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The boundaries of representation: Exploring the bordering of Martu governance in Australia

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Mark Moran
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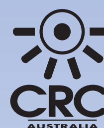
MURDOCH UNIVERSITY
PERTH, WESTERN AUSTRALIA



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The boundaries of representation: Exploring the bordering of Martu governance in Australia

Abstract

Organisational complexity continues to hide the bordering processes that determine the boundaries of Martu people's representation in Aboriginal affairs in the Western Desert of Australia. This paper describes participatory action research that sought to understand why Martu people are not represented in the institutions underpinning service provision. Key findings are that there is a complex inter-cultural space where mining companies and government create a multitude of Martu representative boundaries, most of which are not recognised by Martu people. A community-of-practice approach towards improved Martu representation is recommended, based on three principles: firstly, enabling Martu governance and representation; secondly, expanding dialogue and deliberation; and thirdly, recognising the role of boundary spanners. The paper outlines the relevance of these principles to the practical reality of enhancing representation of Martu people in service delivery.

Key words: Martu representation, Aboriginal, boundaries, community of practice

1. Introduction

The context of this paper is the Pilbara, which is the hub of what has become known in Australia as the resource boom. This landscape is at first glance dominated by the mining industry and its seemingly endless stream of workers. Beneath this surface lie the processes of service delivery by government and non-government agencies, whose roles and responsibilities are geographically stretched and who are under-resourced and under-staffed, and the narratives of Aboriginal lives led in diverse and dynamic cultural contexts.

This is the context of a participatory action research project conducted by the Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre (DKCRC), which links researchers to each other in addition to key partners and other stakeholders to enable outcomes that are policy-oriented and/or commercially applicable to the desert environment. The boundary of the research is around Martu people who reside in the Western Desert in the eastern region of the Pilbara. The Martu people are one of the last Aboriginal groups to come into contact with settler society, and they continue to practice their culture.

The primary aim of this paper is to describe the complex processes that determine how Martu people are represented in Aboriginal affairs in Western Australia. The paper also provides reflections on the research findings to date. The focus, findings and reflections of this research, although particular to the Western Desert, are likely to resonate with a range of national and international contexts.

Firstly, this article outlines the research project and context, and defines the terms 'boundary' and 'bordering processes'. In the second section the authors provide reflections about service provision for Aboriginal people in Australia and DKCRC's theoretical framework for its work in this area. The third section describes the bordering of boundaries in the Western Desert. The fourth section focuses upon the need for a community-of-practice approach based on three principles:

- enabling Martu representation
- expanding upon dialogue and deliberation
- recognising the role of boundary spanners.

Conclusions are presented in the final section.

The research project draws on border studies (Newman 2006) to describe the complex systems that influence service provision for Martu people. Within border studies is the concept of the 'boundary', which helps societies to organise, structure, plan and implement and thus to 'develop'. Boundaries can exist between disciplines, geographical spaces, social-groups (identities) and organisations, to name only a few examples. Newman (2006 p. 147) states that 'for all disciplines, borders determine the nature of group (in some cases defined territorially) belonging, affiliation and membership, and the way in which the processes of inclusion and exclusion are institutionalised'. Boundaries thus mark a line of difference, of discontinuity. How the boundary is perceived (if at all) may depend upon how the subject is positioned in relation to the boundary. Bordering processes are the mechanisms used to define the boundaries, to include or exclude people from within a given bounded domain. All actors in a particular engagement will have their own boundaries, and their own bordering processes for defining these. This paper explores how boundaries, as defined by government, industry (mining) and Martu people, interact through bordering processes in service provision.

2. Researching service provision for Aboriginal people in Australia

Remote Aboriginal settlements across Australia share the context of a lack of economic opportunities, small-sized settlements and large distances between them, lack of human and institutional capital, and a high level of mobility between and within settlements. Market failure has led to a welfare economy and a proliferation of service providers has ensued, mostly from government but increasingly in the form of Aboriginal organisations and private providers (Moran 2006). In this institutional landscape there are diverse perceptions about root problems and little understanding about solutions, hence the terms 'intractable' or 'wicked' policy problem are often applied.

Ongoing features of the service system are policy reform, legislative change, interdepartmental coordination and realignment of departmental portfolios. Much of this change is driven by ideologies from capital cities. More recently, Aboriginal policy reform has followed international trends in neoliberalism and 'third way' politics, towards 'joining-up (a.k.a 'whole of') government' and 'mutual (a.k.a 'shared') responsibility' (Sullivan 2005). Following the abolition of the Aboriginal regional representative organisation ATSIC, there has also been a widespread move towards mainstreaming of services, away from Aboriginal-

specific programs (Moran 2006). A fundamental issue remains pertaining to the nature and extent of Aboriginal representation.

In diverse inter-cultural spaces across remote Australia, citizen-consumers and service providers interact face-to-face, as they access and deliver services. The aim of this research project was to participate in these spaces, so to gain a better understanding of how Aboriginal are represented in the system.

This research is part of a broader project being coordinated through the DKCRC, called ‘Desert Services That Work: Demand Responsive Services For Desert Settlements’. At the concept stage, this project used economic theory, as evident in the title. However, as the field research has progressed, a number of theoretical frameworks have been useful in guiding the research process and in understanding the findings across diverse contexts.

