Addressing the problem of Indigenous Disadvantage in Remote Areas of Developed Nations: A Plea for More Comparative Research

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Abstract

It has been well documented that Indigenous populations in developed 'post-colonial' nations (such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States) experience disadvantage in a number of areas when compared with their non-Indigenous counterparts. Despite (or perhaps because of) a range of policy initiatives and political approaches to addressing disadvantage, there continues to be poor understandings of what 'works' and under what conditions. There is a body of literature which compares conditions, political ideas and policy initiatives across the jurisdictions, but the bases for comparison are poorly described; there is insufficient linking of research into 'ideas' with research into initiatives and their outcomes, and there is insufficient engagement of Indigenous people in the research. This paper proposes a more rigorous approach to comparative research that is based on principals of partnership with and participation of Indigenous people. We conclude that well designed participatory comparative research can not only provide new insights to old problems, but can improve Indigenous people's access to global knowledge systems.

Keywords: comparative research, Indigenous disadvantage, remoteness, Indigeneity-Grounded Analysis, Community-Based Participatory Research

1.0 Introduction

It has been well documented that Indigenous populations in developed 'post-colonial' nations (such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States) experience disadvantage in a number of areas when compared with their non-Indigenous counterparts (see, for example, Cooke, Mitrou, Lawrence, Guimond, & Beavon, 2007). Indigenous people have shorter life expectancies, experience more health problems, have lower socio-economic status, have poorer education outcomes, are less likely to have secure housing, are more likely to be incarcerated, and are exposed to higher levels of domestic violence and other safety risks. In each of these countries, it has been argued that Indigenous people living in remote areas (variously defined) experience even

greater disadvantage than their urban and rural counterparts (Hunter, 2007; Marrone, 2007). Across the jurisdictions, there appears to be some level of agreement as to how Indigenous people came to be in such a position of disadvantage—dispossession of land and culture and other assets by colonising powers, denial of access to services and opportunities through institutionalised racism, and a continuing failure of policy makers to learn from past mistakes (King, Smith, & Gracey, 2009). Remote dwelling Indigenous people are further disadvantaged because of their spatial isolation from services, economic opportunities, political institutions, and each other (Hunter, 2007).

Each nation-state has attempted a number of strategies to address disadvantage—systems of land rights and political representation, investing in specifically targeted health, education and employment programs, implementing punitive measures to encourage school attendance and 'better' use of welfare payments, awarding compensation for past mistreatment, and negotiating royalty agreements with mining companies and other economic beneficiaries of activity on Indigenous land. Some of these initiatives operate at the national level, others are specific to particular States or provinces, yet others are very localised and affect individual families, communities or regional populations. In each jurisdiction (with the probable exception of New Zealand, where the concept of 'remoteness' is less powerful), Indigenous people living in remote areas have been the subjects of policy experimentation with new and different initiatives tried there first and then abandoned or extended to other populations (Humpage, 2010).

The apparent similarities in conditions facing Indigenous people living in remote parts of Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States have been documented in a body of literature whose scope includes more than one jurisdiction. In the mid-1980s, researchers such as Elliot (1985) were comparing approaches to native title in Canada, Alaska and Australia. More recently, there have been volumes of work dealing with patterns of Indigenous mobility in those jurisdictions (Taylor & Bell, 2004) and Indigenous demography more generally (Carson, Rasmussen, Huskey, Ensign, & Taylor, 2011). There is a much longer tradition of comparison of remote Indigenous politics, demographics, health and economy of the United States (particularly Alaska) and Canada as part of the broader agenda around Arctic 'north' research (Huskey, 2005; Huskey & Morehouse, 1992). Despite this work, we continue to have a limited understanding of what 'works' in terms of strategies to address Indigenous disadvantage (Huskey, 2005; Taylor, Johns, Williams, & Steenkamp, 2011). As this special issue of the Journal of Rural and Community Development provides a further contribution to the existing 'comparative' literature, we present this paper as a summary of the key themes that have emerged from past work and as a call to researchers interested in the field to develop more rigorous models for both making comparisons and drawing conclusions from those comparisons. In particular we are concerned with the absence of Indigenous worldviews apparent in the shaping of comparative research to this point, and with the often naïve assumptions about similarities and differences applying to various jurisdictions. We advocate greater attention to the substantial methodological debates emerging from comparative political studies in particular. We also advocate the use of a diversity of epistemologies (Green, 2008) from both western scientific traditions and Indigenous knowledge systems to enhance the collective understanding of how disadvantage (and advantage) emerges in different circumstances and what might constitute positive responses to disadvantage.

