus many of the risk behaviours said to characterise Indigenous

Youth, are, on a closer look, not youthful pathology but learnt behaviour and attitudes or responses to situations within families.

At Docker River close scrutiny of the composition of the core group petrol sniffing, combined with detailed genealogical data, indicates that the chronic sniffer group is comprised of individuals from two family groups. Within these two families, histories of death and disability from sniffing are extensive. The core of the gang of sniffers comprises two brothers in their mid 30s. One, the charismatic leader of the group, is responsible for organising the supply of petrol into Docker River and supplies young people for free in order to recruit them to the lifestyle of petrol sniffing and obtain other services. The wives of both the brothers have also become chronic petrol sniffers. Their own father is dead. Two maternal uncles have died from petrol sniffing, and one classificatory father and two more uncles are severely mentally and physically impaired from sniffing. Their own mother, sisters and other matrikin have shifted to Areyonga, as they are unable to sustain any kind of functional life in proximity to their petrol sniffing kin.



Vehicle owned by the two brothers responsible for petrol supply, broken down on the road between Uluru and Docker River. With great regularity, this vehicle departs Docker River after pay days, subsidised by other sniffers, to travel to Yulara in order to fill jerry cans with unleaded petrol fuel to take back to Docker River. Here the petrol is sold to chronic sniffers or exchanged, and the brothers gain not only substantiation of the sniffer group but also sexual access, and benefit from petty acts of vandalism committed by young male recruits. When lacking money to undertake these supply trips, the brothers drive to the Kata Tjuta turn-off, where they simulate a break-down and prevail upon passing tourist traffic to give them petrol.

The portrayal of gangs of petrol sniffers as groups of adolescent boys, does not fit the picture at Docker River. Here it is the case that the intergenerational transmission of the practice of sniffing within families informs the composition of the group.

This also accounts for many of the difficulties faced by the community in endeavoring to intervene in what is essentially considered by other community members to be family business. This underlies a critical question for this symposium - how do we construct this concept of 'community' – which is made up of **families** - and how effective a paradigm is it when thinking about interventions in young peoples lives.

Conclusion - Implications for Policy and Programmes – the Docker River model

A primary component of the way I have undertaken my research has been participation in the development of a youth programme at Docker River. The key objective of the youth programme as articulated by one of our young leaders is 'to make young people, and their families, proud'.

The underlying assumption of the majority of community youth programme models is that Aboriginal kids have the same aspirations, needs and interests as mainstream Australian kids. Premised on the isolation of young people from their families, where role models and activities alike are drawn from popular culture, the use of mainstream youth programmes as the operational model is assimilationist in the assumption that Aboriginal kids want to be just like white society.

Aboriginal youth programmes get hung up on the perceived need for funding for the latest flashy DVDs or disco equipment. What they do need to be equipped with is skilled youth workers who are capable of understanding the complexities of Aboriginal family life, and a range of activities that enable young people of different social status and gender to engage their bodies and their brains.



A young boy learning how to play guitar with support from an uncle.

Based on a platform of regular, consistent activities for children and young people between the ages of 3 to 30, the Youth Programme focuses on the provision of meaningful, culturally relevant, gender and age status appropriate extensions activities. These activities are aimed in the promotion of self esteem and coherence for young

people in their lives with their families. Our capacity to provide these relevant and stimulating activities relies heavily on the involvement, guidance, and support from older family members, and a Youth Team – a group of young leaders who are the key drivers of the activities and ideas which make up the Youth Programme. These young men and women represent crucial role models for the younger family members who follow their example.



Young adolescent boys preparing to butcher a camel. Camel meat is prepared by the young women as camel stew, chilli con carne, camel burgers etc so that all children and young people can eat for free. The young hunters take home the prized cuts for distribution to their families.

A project designed specifically for young women ‘Kungka Ninti, Kungka Rikina’ (Smart Girls are Deadly Girls), is illustrative of the way our programme works. Focusing on personal development, positive adolescent health, and the fostering of self esteem, this project includes many outings and workshops led by older female family members, from hair and beauty to bush tuckering techniques. A large fashion parade was held last summer at which the young women presented themselves to the community, having staged the publicity, organised the music, lighting, and decoration and cooked camel stew for the entire community. This event, a public display of youthful identity, cultivated in the young women a strong sense of pride, stemming mainly from the consciousness that what they were doing made their families proud. Adolescents feel keenly the desire to gain the attention of their families, and youth programmes need to be directed towards achieving this goal in a positive way.



A young woman preparing camel pizza for sale to families and to the community.

I have found discourses about subcultures and youth peer groups unhelpful in thinking about the experiences of young people at DR, for they imply that the only relationships available to young people are those within the youth cohort, as all others have broken down. Through this implication these models replicate the view of isolation they prescribe.

Through a brief glimpse at our Docker River Youth Programme, I have attempted to show that models which envisage a category of youth isolated from intergenerational structures of socialisation, from mothers and fathers, uncles, grandmothers, are inadequate.

In the complex interplay between peer group sociality and intergenerational relationships, it is from within the family that Pitjanjatjara children construct the necessary social orientations to predicate action in terms of a shared identity with others.