The five theoretical frameworks that have been used in the project to date are depicted in the table below, which to some extent describes the chronological sequence of theoretical learning.

Table 1: Theoretical frameworks of Desert Services That Work

Theoretical framework	End-User	Key tension	External institutional environment
Economic model	Consumer	Demand and supply	Market/State
Liberal political science	Citizen	Rights and responsibilities	State
Community and participatory development	Individual	Participation and membership	Community
Anthropological	Aboriginal person	Aboriginal culture and modernity	Multicultural Australian society
Complex adaptive systems	Actor/agency	Feedback and adaptation	Complex adaptive system

Source: Moran et al. 2008

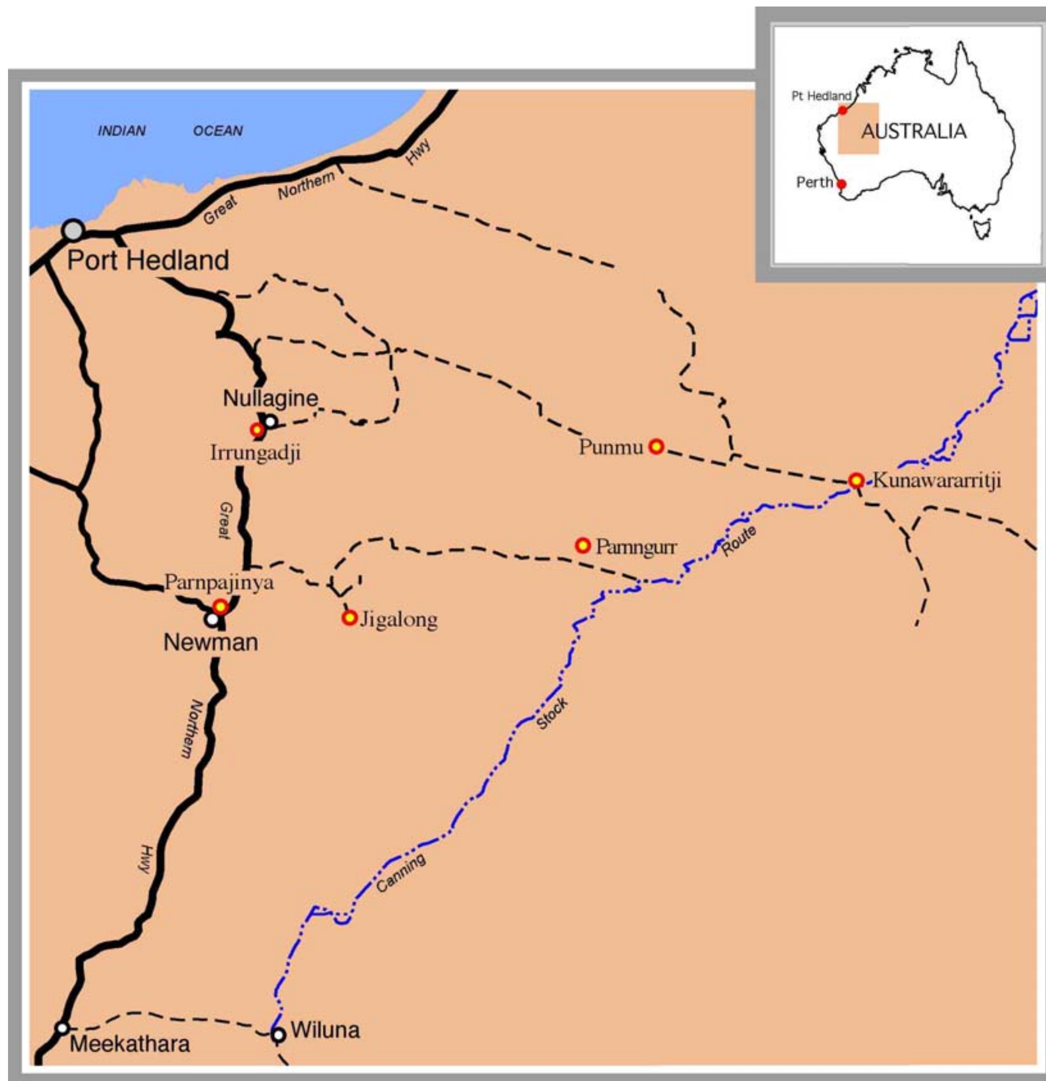
The theoretical frameworks have been useful in understanding particular aspects of the research, but each taken alone is inadequate. The larger research project is thus transdisciplinary in orientation, with each discipline embodying a key tension that has been identified as significant to the research as outlined in Table 1. The term ‘border-work’ used by Horlick-Jones and Sime (2004) to characterise such research is useful, as this not only describes the crossing of disciplines required in such research and the negotiation of a key tension internal to each discipline, but also negotiation around the border between theory and practice in participatory action research. This term helps us to remind ourselves as researchers of the complexities in border-work and of the need to be reflexive as we move within and across the border of practice and differing theoretical frameworks, in addition to also working across different types of knowledge and across a diverse organisational and ideological landscape.