The paper proceeds as follows: we first provide a rationale for conducting comparative research around Indigenous living conditions in remote parts of colonised and developed nations. We then critique the comparative work that has been reported in the academic literature in terms of its key themes and approaches. We identify ways in which the comparative methodologies used in research so far might be improved, including the introduction of rigorous participatory research methods where the research questions, methods, analysis and 'solutions' include Indigenous participation. We conclude with some words of caution about the limitations of comparative research in this context.

2.0 The Case for Comparative Research

Cornell (2006) identified some of the bases on which remote dwelling Indigenous populations in Australia, Canada, and the United States could be compared. These included the shared 'colonial' and 'frontier' heritage, the emergence of similar systems of national and provincial government, and similarities in measures of Indigenous disadvantage. Researchers such as Morrissey (2006) and Lane (2006) point to the institutional classification of Indigenous people as a 'problem' as another point of comparison. Huskey et al. (1992), and Huskey (2005) reported on the consistency of living conditions described in papers presented to the Western Regional Science Association remote region sessions. They noted that comparisons of remote area populations and policies involved both assessment of the characteristics of the populations and impacts of institutions and geography on those characteristics.

The comparative method has been employed in political science to help draw inferences from relatively small numbers (*small n*) of discrete cases (Lijphart, 1971) and to assess the 'necessary and sufficient conditions' leading to a particular phenomenon or outcome (Macfarlane 1992). The comparative method is more than simply comparing cases. It involves a rigorous approach to specifying the context of the comparison and investigating the relationships between variables. It has been advocated in political science research because of a frustration among some with a proliferation of case studies in research that were poorly if at all connected to one another and whose collective sense was difficult to derive (Landman, 2008). Comparativists instead advocate a more purposive selection of cases which are designed to respond to specific questions rather than to observe general conditions. Within the comparative method, similarities and differences between the cases under observation are clearly articulated and their theoretical implications are hypothesised. Because there is a clear articulation of the context of the cases, new cases can be directly compared with previous research (Mahoney, 2007).

There are four common approaches to selecting and analysing comparative cases. Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD) selects cases which can be argued to have similar characteristics in terms of the independent variables in the study but differ in terms of the dependent variable. Research investigates how different outcomes might arise in apparently similar cases. Apparently minor differences in the values of independent variables can be revealed as significant predictors of outcomes. Most Different Systems Design (MDSD) conversely selects cases that have similar characteristics in terms of dependent variables but apparently very different characteristics in terms of independent variables. Skocpol (1979) is regarded as having conducted one of the classic MDSD studies in analysing how popular revolutions emerged in the apparently very different political contexts in France, Russia and China. Wickham-Crowley (1992) on the other hand used MSSD to analyse why guerrilla movements received support from peasants in some Latin American countries but not others.

Comparative research might also focus on exemplar cases (those which appear to best represent the hypothesised relationships) or extreme cases (those which appear least conforming). Comparative studies have been done between nations and between sub-national geographic units and have examined a single site at different points in time, and different sites at the same or different points in time (Landman, 2008).

An attraction of the comparative method (beyond the rigour it imposes on positioning case studies within the literature) for examining Indigenous disadvantage is that it allows the researcher to attempt to control for the effects of time, geography and history. Time/history may be particularly important (Huskey, 2005) as there have been a number of cases where conclusions initially drawn about the efficacy of interventions to address disadvantage have subsequently been questioned because the outcomes observed proved to be short lived. One such example is the apparent success of the 'no school, no pool' initiative in increasing levels of school attendance in the remote Australian Indigenous community of Wadeye (McClausland & Levy, 2006). Within just a few years, school attendance rates had declined despite the continuation of the initiative. Even a 'thick' single case will be narrow in either time or scope and make it difficult to assess why a condition may be short or long lived or whether a similar initiative would produce a similar or different outcome in another context. Caine and Krogman (2010) have likewise argued that claims about the value of Canada's Impact and Benefit Agreements between Indigenous people and resource companies should be regarded with caution because of a lack of knowledge of their long term impacts.

