Perceptions of Reconciliation and related Indigenous Issues among Young Residents of Shepparton

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Abstract
It has been argued that reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians requires non-Indigenous Australians to change their attitudes. Some suggest that this process is occurring and that younger people hold more positive attitudes towards Indigenous Australians. This paper explored the perspectives of 86 young people from Shepparton, Victoria in relation to reconciliation and related Indigenous issues. The study found that young participants’ views of reconciliation varied, and while some supported reconciliation, many opposed a national apology and indicated that they were not very informed about or interested in Aboriginal issues. Many distinguished between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Aboriginals based on behaviour. Their talk was embedded with notions of special privilege, ‘sameness’ and social hierarchy but excluded attention to cultural difference. Findings suggest that these young people have embraced discourses of sameness, individualism and ‘practical reconciliation’ and that they are reluctant to reflect on their position of White privilege.

Keywords: Reconciliation, Young People’s Perceptions, Indigenous issues
Introduction

In the past 200 years, Australia’s history has involved tensions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures (Gomersall et al. 2000). It is only in the past four decades that White Australia has attempted to resolve such tensions (Veracini 2003). Veracini (2003: 226) suggested that in recent decades Australia has “wrestled with questions of Aboriginal agency, White responsibility, destruction, and survival”. The 1990s witnessed a range of activities and discussion surrounding Aboriginal Australians, including the Royal Commission into Indigenous Deaths in Custody in 1991, the Mabo decision in 1992, the 1993 Native Title Act, the High Court’s Wik decision in 1996, the Bringing Them Home Report documenting the Stolen Generation in 1997, the Native Title Amendment Act in 1998, the march across the Sydney Harbour Bridge in 2000, and the general Reconciliation Movement throughout this decade (Curthoys 2003; McCallum 2003).

While these actions may be considered as evidence of change, there has also been discussion and debate over what has not been achieved. Some have argued that “the absence of a treaty with Aboriginal peoples is causally associated with their poor health and social disadvantage” (Jackson & Ward 1999: 437; also see Ring & Firman 1998). There has been debate over the Commonwealth government providing a national apology for the forced removal of children. Indigenous people have also challenged statements and visions about Australia’s national identity (Gomersall et al. 2000). While Indigenous communities have gained control over some services, White, mainstream Australia continues to control budgets, agendas and knowledge (McCallum 2003). Mainstream debates continue over the need for specialised Indigenous services and ‘special privilege’, sameness versus cultural diversity, and ‘appropriate’ behaviours of Aboriginal people (McCallum 2003). And despite all these discussions, debates and policy shifts, Aboriginal people are still dying, on average, 17 years earlier than non-Indigenous Australians (Anonymous 2000; Leigh 2002; Myers 2000; Thomson 2003).

Hence, views about Indigenous Australians are varied, both within Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations. Some have found that younger people have more positive attitudes towards Indigenous people (Pedersen et al. 2004) which may reflect a shift in attitudes and perspectives. This paper explores the perceptions of young people living in a regional centre in Victoria in relation to reconciliation and related issues. Specifically, this paper identifies the ways in which young residents of Shepparton talk about Indigenous issues. The intention was not to study ‘the other’ but to identify ‘mainstream’ thinking, albeit still about ‘the other’. Before addressing this central aim, it is important to understand the public debates, attitudes and perceptions surrounding reconciliation which young people may embrace, draw on, or reject. Before this literature is reviewed, a brief comment about the use of language in this paper is noted.

Following Saxton (2004: 16) “the term Indigenous has been used as a category marker of cultural identification for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in this study and is capitalised throughout the text.” Like her, we “have used this term for convenience and brevity, but do not want to imply that such terms of cultural categorisation are meaningful or accepted as encompassing the diversity of cultural identification for Indigenous peoples in Australia” (Saxton 2004: 16). The term non-Indigenous has also
been used to refer to all other participants but this is not intended to deny this groups cultural diversity either.

Public Debates, Attitudes and Perceptions surrounding Reconciliation and related Indigenous Issues in Australia

Public discourses surrounding meanings of reconciliation

The original use of the term reconciliation in relation to Aboriginal and other Australians is unclear, but one source states that the term reconciliation emerged from the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody in 1991 (Anonymous 2000). Regardless, the term gained a foothold in the early 1990s, taking on a higher priority than the previous debate on treaty (Short 2003).¹ The preamble to the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation Act of 1991 stated that

as part of the reconciliation process, the Commonwealth will seek...
to address progressively Aboriginal disadvantage and aspirations in relation to land, housing, law and justice, cultural heritage, education, employment, health, infrastructure, economic development and any other relevant matters in the decade leading to the centenary of Federation, 2001 (cited in Short 2003: 495; see also Jackson & Ward 1999: 437).

In 1991, Federal Parliament established the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (CAR) with a vision of “a united Australia” (Gomersall et al. 2000; Short 2003).² The Council stated that their commitment was to grassroots change, to develop relationships and change thinking among Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians (Gomersall et al. 2000). The original meanings of the term reconciliation were unclear and goals of the CAR varied among different stakeholders.

