

1-1-2005

Managing spoiled identity through entrepreneurship: an exploratory study of Australian Aboriginal entrepreneurs

James Reveley
University of Wollongong, jreveley@uow.edu.au

Simon Down
University of Newcastle Business School

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/commpapers>



Part of the [Business Commons](#), and the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Reveley, James and Down, Simon: Managing spoiled identity through entrepreneurship: an exploratory study of Australian Aboriginal entrepreneurs 2005, 1-14.
<https://ro.uow.edu.au/commpapers/1064>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au

Managing spoiled identity through entrepreneurship: an exploratory study of Australian Aboriginal entrepreneurs

Abstract

This paper argues that spoiled identity, which results from stigmatization, is an important spur to engaging in entrepreneurial activity. The idea that some people become entrepreneurs in response to fragmentation or damage done to the self is not new. To date, however, this idea has been addressed from the standpoint of depth psychology. This paper uses Goffman's spoiled identity concept to shift the focus from psychological dysfunction to social and contextual dimensions of self-identity, understood sociologically. These issues are explored through the abbreviated life histories of two people, who regard themselves as Australian Aboriginal entrepreneurs. Each person dealt with the effects of stigmatization by using aspects of Aboriginal culture both to position and present themselves as entrepreneurs.

Keywords

Managing, Spoiled, Identity, through, Entrepreneurship, Exploratory, Study, Australian, Aboriginal, Entrepreneurs

Disciplines

Business | Social and Behavioral Sciences

Publication Details

Reveley, J. & Down, S. (2005). Managing spoiled identity through entrepreneurship: an exploratory study of Australian Aboriginal entrepreneurs. In D. Davies, G. Fisher & R. Hughes (Eds.), *Australian and New Zealand Academy of Management Conference* (pp. 1-14). Canberra, Australia: Australian and New Zealand Academy of Management.

**Managing Spoiled Identity Through Entrepreneurship:
An Exploratory Study of Australian Aboriginal Entrepreneurs**

Dr. James Reveley

School of Management and Marketing, University of Wollongong, NSW2522, Australia

Email: james_reveley@uow.edu.au

&

Dr. Simon Down

University of Newcastle Business School, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE1 7RU, UK

Email: simon.down@ncl.ac.uk

Managing Spoiled Identity Through Entrepreneurship: An Exploratory Study of Australian Aboriginal Entrepreneurs

ABSTRACT

This paper argues that spoiled identity, which results from stigmatization, is an important spur to engaging in entrepreneurial activity. The idea that some people become entrepreneurs in response to fragmentation or damage done to the self is not new. To date, however, this idea has been addressed from the standpoint of depth psychology. This paper uses Goffman's spoiled identity concept to shift the focus from psychological dysfunction to social and contextual dimensions of self-identity, understood sociologically. These issues are explored through the abbreviated life histories of two people, who regard themselves as Australian Aboriginal entrepreneurs. Each person dealt with the effects of stigmatization by using aspects of Aboriginal culture both to position and present themselves as entrepreneurs.

INTRODUCTION

This paper tells the life stories of two people who managed their spoiled identities by using aspects of Australian Aboriginal culture to become entrepreneurs. The idea that people engage in entrepreneurial activity as a response to fragmentation or damage done to the self is not new. Ket de Vries (1977, 1996), for one, has advanced this idea but his approach is wedded to depth psychology and thus emphasizes psychological dysfunction. By contrast, our paper takes a sociological view of self-identity and stigma alike – one that is informed by the situational sociology of Erving Goffman. In this view, one's self is not based on an underlying psychological core or process, but rather is something that only emerges in interaction with others in situations (Goffman, 1990). This results in an analytical shift of emphasis from the individual *per se*, to the contexts in which they present themselves. Moreover, as we explain, recent extensions of the Goffmanesque view of stigmatization enable links to be made between spoiled identity and material disadvantage (Link and Phelan, 2001) – to which making the 'decision "to entrepreneur"' (Reynolds, 1991: 64) is one response.

STIGMATIZATION AND SPOILED IDENTITY

In Goffman's classic view, in everyday encounters people are engaged in acts of 'impression management' by which they seek to stage credible performances before others (Goffman, 1990: 9). Stigmatization poses a problem to the successful presentation of self. We seek to conceal those aspects of our selves that do not accord with the situational expectations of others, and thus cause us

embarrassment. For Goffman (1963: 3), stigma is characterised by an identity marker ‘that is deeply discrediting’. There are many bases on which stigma can develop, resulting in a person’s identity being ‘spoiled’. These range from obvious physical imperfections to ‘the tribal stigma of race, nation, and religion’ (Goffman, 1963: 4), through to ‘past experiences’ – such as a history of unemployment – ‘from which objectionable qualities may be inferred’ (Kaplan and Liu, 2000: 215). Such attributes and experiences are not intrinsically discrediting, nor do they automatically and unambiguously define you as a person. Their discrediting effect depends on the norms of the social groups to which you belong, and how the members of these groups respond to you.