Similarly, while the assumption may be made that 'remoteness' is a variable of similarity, there may be important differences ascribable to the types of 'remoteness' experienced by populations in different jurisdictions (and even within a jurisdiction) (Carson et al., 2011). The specific climates and geography (mountains, rivers, deserts etc.) may also be important (following Humpage, 2010; Stafford-Smith, 2008; and others). Institutional geography is also important in this sense. Institutional geography may be defined as the ways in which the political systems perceive, sustain and respond to issues of geography. Obvious examples are provincial and other administrative boundaries. In remote Australia, Canada and the United States at least, 'remoteness' has been operationalised within the institutional geography. There are continuing debates about which parts of the nation-states can be considered 'remote' and what institutions and policies should be directed specifically at remote areas (Wakerman, 2004). There are also 'remote Indigenous' geographies in these places—recognised tribal lands, concepts of Indigenous or native 'communities' and so on which, while also present in non-remote areas, are far more pervasive in remote ones. Remote Indigenous geographies often play a direct and prominent role in debates about land rights and bilingual policy (Hickling-Hudson & Ahlquist, 2003)—remote tribes are assumed to maintain their traditional 'country' and culture, which sets them apart from (many) urban ones. That these assumptions are not always supported by evidence has proven to be challenging in the policy process for Indigenous and non-Indigenous interests alike (Taylor et al., 2011).

Comparative research could therefore provide much deeper insights into the issues of institutional geography in remote Australia, Canada and the United States. There are interesting questions to be explored about the extent to which remoteness matters in determining the outcomes of policy (Huskey et al., 1992). Can 'within-remote' differences be attributed to the different institutional geography in the same way that researchers have tried to attribute

them to the political economy (Barnes, 2005), climate (Stafford-Smith, 2008), terrain, or transport networks, for example?

Theories about 'remoteness' and what it means for the economic, social, political, and cultural spheres of life are generally not as well developed as those for urban 'cores' and their peripheries (Carson et al., 2011). There appear to be relatively few nation-states that have 'remote areas' in the sense that has been conceptualised in Australia, Canada, and the United States, although comparative research may allow us to identify others such as Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, South Africa (Schedvin, 1990), Russia and other parts of the Arctic north (Huskey, 2005). There may even be comparison-worthy 'remoteness' in African and Asian nation-states that so far have been largely excluded from comparative work. Better understanding of the similarities and differences between these 'remotes' can be created through well-designed comparative research.

3.0 Existing Themes and Approaches in Comparative Research

As we have illustrated, there have been a number of attempts at comparison of the various jurisdictions of interest, and our investigation of the existing research has identified that many of these efforts focus quite narrowly on documenting indicators of socio-economic or health status among remote dwelling (and other) Indigenous people (Hill, Barker, & Vos, 2007; Hunter & Gray, 1998; Marks, Cargo, & Daniel, 2007). Others describe political processes, and specifically the role of Indigenous people in political processes, but rarely empirically link the discussion of processes to outcomes that might be reflected in socio-economic or health status indicators (Hickling-Hudson et al., 2003; Humpage, 2010; White, 2007). By and large, the linking of processes to outcomes is a task undertaken in thick single case studies, such as Garnett et al.'s (2009) assessment of the positive link between 'caring for country' initiatives and health status of remote dwelling Indigenous people in the Top End of Australia's Northern Territory. Notwithstanding examples such as these, researchers such as Humpage (2010), Hunter (2007) and Head (2008) have lamented the apparent lack of rigour in the analysis of the link between policy and other initiatives and outcomes for Indigenous people in remote Australia (as an example). Some proffered 'solutions' to Indigenous disadvantage appear to be in direct contrast to one another (for example, self-determination versus increased intervention, urbanisation versus return to country (Scrimgeour, 2007)) and others are likely to be uncomfortable allies at best (for example accelerated engagement in mainstream economy against reconnection to nature and culture). Proffered solutions may be ideologically appealing but lack practical application (as in Stevenson's (2006) analysis of co-management initiatives in the resources sector in Canada). The lack of depth of understanding of possible solutions, their efficacy and applicability to given situations was one of the reasons Head (2008) classified overcoming Indigenous disadvantage in Australia as a 'wicked' or intractable problem. The ideological rather than empirical foundation of many proffered solutions has frustrated researchers and policy makers (Hunter, 2007). We can add our frustration that in many other cases solutions are offered as a 'tail-end' to essentially descriptive studies and/or on the basis of naïve comparison. It is common for researchers to include briefly sketched solution-options at the end of a paper with little articulation of how they informed the research or were derived from it (see, for example, Ring and Firman (1998) on reducing Indigenous mortality in Australia).