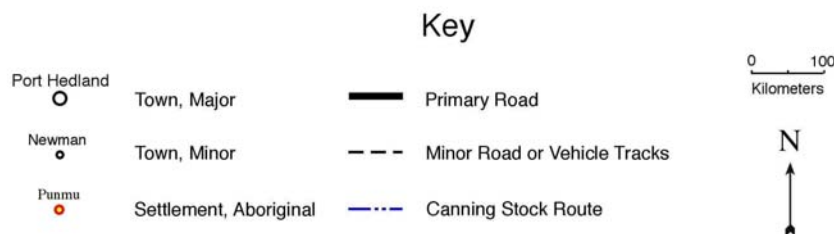
Due to the large number of people involved in the national research team, and the number of people involved in the study, the project has captured a broad cross-section of actors involved in Aboriginal affairs. For the most part, people are polarised in their position, for example, along a traditional/modernity axis. Yet at different points of any discussion or analysis, proponents move across the border of the key tension within a discipline or across tensions between disciplinary boundaries. If there is one single lesson to arise from the project to date

it is this: neither side of the border can be right or wrong, since they simply reflect either side of indeterminate tensions that drive Aboriginal affairs in practice. The nature of the problems is such that neither group from either side of these axes or within any one discipline can fundamentally find solutions on their own. To move into a productive and enabling space, practitioners must suspend ideology, academic discipline and positivist solutions long enough to develop the new forms of knowledge and to permit innovation to develop that is appropriate for the real world context.

This research subproject of Desert Services That Work was carried out in Western Australia, within the remote and resource-rich region of the Pilbara. Here there is considerable confusion about the emerging roles and responsibilities of industry, or more specifically mining, and how this meets with the traditional scope of government and community. The Pilbara is a region in the north-west of Western Australia which covers approximately 500,000 square kilometers but has only a population of approximately 40,000. It is responsible for generating a large proportion of state and federal wealth as it is a major source of minerals. Socially, the Pilbara is characterised by a high income variation between the mining community and the Aboriginal community, with the latter experiencing life expectancies 20 years less than the Australian average.

Martu people live in the Western Desert, located in the eastern region of the Pilbara and this forms the boundary of the research in Western Australia. Martu people live in the settlements of Newman (or 'Nabaru' town signifying that Newman is the name of a deceased person), the town camp of Parnpajinya, and the settlements of Jigalong, Parnngurr, Punmu, Kunawartiji, Nullagine and Irrungadji (see Map 1). Martu people also live in Wiluna. The Nyaparli are the traditional custodians of Newman and immediate surrounds, which was passed to the Martu people in a traditional ceremony in 1974 (McGrath et al. 2002). Native Title determination WC96/78 was awarded to the Martu People and the Ngurrara People on 27/09/2002 for their traditional lands east of Nullagine and Newman and is now administered through the prescribed body corporate Western Desert Lands Aboriginal Corporation (Jamukurnu-Yapalikunu).





Map 1: Settlements of Martu populations in the Western Desert and East Pilbara

Newman is an inter-cultural meeting space for Martu people and actors located in the mining industry, government and non-government. It is 1170 kilometres north of Perth in the East Pilbara region and was established in 1963 by Mt Newman BHP, a large Australian resource company which initially provided services and infrastructure. In 1981, 'normalisation' occurred and municipal and community services were regularised through the transfer of control from BHP to local and state government agencies (McIlwraith 1988). Narratives (stories and conversations) reveal that at this time Martu people began to camp at the current Parnpajinya site, a town camp adjacent to Newman. Parnpajinya continues to be a politicised

issue for Martu people and service providers, in part because of its historical use as a place to drink alcohol, which is not readily available in the Martu communities of the Western Desert.

Martu people are mobile across and beyond the range of Martu settlements. Rationale for this mobility is often assumed to be for reasons such as funerals, accessing family and other cultural obligations and access to services in Newman. Interestingly, access to services does not always require travel to Newman; it can also involve travel to 'country' for cultural reasons and also to access subsidised services such as Aboriginal Medical Service (AMS), which is not available in Newman.

Throughout 2007 the research focused on the role of BHP Billiton Iron Ore (BHP BIO) in facilitating Martu developmental processes through: a) an emerging participatory development approach within the company and b) the partnerships between the company and government departments and how these can be used strategically by BHP BIO to lever improved service delivery by government for the benefit of Martu people. Natalie McGrath was employed by BHP BIO for six months as a consultant. In December 2007 a final report was presented to BHP BIO. This period of time provided a unique window into the organisation.

A number of research methods were used in a participatory action framework which allowed a strong focus on government and non-government service providers. These included comprehensive semi-structured interviews with supply-side actors in service delivery in Newman, participatory observation, issues mapping at Newman, a water audit at Parngurr, and a housing audit of Martu housing in Newman. An important aspect of the research was the employment and training of Martu researchers, who became integral to the delivery of these methods. A Martu Research Approvals and Advisory Committee called *Mirjuni Jakulpa* was established by a non-government organisation called *Kanyirninpa Jukurrpa* (translated as 'holding culture') simultaneous to the outset of the research project. The research plan for 2007 was put to the committee and approved in February 2007. In December 2007 the research findings were presented to the committee, which prompted a five-hour discussion. Approval to disseminate the findings to other relevant actors was received. Future research will regularly report to this committee.