The CAR itself focused more on attitudinal change. This has roots in the Two Hundred Years Later report of 1983 which “concluded that societal ‘attitudes’ lay at the heart of the “Aboriginal problem” (Short 2003: 494-5). This requires a psychological shift among the mainstream Australian population (Saxton 2004). At Corroboree 2000, Dodson (cited in Leigh 2002: 139) suggested that reconciliation is this and more:

Although issues of the health, housing and education of Indigenous Australians are of key concern to a nation, they are not issues that are at the very heart or the very soul of reconciliation… Reconciliation is about far deeper things - to do with nation, soul and spirit. Reconciliation is about the blood and flesh of the lives we must lead together not the nuts and bolts of the entitlements as citizens we should all enjoy.

Gomersall et al. (2000) suggested that promotion of reconciliation throughout the 1990s was political recognition of the divisions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia and acknowledgement of past injustices. Similarly, others have talked about reconciliation as unity and coming together, referring to the broader level of humanity, such as ‘we are all people’. These perspectives omit cultural differences and identities, and taken to extreme return the debate to a state of equity and sameness, denying power as a source of inequality (Saxton 2004). While some argued that reconciliation implied that we were one nation, which was never the case (Saxton 2004; Short 2003), others
were critical of “a united Australia” (Short 2003: 496) because it denied that Aboriginal people belonged to ‘sovereign nations’ (Short 2003).

Most have viewed reconciliation, or at least a part of it, as overcoming Indigenous disadvantage, a key focus of the Keating government (Watson 2001). Structural inequality focused on the needs of Aboriginal Australians and their disadvantaged position. Some have critiqued this position because it creates dependence on government to address disadvantage rather than rectifying its source (Short 2003). Others suggested that focus on structural inequality places issues at the structural level, depersonalises issues of reconciliation, and removes responsibility from the individual level (Saxton 2004). In response, there has been a move to broaden reconciliation to include a social justice perspective, including addressing disadvantage and Indigenous rights. While this did not address the structural causes of disadvantage, Indigenous leaders sought out their rights, particularly their rights to self determination and their rights to land (Short 2003).

In 1998, Howard proposed ‘practical reconciliation’ as a means of shifting the focus from rights and justice to economic independence and equality in health, education and employment. This returned the agenda to one completely dominated by White values and standards, based on an assimilationist premise, and avoided any change by White society (Leigh 2002; Short 2003). The assimilationist view emphasises equity and fairness, where equity becomes embedded with sameness (McCallum 2003; Watson 2001). The focus here becomes lifestyles and people are judged by their ‘decisions’ to work, go to school and participate in community life. This ignores cultural diversity, structural disadvantages and institutional racism but assumes we all have the same goals and values.

Much public debate has centred around these two oppositions, Keating’s focus on structural disadvantage and Howard’s emphasis on equality and sameness, as reflected in the two major political parties (McCallum 2003; Watson 2001). Neither perspective seems to embrace the voices of Indigenous communities or the complexities of reconciliation. This has been witnessed in the media in the late 1990s and early 2000s, where stories have tended to be critical of Indigenous lifestyles, thereby doubting reconciliation or, alternatively, presenting positive stories of success by overcoming adversity. This approach by media has further polarised discussions and understandings of reconciliation (McCallum 2003).

Still other understandings of reconciliation have emerged. In the Bringing Them Home report, reconciliation was said to involve five key concepts, based on the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, namely: acknowledgement and apology; guarantees against repetition; measures of restitution; measures of rehabilitation; and monetary compensation (Jackson & Ward 1999). For Leigh (2002), the key issues of reconciliation were land ownership, the stolen generation, living standards, treaty and interpersonal reconciliation. These perspectives blend priority areas so as to set goals for change across a range of arenas.

Other discourses have contributed to the varied discussions around the meaning of reconciliation. The myth of ‘special privilege’ emerged largely through talkback radio (Mickler cited in McCallum 2003) which “is framed within the broader narrative of responsibility, and is commonly used to argue that ‘everyone should be treated equally’”
(McCallum 2003: 126). Again this perspective is consistent with arguments of sameness and fairness, as reflected in Howard’s discourse. Release of the Bringing Them Home report in 1997 placed focus on the stolen generation and the call for an apology. The ‘sorry’ debate has been a “dominant frame through which the media interpreted most Indigenous issues, including reconciliation” (McCallum 2003: 120). Robinson argued that “this ‘sorry’ business has hijacked the reconciliation process” (cited in Anonymous 2000: 8). Self determination and community control have also been discussed in terms of debates around reconciliation. For Indigenous Australians, self determination is a fundamental right (Dodson 1994) but community control can also be a justification for non-Indigenous services to be free of obligations to address social injustices and provide services (Bourke & Muir 2001). In this way, community control justifies ignoring Aboriginal needs.

