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INTERMIX AND AUSTRALIA'S INDIGENOUS POPULATION

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This note examines the extent of intermix amongst married and de facto couples in which at least one member is an Indigenous person. The inquiry concludes that most Indigenous couples in Australia are intermixed in the sense that they involve a non-Indigenous party and that the proportion of such couples is increasing. Also most of the children currently identified as Indigenous are the product of parents only one of whom is Indigenous.

In the December issue of *People and Place*, Charles Price described Australia's ethnic mix. Price has developed a methodology to account for the ethnic background of all persons who were in Australia at the time of the first fleet and who have come here since that time. He estimates that as of mid-1999 some 70 per cent of Australians are of Anglo-Celtic origin, with the rest drawn from a great diversity of other backgrounds.¹ A major finding, however, is that the original input of ethnic backgrounds is no longer representative of the current Australian population. Rather, what makes Australia distinctive is the extent of ethnic mix. According to Price, 'at present at least 60 per cent of the Australian people are

ethnically mixed, while about 20 per cent have at least four distinct ancestries'.² This intermix is the result of intermarriage. In other work, Price has shown that most second-generation persons (persons born in Australia with overseas-born parents) marry outside their parents' birthplace group.³

On this evidence it could be said that Australia is becoming a 'melting pot'. For some commentators this is welcome. It implies that multiculturalism is working, in the sense that high levels of intermarriage indicate that there is little social distance between people of different ethnic backgrounds in Australia. This is because intermarriage or de facto partnering is the most intimate form of social

interaction. The level of intermix in Australia also indicates that, with a few exceptions (listed below), where ethnic or religious groups have tried to preserve their community by discouraging out-marriage, they have not succeeded.

For other commentators, intermix is seen as a threat. Some ethnic leaders fear that their particular ethnic heritage or religious tradition is being lost. They are inclined to regard those who celebrate the 'melting pot' as covert assimilationists.⁴ There is also concern that, to the extent that ethnic identity diminishes with intermix, this will undermine ethnic community solidarity and potential political muscle.

The question explored in this note is whether the 'melting pot' imagery also applies to the Indigenous population in Australia. The experience in America is a useful starting point. Unfortunately no data were available on native Americans, which would have been the best point of comparison. However, information on black Americans is available. Only a tiny proportion of blacks marry out. According to U.S. Bureau of the Census survey data from 1994, of all married couples with a black member, in 91 per cent of cases both partners were black. Of the balance, 4.9 per cent were composed of a black husband and white wife, 2.5 per cent of a white husband and black wife and 1.9 per cent of a black partner and the other of some other race.⁵ This very low rate of out-marriage indicates that barriers between black and white remain strong, reflecting a continuing high level of community segregation, as well as a profound status divide between the races, which inhibits social interaction.

Another point of comparison in evaluating the extent of Indigenous intermix in Australia is some of the exceptions to the overall melting pot pattern in Australia.

Studies of intermix by religion in Australia indicate that there is very little out-marriage by persons who declare their religion to be Judaism, Islam or Greek Orthodox. The 1996 Census results showed that just 14.1 per cent of Jews who were married were in mixed marriages, 5.9 per cent of Muslims and 14.1 per cent of Greek Orthodox.⁶ In these instances it may be that efforts on the part of the religious groups involved to proscribe out-marriage have been a factor in preventing intermix.

INTERMIX IN AUSTRALIA'S INDIGENOUS POPULATION

The definition of Indigenous people used here is that of the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). Indigenous persons are defined as those who self-identify as such. Indigenous couples are those where one or both of the parties identify as Indigenous. Indigenous births are those declared to be Indigenous by their parents at the time of the birth registration.

Previous studies have shown that intermix is increasing.⁷ This has usually been reported in the context of research exploring the rapid expansion of Australia's Indigenous population. The 1996 Census count of Indigenous people was 352,970, up by 33 per cent from the 1991 count. This growth is attributed to better enumeration measures, greater willingness of people to identify as Indigenous, and to intermix.⁸ The contribution made by intermix to Indigenous population growth is through births of intermixed couples, most of whom identify their children as Indigenous.

According to census data, the proportion of Indigenous couples (whether married or de facto) composed of intermixed parties has increased from 46 per cent in 1986 to 51 per cent in 1991 and 64 per cent in 1996.⁹ In order to explore

this pattern in more detail the Centre for Population and Urban Research (CPUR) purchased a customised data set from the 1996 Census. This provides detail on all Australian Indigenous couples (whether married or de facto) by the Indigenous status of the two partners, as well as their sex, age and location in Australia.

Table 1 describes the extent of intermix amongst Indigenous couples by capital city and rest-of-state residential location. Consistent with the figure cited above, some 65 per cent of all Indigenous couples in Australia in 1996 were composed of mixed Indigenous and non-Indigenous partners. This majority indicates that there is vast difference between the Australian and American situation. It also shows that in Australia, unlike the black American scene, there are more Indigenous females who are partnered with non-Indigenous men than Indigenous men with non-Indigenous females.