The concepts of boundaries, and the bordering processes that define them, have been useful tools for better understanding the complexities of service provision to Martu people. Of particular interest is how and by whom boundaries are constructed and how these can operate to include or exclude Martu representation, which is the focus of the following section.

3. The bordering of boundaries in the Western Desert

Discourse on globablisation has leaned towards conceptions of an increasingly borderless world, particularly in relation to the free movement of trans-national corporations. Beck (2000 p. 11) describes globalisation as 'the processes through which sovereign national states are criss-crossed and undermined by trans-national actors with varying prospects of power, orientations, identities and networks'. Beck argues that the use of 'threat power' for such corporations, the threat of investment withdrawal, affords considerable room in negotiating with and across the nation-state structure. There has certainly been considerable challenge to the relevance of the boundary that is defined by the nation state. For Nederveen Pieterse (2004) this boundary has been contested from below by forces of decentralisation and fragmentation or from above by the formation of the international public sector, the pooling of sovereignty into regional blocks and by post-international politics and the rising power of non-state actors such as trans-national corporations. Interestingly, for Nederveen Pieterse, the declining relevance of the nation state results not in a borderless world, but in fact the construction of new boundaries.

Such debate, however, is of little relevance to Aboriginal people in Australia – and other peoples contained within the boundaries of the nation state – whose claims for human rights, including the right to boundaries of sovereignty, remain silent behind the walls of national boundaries. The Howard government in Australia distanced itself from the United Nations, refusing visits by this international body due to criticism from it. In September 2007, the Australian Government refused to accept the text of the *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*.

It is interesting to consider what the concept of a national boundary means to those Aboriginal people in Australia who live in remote desert regions and for whom state boundaries have little relevance. Certainly, the meeting of Aboriginal jurisdictions with state boundaries in Australia is highly contentious in both academic and policy circles. Prior to colonisation, Aboriginal people in Australia lived and organised regionally, and exchanged across these regions in trade, ritual and marriage. There is no doubt that the forces of colonisation affected the bordering processes that define the boundaries of Aboriginal 'nations'. A pan-Aboriginal identity has been imposed but has not been necessarily been understood or accepted by those who fall into this administrative category. In the context of the Western Desert, Martu people typically identify primarily as Martu rather than as Aboriginal.

Understandings of reality are continually bounded by worldviews and accumulated knowledge. Boundaries and their position in space and time are subjective and highly politicised, for example, in the case of a pan-Aboriginal identity discussed above. Who has the power to participate in the definition/positioning of boundaries is an important question, one that is considered further in the discussion below.

Newman (2006) comments that border studies or 'liminality' has grown over recent decades and there is now a glossary of border language which crosses disciplines, but that a single framework of unifying theory is yet to be developed. Territorial boundaries have traditionally been the main focus of border studies, whereby such boundaries are determined by political and historical processes and are seen as fixed. These boundaries continue to be a particular focus of geographers, but are not seen to be as deterministic as previously.

What is happening at the frontiers of boundaries is particularly interesting. In this research project, we see a boundary frontier in the Western Desert where global mining ventures and government actors meet the Martu people, one of the last Aboriginal groups in Australia to encounter settler society (Davenport et al. 2005). For Howitt, such contexts are characterised by the dominance of mining interests moving the boundary further into the frontier space, and swallowing the less visible interests. Howitt writes that 'social, economic, political and cultural life in resource localities are silenced as everything is subsumed into the story of the mine … diverse voices are replaced and *dis*placed by a generalised and homogenised interpretation in which diversity is devalued in favour of the common currency of jobs, revenue and trade as measures of success' (1995 pp. 389–390, emphasis in original).

A number of mining companies work with Newman as a base; the largest of these is BHP BIO. It would be fair to say that creating and maintaining a workforce is a high priority for these companies. However, BHP BIO also engages with government across a diverse array of partnerships towards the creation of soft and hard community infrastructure. Some of these programs specifically aim to improve Martu people's welfare, and some individuals in the company have also become interested in facilitating participatory development, which places them in a unique position in the mining sector of Australia. This partnership and participatory development approach of BHP BIO has been a research focus for this project. Unlike other Aboriginal groups within the Pilbara, the Martu people have yet to reap substantial benefit from mining interests on the Native Title land. The intent of BHP BIO, which is beyond its native title obligations, is thus of particular interest. BHP BIO is effectively a service provider, whether in relation to training provision or by directly or indirectly providing services.

The researcher observed the multitude of interactions between BHP BIO and government/non-government and the difficulties of coordinating them. This complexity, particular to the Western Desert context, compounds the complexity within and between government departments that is evident across all of the research sites for the Desert Services That Work project of the DKCRC (Moran et al. 2008). In the Western Desert there are many supply-side boundaries, which are the roles and responsibility each organisation has to operate within the bounds of a particular geographical space. Each organisation is then linked to respective hierarchical levels, which in turn have roles and responsibilities bounded by larger spans of geographical territory. Service delivery in the Western Desert is thus a complex network of different government, non-government and mining organisations existing at varying scales, none of whose geographical boundaries coincide or whose roles and responsibilities easily coordinate. The partnerships that BHP BIO coordinates are a mechanism of cutting across this inter-organisational complexity but also in turn add to the institutional complexity.