The core meanings of reconciliation have differed across time and in different contexts; issues of cultural difference, sameness and behaviour remain divergent. For some, reconciliation has meant recognising the past, apologising for wrong doings, moving on together in partnership in the future; for some it is about justice, rights or addressing disadvantage; and for others it remains White control over Indigenous peoples, cultures and land (Grattan 2000). Still others have suggested that the term is only used in order that White Australia can feel better when clearly nothing is being done (Anonymous 2000). Short (2003: 506) argued that “the Australian reconciliation process is significantly out of step with the aspirations of many indigenous groups”. He concluded that it is at the political level, in arenas of policy development and agenda setting, where the reconciliation process has failed but that the concept has potential (Short 2003). While debate over the meaning of reconciliation is important, the authors believe as part of the process White Australia/Australians, as members of the powerful group, must engage in a process of change that empowers Indigenous people, acknowledges Indigenous cultures and values Indigenous Australia. While we are not wedded to any particular position on reconciliation, we do believe that reconciliation has not been actively pursued by mainstream society.

**Non-Indigenous attitudes towards reconciliation and related issues**

A limited amount of research has sought to analyse attitudes towards and perceptions of reconciliation and Indigenous people held by non-Indigenous Australians. Generally, these studies have found that negative attitudes towards Aboriginal people are common (Gomerseall et al. 2000; Pedersen et al. 2000, 2004).

In 1996, a study of attitudes towards reconciliation found that half of respondents (selected from the Australian population) had heard of reconciliation. While the overwhelming majority supported reconciliation, a third indicated that Australia did not look after Indigenous people very well, most felt relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous residents were not positive and most said that Indigenous Australians were disadvantaged. Fear, apathy and ignorance were found to be barriers to progressing reconciliation (Sweeney et al. 1996). Halloran (2007) found that three quarters of his respondents supported some form of reconciliation but less than half of these supporters would themselves undertake any behaviour to promote reconciliation. Gomersall et al. (2000) investigated where or with whom Australians felt that responsibility for reconciliation lay. They found that for reconciliation to be achieved,
Indigenous Australians need to be included in the ‘ingroup’ or be considered part of Australians rather than as a separate or minority group. Similarly, Dunn et al. (2004) identified Aboriginal Australians as an ‘out group,’ particularly among older Australians. Halloran (2007) found that support for reconciliation was related with knowledge about Indigenous people and history, collective guilt and support for an egalitarian society.

Gomersall et al. (2000) found that one in five Australians agreed that non-Indigenous Australians were superior to Indigenous Australians. Most supported the aims and objectives of the CAR, that they would accept an Aboriginal person as a friend or family member, that the subordinate position of Indigenous people was unfair, and that this subordinate position could be altered. Approximately half agreed that supporting reconciliation could threaten personal security. Age, gender, education and other demographic characteristics did not alter response. The authors concluded that while there is strong support for reconciliation generally as well as the goals of the CAR, there is less support for specific outcomes (Gomersall et al. 2000). Therefore, it has been identified that non-Indigenous Australians think that reconciliation is important but that few are willing to engage in a process of change, especially if they feel it would threaten their social position.

Investigating attitudes towards Indigenous Australians more generally, Pedersen et al. (2004) found that those with lower levels of formal education, men, older people, those who are politically right wing and those with less empathy and less collective guilt were more likely to hold more negative attitudes. In another study, Pedersen et al. (2000) compared residents of Perth and Kalgoorlie (Western Australia) and found that Kalgoorlie respondents held more negative views. Furthermore, they found that respondents from Kalgoorlie developed their attitudes based on observation and experiences while Perth respondents based their views on values and mis/information. Many of these respondents believed that Indigenous Australians received special privileges, especially financially, and emphasised the need for equity—that everyone should be treated the same (Pedersen et al. 2000). This study also found that while old fashioned racism (blatent expressions) existed, modern racism, that is more subtle, is more prevalent; modern racism usually was expressed in terms of equity and being treated the same (Pedersen et al. 2000).

In a small study of young people, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians supported cultural diversity, teaching of the complete Australian history in schools and that past injustices needed to be acknowledged to allow the country to move on (Saxton 2004). However, Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians differed in their perceptions of the need for a public apology, formal recognition that Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders were the traditional owners of the land, acknowledgement of colonisation, recognition of Aboriginal law, beliefs and traditions, and that decisions about past actions and injustices were made by non-Indigenous people. Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous young people identified Australia as racist but they felt that this was sometimes justified (Saxton 2004). Saxton also found that young Indigenous respondents were sceptical of reconciliation and unconvinced that non-Indigenous people were truly sorry for or informed about the damage to Indigenous peoples. Young Indigenous Australians in this study focused on respect for others, regardless of their Indigenous status (Saxton 2004). In another Australian study, young participants suggested “that
McCallum (2003) calls for more complex analyses of Australians’ understandings of reconciliation and Indigenous issues. If reconciliation involves changing the views of non-Indigenous Australians, as argued by Halloran (2007), then understanding the perspectives of non-Indigenous people is necessary. This paper contributes to understanding non-Indigenous perspectives generally by exploring how a group of young people from one region view Indigenous people and issues, which reflects how these young people position themselves.

Methods
Most research into perceptions of Indigenous Australians and issues have used questionnaires (see Gomersall et al. 2000; Pedersen et al. 2000, 2004; Sweeney et al. 1996). This study adopted a qualitative approach to allow research participants to speak openly and in more detail about these issues, so that participants had input into the direction, length and topic of the discussion. Interviews were selected so that young people could talk confidentially about themselves and their views; this enabled young people’s perspectives to be explored, probed and captured their ‘own’ words.