There are couple of caveats to the figures in Table 1, which should be kept in mind when interpreting the data. The first is that because there is only one Indigenous person in each mixed Indigenous /non-Indigenous couple and two in each 'both Indigenous' couple, about the same number of Indigenous persons were living in 'both Indigenous' couples as were living in mixed couples. The second is that we have no data on the former partners of Indigenous women who head sole parent families. About 40 per cent of Indigenous families with dependent children are headed by a sole parent.¹⁰ If the level of intermix in the original partnership differed from the pattern shown in Table 1, it would have implications for the extent of intermix amongst the children of Indigenous couples.

The data displayed in Table 1 suggest

that there will be a further increase in the extent of intermix. Intermix levels are much higher in the metropolitan locations. Only in the Northern Territory (outside of Darwin) and non-metropolitan Western Australia are a majority of Indigenous couples composed of two Indigenous partners. When Indigenous persons move to urban centres they appear to be much more likely to partner out. Since there is a pronounced trend in the distribution of Indigenous persons to urban centres¹¹ this points to a continued increase in the proportion of Indigenous couples who are intermixed. The age distribution pattern of Indigenous couples also suggests the same conclusion. Table 1 shows that there is a higher rate of intermix amongst females in the age categories below 45 than in the older age groups. If younger women are marrying out at a higher rate than their older sisters this implies a continuing trend in the intermix direction.

Implications for births

Table 2 also draws from the CPUR Census data set. It shows that, of all Indigenous couples who have natural or adopted children present in the household, 64.2 per cent are intermixed couples. This means that childbearing is mirroring the overall couple pattern.

This conclusion is confirmed by birth registration data. The ABS has been publishing birth registration data for some time. The data recently published for 1998 are the most complete in terms of coverage across all states and territories. Table 3 shows these data. It indicates that 32.1 per cent of all children who were registered as Indigenous births by their parents in 1998 had parents who were both Indigenous. This figure is probably an underestimate because where

Table 1: Indigenous couple families by location and age of female partner, 1996

Female partner's age (yrs)	Total Indigenous couples ^a	% of Indigenous couples who are				Total Indigenous couples ^a	% of Indigenous couples who are			
		Both Indig.	Female Indig. ^b	Male Indig. ^c	Total		Both Indig.	Female Indig. ^b	Male Indig. ^c	Total
	Sydney					Rest of New South Wales				
15-24	813	9.3	48.0	42.7	100.0	1,656	24.3	38.0	37.6	100.0
25-34	2,011	9.6	51.7	38.7	100.0	3,770	25.3	40.8	33.9	100.0
35-44	1,723	12.6	48.9	38.5	100.0	3,297	25.0	41.2	33.8	100.0
45+	1,739	16.8	45.1	38.1	100.0	2,985	34.8	34.6	30.6	100.0
Total ^d	6,320	12.3	48.4	39.3	100.0	11,804	27.3	38.6	34.1	100.0
	Melbourne					Rest of Victoria				
15-24	265	12.5	50.6	37.0	100.0	283	14.8	45.2	39.9	100.0
25-34	715	16.1	46.6	37.3	100.0	656	19.5	47.3	33.2	100.0
35-44	626	16.3	41.7	42.0	100.0	525	20.0	44.6	35.4	100.0
45+	578	21.5	39.6	38.9	100.0	552	28.3	39.9	31.9	100.0
Total ^d	2,208	16.9	43.3	39.7	100.0	2,042	21.1	43.7	35.2	100.0
	Brisbane					Rest of Queensland				
15-24	672	15.3	41.4	43.3	100.0	1,813	39.2	32.4	28.4	100.0
25-34	1,410	12.4	46.0	41.6	100.0	4,049	38.4	35.8	25.8	100.0
35-44	1,123	13.4	48.9	37.8	100.0	3,116	39.6	37.1	23.3	100.0
45+	880	17.2	49.3	33.5	100.0	2,729	46.2	37.0	16.9	100.0
Total ^d	4,106	14.1	46.5	39.4	100.0	11,810	40.3	35.6	24.1	100.0
	Adelaide					Rest of South Australia				
15-24	254	24.8	42.1	33.1	100.0	239	46.9	29.3	23.8	100.0
25-34	501	16.4	44.5	39.1	100.0	551	47.0	31.6	21.4	100.0
35-44	389	23.9	42.7	33.4	100.0	418	42.1	36.1	21.8	100.0
45+	303	28.4	38.3	33.3	100.0	348	50.3	31.6	18.1	100.0
Total ^d	1,457	22.2	42.0	35.8	100.0	1,571	46.0	32.1	21.9	100.0
	Perth					Rest of Western Australia				
15-24	444	33.1	31.8	35.1	100.0	830	66.9	17.8	15.3	100.0
25-34	946	27.1	39.2	33.7	100.0	1,761	60.9	22.8	16.3	100.0
35-44	720	34.3	43.2	22.5	100.0	1,241	61.6	24.9	13.5	100.0
45+	539	34.5	39.9	25.6	100.0	1,062	65.9	23.5	10.5	100.0
Total ^d	2,677	31.2	38.8	30.0	100.0	4,939	62.6	22.4	15.0	100.0
	Greater Hobart					Rest of Tasmania				
15-24	165	10.9	46.7	42.4	100.0	312	11.2	48.7	40.1	100.0
25-34	333	10.2	47.1	42.6	100.0	849	12.1	45.6	42.3	100.0
35-44	335	8.7	49.9	41.5	100.0	745	13.0	44.7	42.3	100.0
45+	254	11.8	46.9	41.3	100.0	617	11.7	44.1	44.2	100.0
Total ^d	1,102	10.1	47.2	42.7	100.0	2,544	12.1	45.0	43.0	100.0
	Darwin					Rest of Northern Territory				
15-24	155	29.0	39.4	31.6	100.0	1,237	90.5	5.1	4.4	100.0
25-34	370	30.0	43.5	26.5	100.0	1,837	87.4	8.3	4.4	100.0
35-44	292	34.6	42.8	22.6	100.0	1,334	82.6	11.2	6.1	100.0
45+	231	35.5	42.4	22.1	100.0	1,067	85.3	11.5	3.2	100.0
Total ^d	1,057	32.1	42.1	25.8	100.0	5,485	86.3	8.9	4.8	100.0
	Australian Capital Territory					Australia ^e				
15-24	87	6.9	48.3	44.8	100.0	9,228	37.6	32.6	29.8	100.0
25-34	206	11.2	40.8	48.1	100.0	19,973	33.4	37.2	29.4	100.0
35-44	174	12.1	37.9	50.0	100.0	16,066	32.8	38.5	28.7	100.0
45+	89	23.6	37.1	39.3	100.0	13,984	37.8	36.1	26.1	100.0
Total ^d	565	12.6	39.8	47.6	100.0	59,717	34.7	36.3	29.1	100.0