It is unfortunately common for research purporting to investigate appropriate responses to Indigenous disadvantage to focus on ideologies of 'ideas' (Humpage, 2010) with limited empirical analysis of the links between ideas and outcomes. Researchers have espoused the value of particular political processes—self-determination (Ohlson, Cushing, Trulio, & Leventhal, 2008), or assimilation (Jull, 2005), 'mutual obligation' (Head, 2008), or intervention (Altman & Hinkson, in press)—which are usually framed around positioning Indigenous governance systems in relation to the mainstream political systems. The importance of ideas has also been reflected in discussions about apologies (Murphy, 2010), compensation (Gregory & Trousdale, 2009), 'recognition' (Coulthard, 2007), reconciliation (Corntassel & Holder, 2008), and the reaffirmation of tribalism (Fleras & Maaka, 2010). It appears that remote dwelling Indigenous people can be more effectively set apart from the mainstream through the construction of systems of 'Indigenous politics' (Cornell, 2006) because in part of the geographic isolation from the mainstream. This setting apart has also been criticised as allowing the mainstream to abrogate responsibility for Indigenous issues (McClausland & Levy, 2006). An uncomfortable balance between public responsibility and the resourcing of remote Indigenous people to 'do it themselves' provides an undercurrent to discussions about relationships between Indigenous peoples and the resources sector and the engagement of Indigenous enterprises and non-governmental organisations as service providers (Angell & Parkins, 2011; Smith, 2006).

There is no lack of ideas about what could (and should) be done in terms of political approaches to the problem of Indigenous disadvantage in remote areas, but the evidence of the efficacy of these approaches in bringing about positive outcomes is sketchy at best (Hunter, 2007). A similar criticism may be made of the research around specific initiatives—including initiatives associated with 'closing the gap' in health and economic indicators in Australia (Pholi, Black & Richards, 2009), New Zealand (Humpage, 2006) and Canada (Cherubini, Hodson, Manley-Casimir, & Muir, 2010). There is a sense in which even nationally oriented initiatives (like 'closing the gap') have special meaning for remote dwelling populations. This is often because those populations are seen as being more authentically Indigenous and remote settings are at the forefront of public thinking about Indigeneity and the problem of Indigenous disadvantage (Prout & Howitt, 2009). Challenges are in some cases presented as more acute because of the constraints of culture and geography in remote areas, but solutions are also presented as more obvious because of the leverage culture and geography provides in terms of implementing and sustaining 'non-mainstream' systems (Walker, 2008). Land rights are easier to achieve in remote areas (Bravo, 1996). Implementation of 'mixed' (Huskey, 2005) or 'hybrid' (Altman, 2004) economies is seen as possible in remote areas where the resources of the land are still accessible. Similarly, this applies to 'caring for country' initiatives (Garnett et al., 2009) and the apparent (but highly debatable) value of 'traditional culture' as a tourism asset (Tremblay, 2009). Again, while we can compile a list of the sorts of initiatives that may be available for remote dwelling Indigenous people, there is very little consistent evidence about which initiative/s 'work' in terms of addressing disadvantage, and under what conditions initiatives may or may not 'work' (Taylor et al., 2011).

We contend in this paper that part of the reason why good evidence about the links between ideas, initiatives, and outcomes has been difficult to find is because researchers have largely failed to move beyond naïve comparisons between the jurisdictions of interest (and potentially others), nor have they made good use of comparative research methods within jurisdictions (an argument supported by Stout and Kipling's (1998) review of research into