The setting
After approval of a university ethics committee, this study was undertaken in Shepparton, Victoria, during 2002 and 2003. Located 190km north of Melbourne, Shepparton is a growing regional centre with a population of approximately 35,000. It is an agricultural area with strong horticulture and dairy industries dependent on irrigation. Known as ‘Australia’s Food Bowl’, the area also houses several food processing enterprises that provide permanent and seasonal employment. Shepparton has a diverse population in terms of income, occupation, cultural background (e.g., 27 different language groups) and length of residence. The town has five secondary schools (three public and two private), numerous sporting clubs, a small four-cinema complex, a skate park and several fast food outlets. Shepparton also has two generalist youth services, a youth accommodation service and other services that offer youth programs.

The Goulburn-Murray area has the largest Indigenous population in Victoria outside Melbourne, estimated to be 10% of the population of the region. There are several Aboriginal cooperatives, Aboriginal medical centres and Koori services (youth, family, employment, housing, aged care, etc.) in this region, many within the Shepparton area. These Indigenous residents have been found to have low incomes, low education levels, high unemployment rates and high rates of diabetes and mental illness (Tynan et al. 2004). Young Indigenous residents attend all public schools throughout Shepparton and many play football or netball, mostly for the local Aboriginal operated club, Rumbalara (Tynan 2008).

Recruiting respondents and collecting data
Respondents were sampled via two methods. A total of 90 students in Years 11 and 12 were randomly selected from three local secondary schools, two public and one private. In each of the three schools, 30 students were randomly selected and asked to participate in the study. Random selection was used to promote a diverse sample
by asking students directly rather than accepting only those who volunteered. Upon providing written consent from both themselves and a parent/guardian, a total of 56 students participated in an interview, a response rate of 62% (see Esbensen et al. 1999). In addition, another 36 young people were purposely sampled through four local youth services/agencies and an Aboriginal football/netball club. Young people were asked by workers, responded to flyers or were asked by researchers when researchers were invited into group settings. While not random, this allowed the research to access young people who were young mothers, young people from refugee families, Aboriginal, not at school, living in foster care, unemployed and/or living independently. Written consent was sought from all participants and parent/guardian consent was gained from service users if they were under 16 years of age. A total of 92 young people were interviewed by five interviewers.

Initially, Koori students from the three schools were also selected. When recruiting them for the study, negative attitudes and comments about Koori students were heard from teachers and some students. These included statements such as “you’ll never find them”, “he never comes to school” or “why would you choose him?” There was clear resistance to their inclusion and recruitment in the research in ways that were both spoken and unspoken. Because it was felt that the study was stigmatising these young people, this recruitment strategy was abandoned. Other Indigenous recruitment strategies remained for several interviews, but the questions about wellbeing lead to personal stories involving significant grief and loss issues and while support was offered, concern for these young people and the interviewer, also led this strategy to be abandoned. Indigenous respondents are identified only when they identified themselves as Indigenous at some point in the interview; overall six of the 92 respondents identified as Indigenous. It is noted that one of the five interviewers/research assistants was Indigenous but clearly a White framework was adopted (see Moreton-Robinson 2006).

All respondents were asked to participate in an interview exploring their understandings of health, wellbeing, community, relationships and reconciliation. These interviews were semi-structured where a set of questions were asked of each respondent but ranged in order to pursue particular topics in detail and so that interviews flowed in a somewhat conversational manner. Interviews ranged from 30 to 90 minutes in length. Participants were asked: what do you think about reconciliation?, how would you resolve these issues?, do you have any Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal friends?, and how would you like Indigenous and non-Indigenous people to live? Other questions and discussion followed these questions.

**Data analysis**

All interviews were transcribed and entered into NVivo. Analysis of the data identified common responses and themes and sought out the meanings underlying their discussion. Therefore, while some discussed the issue briefly, some were uncomfortable discussing the issue, some had no opinions and some clearly tried to ‘sit on the fence’. Also important were dismissive comments, ignorance and racist remarks as well as the passion, anger and empowered notions of each response. Indigenous respondents are identified in the findings to privilege their knowledge, understandings and experiences of the issues being discussed. Given the topic, their perspectives are important contributions. Findings presented here reflect the common themes and responses
and the general meanings of respondents so that these can be compared with broader discourses reflecting reconciliation.

Findings
I think Aboriginals complain and protect each other because most people are so offensive to them. Like my Mum, you should see her in the supermarket, if there is an Aboriginal in front of us and she’s talking...Mum just barges through. I find that really rude and I reckon that’s what makes them so aggressive. Mum thinks it’s all their fault but I reckon sometimes people like her cause it.

The Young Participants
While 92 young people participated in this study, 86 discussed reconciliation and/or Aboriginal issues and were included in this analysis. Of these 86, 48 were female, 38 were male, four identified as ‘Koori’ and all were aged between 14 and 24, the average being 17. Half lived in a ‘nuclear family’ and half lived in other types of families, most often with a single, female head-of-household. Some participants had resided in Shepparton for their whole life while others had lived in Shepparton for only a few months, with the average length of residence being 11 years.