From the researcher's perspective, there are a number of Martu boundaries on the demand side, including language group and 'country' origin, family, age (whether or not an individual is an elder), gender and the primary settlement at which an individual is seen to be based. Many of the boundaries discussed here primarily relate to identity and were constructed through participatory observation. They are referred to here only for the purpose of emphasising issues of complexity; in no way are these claimed to be a definitive account of Martu representations of themselves, and it is likely that there are other boundaries within the Martu world as seen by Martu people. In fact, this discussion raises the important issue of invisibility of Martu identity in the broader construction of the delivery of services.

Another boundary that further compounds complexity and supports the argument here is whether an individual is identified as Martu or belongs to another Aboriginal group. Mining sector, government and non-government programs are often targeted either at Aboriginal people or at Martu people; both of these categories render invisible the differences that exist within these categorised groups or the hybridity that may exist between them. Often, programs are labelled as Aboriginal but target Martu people only, or on the other hand, target the generic 'other' Aboriginal people and do not attract Martu participants. Aboriginal people from elsewhere in Australia working within for service organisations are often expected to naturally form relationships with and/or represent Martu people. Thus, the complexity of Martu identity does not appear to be well recognised by service providers.

The concept of 'community' is often used to represent Martu identity in communication between service providers. However, what boundaries are determined by using the term 'Martu community' in any one conversation between service providers is largely unclear. It has been observed by the authors that any one service provider will use the term 'community' inter-changeably to imply varying boundaries around the Martu population and Martu settlements. At times, service providers include all Martu people within the Western Desert region when discussing the 'Martu community'. At another time, only the Martu in Newman are included, which may imply either Martu people living in Parnpajinya (a Martu settlement on the edge of Newman) or may include both the Martu people living in Parnpajinya and in Newman, which in both cases may at any one time also include people visiting from other Martu communities. The gaze of service providers for Martu people is generally focused upon Martu people in Newman/Parnpajinya, possibly because Newman is the office base for service providers. It has been observed that service providers (perhaps unconsciously) change the boundaries around the term 'community' depending upon the requirements of the task at hand or the focus of the conversation.

Internationally, it has been noted that it is not unusual for the word 'community' to be used by government and industry as it creates the misconception of consensus and justifies political expediency (Lea & Wolfe 1993, Nelson & Wright 1995). In Newman 'community meetings' are called with little notice to help legitimise pre-designed policy and program delivery and the fast expedition to allow for annual funding cycles. The term 'community' has been particularly useful in a policy age of 'mutual responsibility'. An interesting example of how responsibility is placed upon the Martu 'community' (without this being defined but presumably in this case the 'Parnpajinya community') is in relation to the 'negotiations' of a shared responsibility agreement of a playground. An excerpt from a monthly field research report is as follows:

> *XX (government representative) firstly asked the Martu people there what they wanted in the community. People started to talk about a sobering up shelter, which was linked to the morning discussion at another meeting. He then made the leap to a children's playground, which was what the program was that he wanted to talk about. He then started to proceed with this. I asked him if it was OK to take a step back and if he could explain what this program is. He said that basically the government gives people money and they say what they wanted to do. XX went back into the example of the playground. I asked him if he could explain the process a bit more, i.e. what conditions would be set. He said that typically school attendance was a condition. I asked him what kind of support would be given towards school attendance. XX reply was that because it wasn't a program about school attendance that they were limited in their support, but could bring in other agencies, i.e. speak to the education department in Perth. YY (also*

> *government representative) said as long as they could see the community was trying. I stopped myself from asking how they could tell as I felt I had spoken enough.* ***ZZ (Parnpajinya resident) asked a good question which was would school attendance be the responsibility of the community or the parents.*** *Other people discussed how sometimes children couldn't go to school because of sores. XX rolled forward and said that they didn't need a decision today and that AA (non-government representative) was keen to talk to the community about this. It was decided that there would be a meeting next Tuesday to work out the planning for the playground.*

Aside from the shortcomings evident in the government officer asking one question and apparently shifting the conversation to a response that he preferred, this excerpt also demonstrates the lack of consideration to the boundaries of responsibility placed upon Martu as well as the insufficient information that is provided more generally and the rapid roll-out of programs, in this case to expend money prior to the end of financial year. The excerpt additionally demonstrates the conditions placed upon Martu people (seen as a community, not as individuals with differing roles and responsibilities) for rewards but with little support to meet these conditions, or discussion about why such conditions may be difficult to meet. At no time was it questioned whether there was sufficient and appropriate representation at the meeting to make such a decision on behalf of the 'community' or was it determined where the boundaries of the 'community' may lie. This scenario is the norm rather than the exception.

There is a broad academic discourse about the concept of community, which is considered to be widely debated and to hold diverse meanings. Communities are often perceived as sharing a common interest and are often confused with place, in which a bounded geography is assumed to produce natural or organic communities (Mayo 2000, Brent 2004). This term has been imposed on Aboriginal people across Australia during the era of self-determination based upon naïve assumptions about pre-industrial community and on the idea that the social organisation of traditional Aboriginal life would fall harmoniously into homogeneity through co-residence (Sullivan 1996, Davies 2003).