Aboriginal women's issues in Canada). By and large, there has been little attention paid to clearly identifying the conditions (time, geography, nature of the population to which they are applied etc.) under which various ideas and initiatives work or do not work. What tends to happen in the naïve comparison literature is that one case is held out as an 'ideal' against another's imperfection with very little examination of the extent to which the ideal and imperfect types can be reasonably compared. This can be done, on the one hand, by positioning the researched case as 'ideal' as in Cornell's (2006) assessment of Indigenous nation building in the United States as a way forward for Canada, New Zealand and Australia. On the other hand, the non-researched case may be offered as the 'ideal' as in Short's (2007) unfavourable comparison of reconciliation processes in Australia compared with Canada or Watson's (2007) postulation that Canadian, United States and New Zealand approaches to recognising Indigenous sovereignty provide better foundations for improving Indigenous health than those in Australia. Disturbingly, non-Indigenous cases are often held as the 'ideal' in a comparative sense, an approach which hinders the development of research approaches and understandings that recognise Indigenous values (a criticism made by Young (2003) and Richmond and Ross (2009) of Indigenous health research in Canada). This approach also leads to the treatment of 'Indigenous' as an homogenous concept, limiting our understanding of the contribution of different kinds Indigenous experiences (Jacklin, 2009).

4.0 Towards A Comparative Research Framework

In the terminology of comparative science, much of the current research cited above fails to establish the 'necessary and sufficient' conditions under which the status of remote dwelling Indigenous people can be improved by any, or a combination of, the approaches actually used or proffered as alternatives. Humpage's (2010, p. 235) paper stands as an exception because it offers a framework for comparative research into how different policies emerge. That framework includes "institutions, interests and ideas" that might distinguish one case (her interest is in nation-states) from another and so lead to differences in policy approaches. Humpage's conclusions focus on the idea of 'spatiality' which is seen as influencing the diversity of experiences within a nation-state, and 'political strength' (Indigenous people's 'power to persuade' (Brett, 2007)), which is viewed as the key determinant of how well the practice of policy allowed Indigenous people to achieve 'self-determination'. These two issues are also highlighted in Fleras and Maaka's (2010) examination of how different policy regimes emerged in Canada and New Zealand. They argued that New Zealand's more urbanised Indigenous population and the higher proportion of Indigenous people in the total New Zealand population lead to greater direct involvement of Indigenous people there in shaping and implementing policy. While these are among the very few examples where specific attention is paid to how comparisons between cases may be constructed, they are concerned with analysis of the emergence of political systems (a worthwhile task in its own right) rather than the assessment of what might enable specific systems to achieve specific results in terms of addressing Indigenous disadvantage.

Humpage's work provides some insights into how comparative research may be framed. Indeed, it would be of value to simply add 'outcomes' as a fourth element (besides institutions, interests, and ideas) of the existing framework proposed by Humpage. Fleras et al.'s work, however, demands attention to the challenge of incorporating Indigenous views and philosophies in the design of comparative research. While their "Indigeneity-Grounded Analysis" was ostensibly about the parameters within which Indigenous people should be

engaged in political processes, those parameters are equally applicable to engagement in research processes and, in our interest, comparative research processes. Such engagement is only apparent in a few of the studies we have reviewed, for protected area development (Jones, Rigg, & Lee, 2010; Mallory, Fontaine, Akearok, & Johnston, 2006) and in health research (Mundel & Chapman, 2010; Reading, 2003; Reading & Nowgesic, 2002), but not in any comparative research. Most of the comparative research to date has been based around either positivist explorations of 'indicators' as consistent descriptors of the human condition irrespective of cultural, spatial or temporal contexts, despite growing recognition that indicators have different meanings in different contexts (Angell et al., 2011; Shavers, 2007). What Fleras et al. instead invoke is an attention to engagement of Indigenous people in partnership in the identification of the 'problems' and the design of the (in their case, political) systems that can address those problems. This mirrors the calls from Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars for partnership centred research methods where the research questions, methods, analysis and 'solutions' involve active Indigenous participation (Fletcher, 2003; Kovach, 2009; Smith. 1999). These calls are made with a pragmatic recognition that research scientists of the western tradition have something to bring to the table—not least of all the standing that 'scientific research' has within the mainstream political systems that will continue to be the gatekeepers for both ideas and initiatives. Indigenous participation, however, is essential to improve the understandings of all stakeholders of what problems, indicators and outcomes are important and what meanings they might have (Green, 2008). There is no need to pretend a 'divide' between Indigenous and western ways of knowing—there is sufficient evidence of the dynamism of both that ambitions to work towards shared understanding need not be futile (Agrawal, 1995).