The sample included students who were doing well in school with ambitious career plans as well as others who struggled with school, those with few friends or feeling they did not fit in, and those who were very social. There were also those who accepted their life and were very happy, those who were concerned about their futures, and those who were “into” their part-time job, their sport, their friends or family, or other activities. Most of the users of the youth services did not attend school; some had left in year 9 or 10 while some were still in school or at TAFE and others had completed year 12. Some of those utilising these services were gay or lesbian, some were parents, some were unemployed, some suffered depression, some were refugees, some had been “kicked out of home” and/or some just wanted support.

Meanings of reconciliation
The term ‘reconciliation’ was not familiar to some of these young people: “what does that mean?”, “I’ve heard it but I don’t know what it means”, and “that’s that Aboriginal thing isn’t it?” Twenty-two specifically stated that they favoured reconciliation, 20 stated that they were unsure while only five actually said that they opposed reconciliation. Another four described it as a complex issue. One said that it did “not personally involve me so it doesn’t affect me”. One young, lesbian woman commented: “why think you are better than someone just because of the colour of their skin. It is just like straight people thinking that are better than gay people”. Six commented that Indigenous populations deserved a greater level of respect: “my blood...it’s no different”, “they’re no more powerful than you and I, just a different skin”, and “everyone has got feelings, that is how I look at it”. For some, reconciliation was supported with conditions:

I like reconciliation because I think that White Australians took the land. But I also think it should be with moderation because we can’t obviously give all of it back because we still live here. I think that the
major sacred sites, like mark them, not give them back, but show that we respect them.

By reconciliation, most referred to talking or “both sides sitting down and talking it out”. There was a belief that talk could result in consensus and allow “both sides” to benefit, develop understanding and build relationships. However, few could identify tangible methods for achieving a sense of harmony: “I don’t know. I don’t really know how you would be able to resolve it because some people are racist, some people aren’t and you can’t really force somebody to change their beliefs”.

Participants from the youth services were less supportive of reconciliation than those of the school sample. School students were more likely to express sentiments that “White Australians took the land” and that treatment of Indigenous populations had been “unfair”. However, most participants were not very informed and did not appear to want to be informed. Further, being more informed did not mean that young people were more supportive of Aboriginal rights or needs.

When discussing these issues, all but one non‑Indigenous respondent spoke from their own value system. Some talked about improving the ways in which Aboriginal children were raised, some talked about “getting them good jobs and medicine” while others prioritised happiness over injustice: Aboriginal people “just have to get over it...If you live your whole life with hate, you’re not going to have a very fun life”. Only one stated that he was not sure what “they wanted” or how “their culture views things”. There was little recognition of cultural differences; differences were viewed in terms of disadvantage, appearances and primarily behaviours. Participants cited incidences of being asked for cigarettes or money, or in some cases fights, as evidence of the differences between their own situations and that of local Kooris. That Aboriginal people may not share mainstream goals of tertiary education, employment, home ownership and financial security was not even considered by most.

Many acknowledged that despite past injustices, Aboriginal people “just needed to get over it” or to “move on”. This view served to absolve non‑Indigenous people of responsibility. It was clear that if change were to occur, the impetus would have to be from Indigenous Australians; these young people indicated that they were in no way responsible. Ten respondents specifically stated that relations will not change: “it’s not going to change and it is not going to get better.” Another believed assimilation would work: “Realistically I think what is going to happen with Aboriginal people is...they’re just going to be integrated with society until the only way they can tell if they’re Aboriginal or not is through ancestral records, not through any kind of sense of racial identity.”

The Koori respondents made few comments about reconciliation. They all said they did not have “problems” around their “race” and had either not experienced or only occasionally experienced “racism”. Two went on to describe situations involving difficulties in securing employment and divisions in social settings. They all talked about the need for Indigenous and non‑Indigenous people to interact and develop relationships. In response to reconciliation, most said they “don’t think about it often”: “Oh, I don’t know really... I was supposed to go on the march last year, but, I had football I think, so, I didn’t really go, I haven’t really thought about it since I got asked to go on the march”. Researchers sensed a discomfort in talking about this topic.
The sorry debate

As McCallum (2003) found, the sorry debate was intertwined with issues of reconciliation for these respondents: “I think we may need to do something about it… we did settle in here when there was already another culture here and we’ve just taken it over. There may need to be at some point an apology of some sort”. Almost half of the respondents raised the issue of a national apology to Aboriginal people. Of these 38, 20 indicated that they were opposed, four indicated that it was “too late” for an apology, three said “maybe” or “perhaps”, one responded that “I just couldn’t really care” and two said “I don’t know”. Eight stated that they supported a national apology, although five of these respondents qualified this statement; three added that they would not personally apologise and two said that the government should “apologise” but not be “responsible”:

“I guess an apology is needed but I don’t think I should apologise either”.

The tone of responses ranged from those who were “100% for it” to those who were strongly opposed to a national apology. Those in support usually did not justify their position while many in opposition explained their reason, most commonly that they did not feel that the current society should take responsibility for injustices of past governments:

I don’t believe I did anything wrong. I don’t know why I have to say sorry. Yes we should say sorry for what they did but I don’t believe it has to come from us, I didn’t do anything wrong. I have never done anything to the Aboriginals. So I am not sorry for anything.