Contrary to this, it appears that the Martu lived reality does not neatly fall within geographical boundaries that service organisations prefer and define as 'communities' but instead involves a degree of fluidity where Martu people 'belong' and/or are connected strongly to a number of geographies across households and settlements, and appear most primarily as a kin-based society. Changes and fluidity across time, space and social-group categories within the Martu population unsettles policy and program delivery styles based on a settlement approach only.

Although it can be argued that Martu individuals may sit within and between the social-group boundaries that have been discussed, a strong sense of Martu identity can be observed; from certain vantage points this can be seen to be contained by a solid boundary that encapsulates all Martu people and includes all that Martu people have in common. Although at times this strong identity is recognised by service providers, they also create other boundaries to categorise Martu people, to deal with the complexity of scale and also to legitimise program activity. These boundaries open a number of interfaces, many of which are not defined by Martu people.

Likewise, Martu people have little understanding of the internal workings of the institutional landscape which surrounds them and the many supply-side boundaries that exist – for example, government is seen as a monolithic labyrinth despite the many departments and divisions that exist. The extent of this limited understanding is potentially more acute within

the Western Desert when compared with other Australian contexts, because of the relatively recent cross-cultural contact. Thus a sharp boundary between service providers and Martu people is maintained by the limited understanding Martu people have about service providers and vice versa.

To help overcome this, the majority of service actors in Newman expressed a desire to engage Martu people who represent the Martu domain. Many organisations are seeking to establish a single Martu interface with which to engage. However, when the sheer number of service provider organisations is considered, it is quite a task for Martu people to represent themselves in an unpaid and un-resourced capacity across the breadth of this institutional landscape. Generally, service providers identify a few individuals – mostly based in Newman – to attend meetings and speak for Martu people, and at times for all Aboriginal people. These individuals are often, but not always Council members and are expected to act in an unpaid capacity for the common good of their ‘community’; whether this implies Parnpajinya, Newman and Parnpajinya or includes all Martu communities across the Western Desert is never clear. This form of consultation never allows for the time necessary to allow such individuals to facilitate discussion among Martu people, nor does it recognise the payment necessary to compensate for the time to do this. It also fails to recognise the potential cultural inappropriateness of one Martu representative being able to speak for all Martu people, however this is defined. Martu representation thus remains a complex issue.

It is appropriate to conclude here with some questions about the bordering processes of boundaries in the Western Desert: How are service delivery boundaries constructed? How is it that Martu boundaries are not easily visible to service providers? How can processes of participatory review be created to deconstruct and construct representative boundaries so as to ensure efficiency and effectiveness of diverse organisational purpose? Within these processes how can dialogue be facilitated among diverse and competing perspectives? The following sections will aim to explore these questions.

4. Clarifying the boundaries of Martu representation within a community of practice

Policy and program delivery relating to Aboriginal people in Australia exists across diverse government departments, each of which has differing administrative requirements and as a whole is paralysingly complicated for all actors involved. This complexity is further compounded by the overwhelming extent to which policy and program delivery change occurs. At the national level this change is seen to be accelerating and is creating institutional confusion, exacerbated at the local level by the continual changeover of staff.

However, some characteristics have remained constant throughout Aboriginal policy change in Australia. These include the linear nature at which policy solutions are expected to provide anticipated results; the extent to which policy is determined within capital cities, remote from the contexts to which they are aimed; the manner in which such policy is fed down through siloed bureaucracy for a generalised Aboriginal identity; and the lack of monitoring and evaluation of policy and program towards evidence-based change. These features are characteristics of a linear deterministic based system which is predictable and controllable and fails to recognise the complexity of bordering processes and boundaries that are its result.

The discussion in the previous section relating specifically to the Western Desert can be summarised here by a number of macro patterns that exist in the overall system: firstly, a complex system of diverse service delivery boundaries is defined without communication with Martu people, which results in minimal understanding by Martu people of the service delivery system, and indeed little understanding by other service delivery departments of the system; secondly, boundaries are established within the Martu population by service delivery personnel which do not align with how Martu categorise themselves, and this demonstrates limited understanding by service personnel about the Martu world; thirdly, the siloed nature of bureaucracy, either government or industry, cannot allow for the dynamic fluidity that exists between these internal categories within the Martu population; and lastly, opportunities for Martu people to develop an effective system of self-representation to deal with the quantity of service personnel remain limited.

The discussion in this section is based on recognising the cultural boundary that Martu people maintain and secondly, that the institution of Aboriginal affairs requires rigorous reflexivity in its bordering processes and boundaries relating to power, representation and identity through dialogue within a community of practice. A community of practice is defined by Wenger (1998) as a group of people engaged in collective learning in a common field of activity. In the Western Desert, three areas would be the initial focus of a community of practice: firstly, the need to enable experimentation of Martu governance structures and processes; secondly, the role of dialogue and deliberation; and thirdly, the role of boundary spanners.

4.1 Enabling Martu governance and representation

Governance is a much debated concept, but for the purposes of this article is considered as the ‘formation and stewardship of the formal and informal rules that regulate the public realm, the arena in which state as well as economic and societal actors interact to make decisions’ (Hyden et al. 2004 p. 16). The concept of governance is often confused with ‘management’, and this is common in the service delivery system of the Western Desert. Management can be defined as implementing the visions and decisions made about the priorities determined through governance processes. Both management and governance are of equal importance for service delivery to Aboriginal people.