Indigeneity-Grounded Analysis (IGA) incorporates five principles (Fleras et al., 2010, p. 14): "*indigenous difference, indigenous rights, indigenous sovereignty, indigenous belonging, and indigenous spirituality (including traditional knowledge)*". The question of why we might apply these principles to a process of partnership with and participation of Indigenous people in comparative research is readily answered because it provides a mechanism for improved collective understanding. The question of how to apply these principles within our comparative research framework is answered by researchers (for example, Ball and Janyst, 2008; Castleden, Sloan, & Neimanis, 2010; Fletcher, 2003; Louis, 2007) and research organizations (in Canada, the Institute for Aboriginal Peoples' Health (Reading, 2003), Canadian Interagency Advisory Panel on Research Ethics (CIHR, 2010)) that have utilized and advocated for Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) methods. While research contexts allow for and require different specific research processes, CBPR grounded in Indigenous paradigm principles, provides general steps that can be followed (Fletcher 2003; Louis & Grossman, 2009):

1. Form a partnership with Indigenous peoples and co-create the research process.
2. Discuss how the benefits of the research should flow to the community, how the community should control the information generated, how it is to be used and how it will be disseminated.
3. Develop a mechanism for Indigenous partners to review and revise drafts of findings and ensure access to final product.
4. Develop and maintain relationships within both Western ethics protocols and within Indigenous cultural frameworks.

IGA, CBPR and similar approaches have attracted criticism because of their roots in the dominant western research paradigm; several Indigenous scholars argue that research needs to be conducted from an entirely different world-view (Kovach, 2009; Louis, 2007; Smith, 1999), and argue for the use of Indigenous paradigms to frame research. We counter-argue that good comparative research recognises multiple world-views, and in fact needs to be open to input from Indigenous paradigms, western research paradigms, and the views of policy makers, resources companies, non-government organisations and others who are active in the systems of advantage/disadvantage. This broader view of partnership and participation is again aimed at improving individual and collective understanding of processes while echoing the call from Indigenous scholars (Kovach, 2005; Louis, 2007) for research that is grounded in relational accountability, respectful representation, reciprocal appropriation, and rights and regulation. It also demands from us transparency in terms of explicating how various paradigms have been included and why. Such transparency is largely absent from existing comparative research.

The principles within IGA and Indigenous paradigms therefore should serve as a wrapping within which our comparative research is conducted. The wrapping provides clear ethical guidelines that create the basis upon which the research relationship is built, and allows us to negotiate the parameters for comparison of cases with the remote dwelling Indigenous people who are the units of analysis and the intended beneficiaries of our collectively enhanced knowledge. The CBPR literature in particular provides a set of guidelines for conducting research with Indigenous people in single case settings. General issues around how single case projects should be scoped, conducted, reported on, and embedded into processes of community development have been well canvassed and we will not go into substantial detail again here (general guides include "Canadian Institutes – Tri-Council Policy Statement," 2010; Desert Knowledge CRC, 2006; Smith, 1999). The application of a partnership and participatory approach to comparative research involving multiple cases, however, raises challenges in four key areas: ensuring that concepts 'travel'; ensuring that the geography which delineates units of analysis makes sense; ensuring that the different experiences of colonisation are adequately accounted for (particularly in a temporal sense); and negotiating how different world views will be incorporated and respected. These collectively speak to how the bases for comparison are established and defended.

Comparative research across the Arctic North (see Larsen, Schweitzer, & Fondahl, 2010) has begun to explore differences in local interpretations of concepts such as 'well-being' and 'health'. Differences in understandings of these concepts not only exist between non-Indigenous and Indigenous peoples but between different Indigenous peoples. In the case of the concept of 'health' for example, there may even be differences in understanding of the intent of the concept (Richmond, Ross, & Bernier, 2010). Negotiating interpretation and operationalisation of concepts between an Indigenous people and an 'outsider' researcher is difficult; this becomes even more challenging when considered within a comparative research setting. There is no straight forward resolution of this issue. What is required is very careful and collective examination of the different meanings of concepts so that the impacts of shared and disputed interpretations can be assessed and communicated.