A sixteen year old male passionately responded: “Hell no!!! And put three exclamation marks after that. Because when he [John Howard] is admitting wrong they can sue for money from taxes”. Some stated that mainstream society had nothing to apologise for: “We say sorry to them? No, I don’t think we should say sorry to them, we’re the ones that live in our country but they don’t make an effort, they’re still sitting in the middle of the mall and shouting and stuff. It’s not us that have done anything”. Another respondent identified himself as racist: “I don’t think they should say, the Government or whoever, should say sorry. Because that is where I am racist, because Aboriginals are taking advantage, they lay claim to everything”. Another commented:

Some issues I agree with my Dad on. He says that the stolen generation should be grateful because if you look at the number of Aboriginals that were taken into White homes, and how many of them survived compared to those who were left in the Aboriginal community. If they were put in White people’s homes they would have been much better off, they would have had medicine and stuff.

A few doubted the impact of an apology: “I don’t know if the whole John Howard saying sorry thing were to happen, whether it would change anything… I think it was really wrong what happened, the stolen children thing and all that.” One young Aboriginal person also indicated that an apology would not achieve much and that people today were not responsible: “John Howard didn’t shoot the Aborigines did he”!

He felt that other things were more important:

...instead of saying sorry to us, why don’t you let us speak our own lingo, do our own things and, like, be our own person again... instead
of saying sorry to us, how about just giving us back what we want, a bit of land; we don’t want a whole Australia back, we can’t, there’s other people living here, but just give us a little bit of land and our, our lingo too.

“We’re all the same”

There were undertones of sameness in most of young people’s discussions of Indigenous issues. In doing so, these respondents drew on understandings of equality and fairness as sameness: “It would all be equal if I was in charge”. At the heart of most young people’s understandings was that equality as sameness was a “fair” approach.

...everyone should just be exactly the same as each other, you know what I mean, treat each other like there’s no difference. Like we don’t need... places that are specifically for one group of people, like for Aboriginals... cause that’s... segregation... we’re all people... Everybody should be treated exactly the same.

For some, issues cultural diversity could be addressed, and perhaps ignored, by treating everyone the same: “I don’t treat Aboriginals any differently. I have a lot of Aboriginal friends. They treat me with respect and I treat them with respect”. Other comments echoed these sentiments:

In Shepparton there are a lot of Indigenous people as well as people from all over the world like Turkey and Albania and Japan and China and everywhere...I have some very close friends who are Indigenous people...I’m not racist, I don’t care what they do...They’re nice to me, I’m nice to them, I’m never mean to anyone unless they’re mean to me and I haven’t really come across any Aboriginals or other people, like other cultures, that aren’t nice...I think Aboriginal people are great, then you’ve got some of them that are a bit off the edge, but then, like, there’s only that handful that makes the others out to be the way people speak about them.

Many clearly tried to say ‘the right thing’ but most believed that all people should be treated the same, have access to the same resources and that disadvantage was about personal behaviours and choices rather than structural inequalities or cultural respect.

Yeah, I think we need to have reconciliation with them because they are Australians, the same as us, but if we are going to be reconciled we have to be all treated as equals, so they can’t expect special payments because they are Aboriginals when they want to be equal. They will probably have to change lots of mindsets of other people to treat people as equals.

That “the Government favours Aboriginals” was also a common perception. Nineteen respondents specifically stated that Aboriginal Australians get “special treatment” and this was viewed as “unfair”. Many blamed “special treatment” and extra entitlements as creating difference, indicating that problems, including local fights, words and racist attitudes, were the result of not being treated “the same”.

Perceptions of Reconciliation and related Indigenous Issues among Young Residents of Shepparton
"Good" and "bad" Aborigines

Reflecting the focus of individual behaviour as key to how people are judged, some participants talked about two groups of Aboriginal people locally, the "good" and the "bad". The "bad Aboriginals" were blamed for creating stereotypes and "why most people hate Aboriginals".

...you have two different sorts of Aboriginals. You have the Aboriginal people and then you have the street Aboriginal people, who really rub it in. They are more the people who will say 'I am Aboriginal, these are my rights, blah, blah, blah,' but they are abusing them. Those people I really hate but otherwise I have got no problem whatsoever with Aboriginals.

The "bad Aboriginals" were seen on the local streets, were threatening and were said to start fights "if you looked at them wrong". Many respondents referred to hearing about others who were "bashed". Respondents were also quick to add that their "Aboriginal friends" were "not like the bad ones" or the "trouble makers", but were from a "good family".

In this way, Indigenous people were categorised by non-Indigenous respondents into two distinct groups and behaviour, rather than culture, was the grounds for judgement. These categories were extreme, to the point that Indigenous people engaging in mainstream behaviours were sometimes not viewed as Indigenous: "I've got 3 friends that are Koori; they don't classify themselves as Koori because they prefer to work for their money, not sit down and bludge". Respondents blamed Aboriginal people for not working, for how they raised their children, for substance use, for crime and violence, and for their attitudes. Few were able to separate behaviour and culture and discussion of cultural difference was clearly absent.