The research project recommends involving Martu people in governance processes so as to transparently recognise issues of power and politics in relation to boundaries and bordering processes. This stands in contrast to the dominant practice in the Western Desert, where government tends to ‘govern’ in a manner that is easily aligned to management, whereby program statistics collected at the local level are fed up siloed channels of command and decision making occurs at a distance from the local context. BHP BIO also leans toward this approach, in part because of their alignment to government through a multitude of partnerships. The non-government sector, which is heavily under-resourced, works between these structures and Martu people, with the hope of filling much-needed shortfalls in the type and quantity of services.

Martu people thus have little political input to any of the bordering processes that create the boundaries of institutional service provision in the Western Desert, in addition to having little voice in the disparate bordering management processes that determine how the system defines them. There are few resources for building the presence of Martu political boundaries, which could be made more visible so as to enhance Martu representation in bordering processes specifically and within the delivery of services more generally. All departments expect Martu

representation in programs, but government support for facilitating this process is generally ineffective.

A practical way to improve Martu representation in bordering processes is to use the representative boundaries as defined by Martu people, and in dialogue with the service sector. Typically, management models are imposed on Aboriginal people that mirror the culture of the dominant western institutions, with some slight tinkering to make them culturally appropriate. Rather, a model that allows for cross-cultural governance would provide meaningful inclusiveness in decision making and be able to successfully negotiate complex boundaries. In Australia there has been much written about how the meeting of cultural boundaries requires much greater understanding and about how this will require experimentation and negotiation of complex relationships (Rowse 1992, Lea & Wolfe 1993; Peters-Little 1999, Behrendt 2003).

More recently, Hunt and Smith recommend that 'community development workers operate[ing] alongside Indigenous leaders to facilitate governance capacity development and institution building in communities and organisations' (2007 p. xxi). The need to build institutions (or 'rules') is emphasised, and capacity is strengthened in cases where 'Indigenous people create their own rules, policies, guidelines, procedures, codes, etc., and design the local mechanism to enforce those rules and hold their own leaders accountable' (Hunt & Smith 2007 p. xvii).

Another key issue relates to the identification of regional boundaries and the interplay of regional agreements with these boundaries. The issue of scale is particularly complex and has been the focus of debate for a number of years. The concept of regional, dispersed, layered community governance has been developed by a number of academics (for example, Rowse 1992; Sanders 2000, 2002; Smith 2002). A number of models for regionally dispersed governance are outlined by Hunt and Smith (2006), which allow for local and regional boundaries simultaneously, while acknowledging the tensions that may exist between these. Holcombe relates this to Aboriginal engagement with the mining sector in the Pilbara, stating that the 'modern multi-articulated Indigenous lifestyle equates to both dispersed residence and dispersed governance' (2004 p. 7). This approach would easily fit into a networked approach to governance in the Western Desert, also involving government and industry.

In the Western Desert, the research project found that a participatory action approach could develop a regional governance boundary that is defined by Martu people, which also allows for local Martu diversity. Building Martu representation will take long-term dialogue, ideally within a community-of-practice approach, and funding commitments. The degree to which a local government model may be relevant to such a boundary is debatable and forms part of a larger tension as to whether such a regional boundary is one of political representation or whether this boundary and the structures and processes are for bureaucratic purposes only.

4.2 Dialogue and deliberation

In the Western Desert service-provision environment, communication is dominated by bureaucratic managerialism, which is symptomatic of a new public management that relies upon benchmarking and indicators. It is more than ten years now since Mowbray commented that bureaucratic and rationalistic policy is unlikely to be the right approach to cross-cultural governance and communication (Mowbray 1994). There has never been a mechanism for a comprehensive dialogue between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people anywhere in

Australia (Fletcher 1999). Bradford writes that this is required as a ‘continuous state of being’ between Aboriginal people and the institutional structures that surround them (Bradford 2004 p. 174).

The use of participatory methods holds potential for enabling a more dialogical and deliberative approach to cross-cultural communication in remote Aboriginal Australia. Participatory methods have been used internationally for many decades and the lessons from them are well documented. This research project was based on a participatory approach and found that Martu people responded particularly well to tools such as the participatory problem tree and institutional mapping. Using participatory methods allows for cross-cultural understanding, not only of the data collected but also for data analysis and the presentation of findings. This understanding is a necessary prerequisite for ongoing dialogue about the issues faced by Martu people and the service sector, and for shared participation in the implementation of strategies to address these issues. This understanding has not yet been successfully facilitated by the current approach to consultation and the lengthy reports that are produced.

An alternative approach to communication in the Western Desert will require the training of government, non-government and industry. Such training would ideally take place over a longer-term basis, to allow for reflection, dialogue and deliberation about practice in between training sessions in a community of practice. The need for this approach in organisations that interface with Aboriginal culture in Australia is well documented (for example, Cowlishaw 1999, Howitt 2001, Behrendt 2003). This training was recognised by service providers themselves as a prerequisite of a relational approach, seen to be necessary for the building of productive relationships between service providers, and between service providers and Martu people.