One of the immediate implications of Indigenous partnership and participation in comparative research is the requirement to frame the spatiality of comparison (what geographic units of analysis are comparable) in a way that makes sense to Indigenous people (c.f. Taylor, 2009). While past research has

occasionally been concerned with the differences that mainstream institutional geography might make (the declaration of some areas of land as fully fledged provinces and others as less autonomous 'territories'; the different local government systems that emerge within nation-states etc.), there is little evidence that Indigenous institutional geography (traditional national borders, inherited land management responsibilities etc.) has been taken into account. Similarly, the positioning of ideas and initiatives within timeframes constrained by European experience with remote dwelling Indigenous populations is common (Lea, 2008), while investigation of the implications of Indigenous cycles of history is not (Mundel et al., 2010). As a result, the relationships that we think we see between processes and outcomes must be questioned. More probably, our failure to understand relationships between processes and outcomes (Hunter, 2007) arises from our failure to account for the different spatio-cultural and temporal-cultural parameters that might apply.

5.0 Conclusions and Notes on Limits to Comparison

What we have done in this paper is assert the case for more comparative research, and more rigorously conducted comparative research, into issues around the wellbeing of remote dwelling Indigenous peoples in developed 'post-colonial' nations like Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States. We have argued that the existing (small) body of comparative research is weak in at least three related ways—the bases for comparison are poorly described, there is insufficient linking of research into 'ideas' with research into initiatives and their outcomes, and there is insufficient engagement of Indigenous people in the research. It is on this latter point that we are most intently focussed. There are challenges in attempting the Indigenous oriented approach to comparison that we advocate when the research involves different Indigenous cultures. It is much easier to adopt concepts from a dominant western paradigm under the (itself misguided) idea that those concepts will travel more readily than Indigenous understandings which may be more locally embedded. Instead, we advocate embracing diverse understandings of concepts of 'advantage', 'disadvantage', 'health', 'well-being' and so on to open the door to consideration of variables that may thus far have been omitted from comparative research. The keys to understanding 'what works' and why may be found in these new variables.

Understanding concepts from different points of view will also enable us to more knowledgably assess what can and cannot be compared. The assumption in the literature thus far has largely been that the jurisdictions we include here are suited to Most Similar Systems Design, but in reality a range of reasons why the populations are fundamentally different has been revealed. It is not only that they have had different experiences of colonisation and exposure to different policy regimes (as identified by Humpage (2010)) or that there are different approaches to Indigenous politics (Fleras et al., 2010). There are very different ideas about 'remoteness'—what it is and what remote dwelling people experience in terms of climate, geography, and political separation from the 'non-remote'. We must question the assumption that the concept of 'remoteness' travels so readily between jurisdictions (an assumption embodied most recently in the edited volume by Carson et al. (2011). While doing so, we should also question how well the concept of 'Indigenous' travels across jurisdictions where Indigenous people represent different proportions of the population, have different historical experiences, cultural systems, and may even be identified in different ways (Axelsson, Sköld, Ziker, & Anderson, 2011). More attention should be paid to other forms of comparative research—Most Different Systems Design, exemplars and extreme cases.

We have not spent much time specifying the research questions that could best be pursued in a comparative research program. There are many and varied questions already apparent in the literature, and we have alluded to some of these throughout. Determining 'good' questions is part of the process of partnership and participation. Good questions may be brought by researchers, Indigenous participants, policy makers, non-government organisations, corporations, or the media. Good questions may arise in a particular setting and then be applied elsewhere, or may emerge more or less simultaneously across a number of settings. Good questions will always, however, be negotiated as such with the Indigenous peoples around whom those questions revolve. Indigenous voices must be heard in the framing of research questions as they must in the development of understandings of concepts and variables (Louis, 2007). However, there must also be respect for the process of exposing all partners (both Indigenous and non-indigenous) in the research to new ways of thinking and new ways of seeing things. To act on the basis that only one of the partners in the research can propose good questions is limiting. What is essential is that Indigenous people make the final decision on whether the good question (whatever its source) is important, relevant and appropriate. Ultimately, comparative research of the nature we advocate here is intended to empower Indigenous people through building knowledge about contexts that are similar (and different) to their own. It is about ending the isolation of remote dwelling Indigenous people from global knowledge systems while providing a mechanism for local knowledge systems to influence global systems. Indigenous people have recognised the value of collective (and multi-national) representations in influencing political institutions (Morgan, 2007). Comparative research may help provide improved collective access to research institutions.

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