Within the dichotomy, some talked about violence and distinguished between a general fear of Aboriginal people while acknowledging that some Aboriginal people that were "nice":

If you even look at one Aboriginal person wrong at school, then that whole community will come and harm you, or if you’ve got a car damage it. It’s really bad. You have some, there’s a few in my class, who’re really nice and they wouldn’t say a bad thing about you.

Eleven respondents actually talked about "being afraid" of Aboriginal people. "I feel sorry for the Aboriginals and what happened, but then in Shepp it’s scary around the streets at night. I would never go". Providing an alternative perspective, one young man spoke about being out with his Koori mates: "people say things every now and again... or they just won’t leave them alone all night, like walk past, bump ‘em, just try to get them angry and get them agro, try to get them angry". Most of the participants did not talk about racism towards Indigenous Australians. There was more focus on local Indigenous people being "racist towards non-Indigenous people" and that "Aborigines in Shepparton create their own racism" largely through their behaviour, reinforcing the notion of Aboriginal people as "bad". "I can see why most of Shepp really hates the Aboriginal community because they’ll bash people up and if you see a group of them
down the street you don’t want to have much to do with them”. Again, the basis of being categorised as “bad” was behaviour rather than culture.

Participants were asked directly whether or not they had Aboriginal friends. Few indicated that they had Aboriginal friends and while some spoke about having Aboriginal friends, discussions revealed that they were acquaintances rather than members of their social groups, thus differentiating relationships with Aboriginal and other people. Having “an Aboriginal friend” tended to be a reference to knowing someone of Indigenous identity and implied a responsibility that they should have Aboriginal friends: “No I don’t, sorry [have any Aboriginal friends]”. But a few did have “many Koori friends” and one young woman spoke about having to deal with her “pretty racist family” as a result. All the Koori respondents had, and wanted to have, non-Koori friends and they identified the need for mainstream and Indigenous communities to interact frequently.

Discussion

A study of wellbeing in a regional, multicultural centre in Victoria identified a trend towards a lack of understanding of, concern for and interest in Indigenous Australians and the local Aboriginal community. Some comments were blatantly racist while most had uneasy tones of judgement and ignorance while lacking empathy. This study supports Pedersen et al.’s (2005: 170) claim that “Australia would appear not to be as accepting of a multi-cultural society as we sometimes believe, and on which we often pride ourselves”. Most young people interviewed localised the issue which was found in McCallum’s (2003) and Pedersen et al. (2000) studies among rural and regional participants but less so among urban participants.

Meanings of reconciliation varied and focused mainly on issues of talk, acknowledgement of unfair treatment in the past and ‘practical reconciliation’. In terms of a reconciliation process, simple solutions were often proposed. Most inferred that talk and building relationships would solve the problems while few accepted any responsibility for building these relationships (see also Leigh 2002). Supporters of reconciliation were more similar to Howard’s ‘practical reconciliation’, focusing on health, employment and education, with little or no recognition of cultural difference and respect. Reconciliation requires a change in attitudes and behaviours by all Australians (Halloran 2007) yet these young people indicated that it was up to Indigenous people to adopt ‘mainstream’ values and behaviours for reconciliation to be achieved. Intertwined in their discussions of reconciliation were ideas about a national apology (see also McCallum 2003). Half discussed it voluntarily with some supporting an apology, some sceptical of its outcome and many opposed due to its implications in terms of finance and White acceptance of responsibility. Regardless, these young people were often more comfortable discussing the sorry debate, perhaps because, as McCallum (2003) suggests, it is a polarised issue where discussion surrounds support or opposition rather than complexity or change (see McCallum 2003).

While most of these young, regional Victorians wanted life to improve for Indigenous Australians and supported reconciliation, most were more committed to a perspective that opposed any system that was not the same for everyone. Having specific services for particular groups was viewed as providing ‘additional’ and ‘special’ services, prioritising groups, and not being fair, equal or treating everyone the same (see McCallum
Most felt that such ‘special treatment’ was a key factor in racist views held by non-Indigenous Australians which supports McCallum (2003) view that the ‘myth of special privilege’ is at the heart of the construction of current discourses around Indigenous issues. Understandings of sameness are also underpinned with an ideology of White privilege which ignore the complexity of issues and relations embedded with cultural difference; structural inequalities, disadvantage and cultural difference were rarely discussed by participants of this study. White privilege enables a process of othering and cultural homogeneity (Tynan 2008) largely masked under talk of sameness and equity.

It was also found that young people’s perspectives identify two types of Aborigines, “good” and “bad”. These categorisations were evident to the point that “good” Aboriginals were not thought of as Koori by some. This suggests that individuals are not only responsible for their own behaviours but that these are the basis for social status. Change, then, was focused at the individual level; it was up to individuals to change behaviour and through behavioural change would come respect, opportunity and equality. This deflecting of responsibility from White Australians to Indigenous Australians, “they need to change”, ignores any structural disadvantage or the role of White values and judgements (see Meyers 2000). The paradox is that while these young people recognised that Indigenous Australians are disadvantaged, they also labelled them as the ‘other’ and expected ‘them’ to change and become more like ‘us’. This supports Forrest & Dunn’s (2006) finding that Anglo privilege and multicultural values are independent from each other. Further, this situates these young people’s perspectives as consistent with current political discourses, including current confusion between the national political level and individual action and attitudes (de Costa 2002). It further reflects a form of ‘new racism’ where Indigenous people were not seen as inferior but “differentiated as threats to ‘social cohesion’ and ‘national unity’” (Dunn et al. 2004: 410-11). This more subtle and indirect form of racism is intolerant of difference to mainstream values (see Dunn et al. 2004).