The training could be aligned to existing initiatives approaching cross-cultural awareness, and would aim to break down stereotypes, allowing alternative boundaries of Martu identity to be created as defined by Martu people and new connections to be formed founded upon these identities. Langton (1993) states that Aboriginal identities arise from the experience of Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people, and that Aboriginal identity is a ‘field of intersubjectivity in that it is remade over and over again in a process of dialogue, of imagination, of representation and interpretation’ (p. 33). McIntyre (2003 p. 311) imagines in a similar context in Alice Springs the creation of ‘shared spaces that respect liminal differences’. In the Western Desert, respect of difference is a critical aspect in building long-term relationships towards improved service outcomes.

This paper builds on Langton’s discussion and aligns with McIntyre by also emphasising the need to allow deliberative dialogue across cultural boundaries in complex planning issues (see Gastil & Levine 2005). Deliberation will allow for numerous perspectives that exist across boundaries to be connected and juxtaposed, allowing for the birth of alternative perspectives with the aim of creating long-term, cross-cultural and sustainable planning strategies. Deliberation will need to allow for diverse cultural narratives and will require alternative forms of documentation, for example, an emerging Martu film unit provides a mechanism to record deliberations visually. There are a number of key areas that cross organisational and cultural boundaries, and which require careful and long-term deliberation in the desert across the range of actors who co-exist within the system. No mechanisms currently exist to support initiation or provide long-term support for processes of deliberation.

4.3 Recognising boundary spanners

Martu people have limited foundational understandings of the ideological underpinnings of policy or of government and industry more generally. In fact, both government and industry are seen as monolithic entities whose rationality is unfathomable. This limited foundational understanding is constantly exacerbated by seemingly irrational 'consultative' practices of government and industry based on the need for rapid expenditure of funds over short time frames with little time spent in the 'field' to explain the processes involved. The moments of connection initiated by government and industry with Martu are largely oriented towards who is available to speak in a 'community' on the day that the government and industry actors arrive into the 'community' space, usually with little notice. Martu connections with government are primarily forced through the need to submit forms, many of which are not understood by Martu individuals.

The productive connections (as they appear from Martu perspectives) that do occur between government, industry and Martu are largely negotiated by Martu leaders or by non-government (or less often government) actors who exist in the borderland between these distinct worlds. As described above in section 3, Martu leaders often act in this role in addition to their other community responsibilities. In industry, key actors act in a similar fashion by providing connective bridges. These individuals can be described as boundary spanners who build bridges and broker to allow for the survival of the overall system. This role is well recognised within organisational literature (for example, Williams 2002). This role is in most cases not paid, nor resourced, and is often not recognised. Without these individuals it is likely that the system would not function even to the extent that it does now. The non-government, government and industry individuals often take on this role in addition to an existing job description (with associated roles and responsibilities) and appear to perform this role from an altruistic obligation that emerges from long-term engagement with Martu people. This is largely forced by the fact that Martu people tend to operate from a relational worldview and engage more easily in communication with individuals who have proven themselves trustworthy and who have a recognisable identity within the 'mob' generally. The accountabilities of Martu leaders and organisational actors in this role are complex, and at times may be contradictory.

In border studies the borderland is a point of hybridisation and adaptation which, if resourced, could lead to new boundaries and system configurations. This is an argument to increase and sustain funding for the bridging and boundary spanning roles within a network, as well as to secure institutional space and recognition for this role, which will enable ongoing system transformation and allow for the dynamic learning that takes place at cultural interfaces in the Western Desert. These individuals are thus able to play an important role within a community of practice.

Committing long-term funds to non-government organisations in the Western Desert is necessary. Often, individuals within these organisations spend considerable time accessing funding and reporting on accountability criteria, while also performing important bridging roles not recognised by funding agencies. Two other principle strategies include the training of cross-cultural Martu facilitators and also the training of people in government, non-government and industry so as to provide necessary support for boundary spanners, within and outside the Martu world.

Training for Martu people could aim towards employment within government, non-government (including University research positions) and industry as advisors/interpreters/facilitators, thus formalising a role that Martu people often perform with little financial or other recognition. It is likely that this training would need to be followed through with ongoing mentoring. Improving Martu employment in organisations addresses an identified need in the Western Desert, and would help government and industry achieve their Aboriginal employment targets. The formalisation of this position creates the need to value this role financially. However, it is important to openly frame such positions not as ‘representative’ of the community but instead as ‘advisory’ in enabling access to the most appropriate representative channels. This distinction is important for Martu people and is likely to be easily confused within the service sector.

5. Conclusion

The research process to date has identified the complexity of organisational boundaries within the Western Desert and the lack of Martu representation within this complexity. In particular, it is clear that Martu people are categorised and bounded by service delivery through concepts such as ‘community’ in an unsystematic manner, which does not appear to align with Martu lived reality and identities. The research has determined that service delivery actors are seeking forms of Martu representation, but because of cross-cultural differences are unable to engage Martu people in bureaucratic purpose and in political process.

What is clear from the research is that system change is required. This is certainly feasible with sufficient political and fiscal support. The research identified the need for a community-of-practice approach based on three principles:

- enabling Martu governance
- expanding upon dialogue and deliberation
- recognising boundary spanners.

This paper has demonstrated that in practice these three key principles are critical in helping to build Martu representation and work towards cross-cultural clarity about the diverse organisational and cultural boundaries that meet within the service sector in the Western Desert.

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