^a An Indigenous couple is one where at least one partner declares as Indigenous.
^b Female Indigenous but male either not Indigenous or Indigenous status unknown
^c Male Indigenous but female either not Indigenous or Indigenous status unknown
^d Totals include a few cases where the spouse was temporarily absent.
^e Australia includes 30 families who reside in Other Territories.
Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, unpublished customised matrix 1996 Census

there is a lack of information on the fathers of children registered, these children are classified in the 'Only mother Indigenous' category. With this caveat, it appears that around 65 per cent of Indigenous births registered in 1998 were the products of intermixed parents. Again, this mirrors the pattern of couple distribution.

Though a substantial proportion of these births would have been to female sole parents, they do not appear to be affecting the outcome. This implies that the fathers were distributed in a similar Indigenous to non-Indigenous ratio as the couples detailed in Table 1.

DISCUSSION

The contrast between the Australian and American situation as regards the extent of intermix is dramatic. Why this is the case is beyond the scope of this note. A variety of factors could be involved, including more tolerant and inclusive attitudes on the part of some non-Indigenous Australians, an openness on the part of Indigenous Australians to enter mixed relationships, a lack of any organised Indigenous Australian community effort

Table 2: Indigenous couple families^a with natural or adopted children present, 1996

	Both Indigenous	Female Indigenous ^b	Male Indigenous ^c	Total Indigenous couples
Number	11,300	11,076	9,231	31,607
Per cent	35.8	35.0	29.2	100.0

^a An Indigenous family is one where at least one partner declares as Indigenous.

^b Female Indigenous but male either not Indigenous or Indigenous status unknown

^c Male Indigenous but female either not Indigenous or Indigenous status unknown

to discourage out-marriage and the less institutionalised separateness of Indigenous communities in Australian settlements relative to black communities in America.

Whatever the reasons, the extent of intermix has important implications for the reconciliation process. There is already a high degree of familial connection between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Australia. Couple intermix implies that cultural barriers between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people are diminishing. When people join together as couples it is inevitable that there will be a degree of integration of life styles and cultural practices.

These comments should not be taken to mean that Indigenous identity will necessarily weaken as a result of intermix. Identity formation is a social rather

Table 3: Indigenous births in Australia, 1998 (%)

	Australia	QLD	NSW	VIC	SA	NT	WA
Both parents Indigenous	32.1	34.9	22.0	20.2	31.9	46.7	43.8
Only mother Indigenous	41.7	38.5	45.4	44.7	39.0	45.2	35.6
Only father Indigenous	17.1	26.2	1.5	34.7	28.9	8.0	20.6
Father Indigenous, mother not stated	9.1		31.0				
Total ^a	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Number	10,445	3,085	3,014	590	661	1,284	1,468
Proportion ex-nuptial	78.9	75.3	76.6	70.2	79.7	93.5	85.1

^a Total includes some where one parent is Indigenous and the other is not stated. NSW data on 'father Indigenous and mother not stated' supplied to us by the ABS to explain missing data in their *Births* publication.

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Births, 1998*. Cat. no. 3301.0

than a biological process. Even though an increasing majority of Indigenous children are the outcome of intermixed couples, they may still have cause to identify as Indigenous. Also intermix does not mean an end to Indigenous community disadvantage. Sadly, despite the positive

implications of intermix (from the point of view of diminished social distance between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities), the gulf between the social, economic and health status of those who identify as Indigenous and the non-Indigenous community remains vast.

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