This is a small study in one region of Australia and therefore cannot be generalised. Further, Shepparton is known to be a politically conservative area, which may contribute to more negative attitudes towards Indigenous Australians. However, it cannot be assumed that rural Australians hold different attitudes towards Indigenous Australians than their urban counterparts, and the similarity between the respondents in this study and popular and political discourses does not suggest that Sheppartonians are unique in their attitudes.

What this study does suggest is that at the heart of perspectives toward reconciliation and related Indigenous issues is the power held by non-Indigenous Australians. Most discussions of reconciliation identify Whiteness as normative, thereby identifying White Australia’s position of power (Saxton 2004). Moreton-Robinson (1998: 11) clearly articulates that Whiteness is at the centre of society and Indigenous and other cultures are on the margins:

Whiteness in its contemporary form in Australian society is culturally based... Whiteness forms the centre of Australian society... Whiteness confers both dominance and privilege; it is embedded in Australia’s institutions and in the social practices of everyday life. White people
share common behaviour, attitudes, beliefs, values and preferences
despite the fact that there are differences between those who share the
racial location of “Whiteness”.

Myers (2000: 369) observed that Australians refuse to acknowledge their “Whiteness”
which denies White privilege. He concluded that “in the eyes of Whites” Aborigines
“were invisible... Until Whites begin to see Aborigines..., no prospect for reconciliation
in Australia “confronted Anglo privilege by attaching an ethnicity to Anglo culture”
resulting in a backlash that reinforced Anglo privilege. This backlash – in the forms of
One Nation who associated immigration and multiculturalism with social division and
John Howard’s focus on “Anglo privilege, identity and values” (Forrest & Dunn 2006:
208) – has refocused many Australians on common values, sameness and one Australia
(Forrest & Dunn 2006; Leigh 2002; Short 2003). Participants of this study seemed to
have concurred.

Conclusion

Thus, the understandings that these young people have embraced are consistent with
discourses of sameness, individualism and practical reconciliation. While some might
say this is only one group of young people in a rural area known to be a safe Liberal
seat, their strong statements about ‘special treatment’, the ascribed blame on Aboriginal
people and the lack of knowledge and interest in such issues—issues present in their own
community—is concerning. While young people’s perspectives had to be sought out for
this analysis, Kooris are aware of these attitudes and must endure them, negotiate them
and live with them daily. This highlights the impact of the power relationships between
White and Indigenous communities in the lives of some individuals. If reconciliation is
to develop, then changing the understandings of non-Indigenous Australians and their
position of privilege is crucial.

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References


Endnotes
1 In 1979, the National Aboriginal Conference proposed a treaty between Indigenous people and the Commonwealth of Australia. As the proposition gained foothold, it was anticipated that the treaty would “right the wrongs” and provide a settlement of past injustices (Short 2003: 494). White politicians disliked the concept of a treaty as it implied two states (Short 2003).
2 In 2000, the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation was disbanded and Reconciliation Australia, an independent organisation, adopted the tasks of the Council (McCallum 2000).
3 It was not assumed that young people using a Koori service or playing for Rumbalara were Indigenous. Recruiting non-Indigenous young people who played for ‘Rumba’ or used a Koori service was viewed as important to including a diversity of young people and perspectives in the sample.
4 Two interviewers conducted the high school interviews and three conducted the mainstream youth service interviews. One of the latter was an Indigenous researcher who was also involved in conducting/organising interviews with Indigenous young people. The authors were two of these interviewers. The interviewers did not know the participants with the exception of the Indigenous interviewer where a prior relationship indicated trust and was key to consent for participation. However, this researcher did not interview any family members and one of the non-Indigenous interviewers interviewed family members when required.
5 The framework used was clearly a White framework where the researchers were in positions of power, as adults interviewing young participants, in directing questions, in assessing relevant discourses and in categorising participants as Indigenous or non-Indigenous (see Moreton-Robinson 2006).
6 Embedded in these young people’s talk was a strong notion of individualisation where achievements and lifestyles are based on individual efforts, behaviours and choices (see Beck 1992). Under the façade of choice, behaviours are rewarded for their lifestyle outcomes and monitored by other individuals. The source of good or bad choices, the regulator, is the family, which was blamed for the ways in which Aboriginal children were raised, what they learnt and how they acted.
7 Forrest & Dunn (2006) found more negative attitudes towards Indigenous Australians among residents with lower levels of formal education. As levels of education in Shepparton are lower than national levels (ABS 2002), this may contribute to explaining the negative attitudes of local residents. However, respondents of this study are young and most are still being educated.
8 Forrest & Dunn (2006) argue that privilege is held by Anglo rather than White Australian, distinguishing between Anglo and other White European identities. While tensions exist between Anglo and other White Australians, they remain privileged when distinguished from Indigenous Australians.