Our paper aligns with sociologists who accept Goffman’s view but shift the study of stigma from an exclusive focus on the presentation of self in ‘micro-level interactions’ to considering also the distribution and limitation of life-chances that results from the operation of exclusionary practices associated with stigmatization (Link and Phelan, 2001: 366). Stigmatization interlocks with material disadvantage in a variety of ways. These range from overt job discrimination whereby the stigmatised are precluded from employment, or are forced to keep hidden a character blemish – like a criminal record – in order to obtain employment, to enduring patterns of inequality that result, say, from chronic intergenerational unemployment. Equally, exclusion occurs through social closure by which outsiders are marginalised – as in the case of a trade union that will not accept as a member someone who is a known strike-breaker. Status loss and discrimination that emerges through a set of power relations are key components of stigma (Link and Phelan, 2001: 367).

There are a variety of ways in which people cope with, or actively resist, stigmatization. Goffman himself emphasized strategies that are deployed in face-to-face interaction, such as people retreating into groups composed of ‘sympathetic others’ who treat them as “‘essentially” normal’ (Goffman, 1963: 20), or through acts of impression management that control ‘undisclosed discrediting information about self’ (Goffman, 1963: 42). These techniques are illustrated below. The response of our study participants to stigmatization involves actively embracing and manipulating aspects of Aboriginal culture, in order to become entrepreneurs. This response potentially increases their life-chances and offers them the prospect of an identity that affords, at minimum, ‘a phantom normalcy’ (Goffman, 1963: 122, emphasis omitted).¹

We do not claim that all people with similar experiences of stigmatization will respond to it in this way – entrepreneurship is but one response among many, albeit a response that to date has been inadequately documented and theorized. Our purpose in this paper is to rectify this neglect. The stigma concept allows us to analyse both identity formation and patterns of structural disadvantage in the constitution of the person. Consequently, our approach meets the criteria of good social science – the location of personal troubles in a broader social milieu (Mills, 1983). Our reference to Mills is not a casual one, as we have used life-historical research methods (i.e. detailed interviews) in our study (see Plummer, 1983). Two abbreviated life histories will be presented.

DAVID: A ‘DISCREDITABLE’ PERSON

By birth, David is not an Aboriginal person. His father was killed when he was a boy, and he was adopted out and grew up on a farm with a family from whom, he says, ‘I get the Aboriginality, the recognition of it’. He maintains that ‘I actually identify as Aboriginal’, but for many years this cultural identification was in the background. David left school early, and spent sixteen years as a gunner in the Australian Army. In late 1997, David noticed an advertisement for leading plant operators in an army magazine. He discovered that the training involved learning, with a view to teaching others, how to operate cargo-handling equipment for port work. For David, the prospect of a port job presented a significant opportunity: ‘after leaving the army this was going to be the career to set me up.’ The background to the offer of training, which David subsequently accepted, was a plan by one of the two main stevedoring companies (Patrick Stevedores) that operate nationally at Australia’s ports to sack its entire unionized workforce and to re-staff its operation using already trained, non-unionized employees.

In the company of around 20 former soldiers, David was secretly trained at a site in Singapore and then deployed to work as a team leader at Port Botany (in Sydney). Subsequent union action by the Maritime Union of Australia in the Federal Court led to a peak level union-brokered deal with Patrick Stevedores whereby the bulk of the unionized workers were allowed back into their old jobs, contingent upon the ejection of the replacement workers from the waterfront. Despite promises of ongoing work, David found himself out of a job. Although he spent only a brief time at the docks,

having worked as a replacement employee in a highly unionized industry David is labelled 'a scab'. In short, his identity is now spoiled and he experiences ongoing stigmatization.

Particular social groups ascribe stigma to identity markers – such as past experiences – that are viewed as being irrelevant, benign or even with kudos by persons in other situations. David continues to be accepted by his ex-military mates as a creditable person. To the extent that stigma can be seen as 'a characteristic of persons that is contrary to the norm of a social unit' (Stafford and Scott, 1986: 90, cited in Link and Phelan, 2001: 364), David's social stigma derives from how unionized fractions of the Australian working class, in particular occupational groups, view workers who offer themselves as replacement labour. For these workers, David's work history is deeply discrediting.

David continually found himself being excluded from working as a plant operator at unionized sites – because when co-workers found out his background, despite his best attempts to conceal it, their trade union would apply pressure to the employer and his work either would not continue beyond the probationary period or casual employment would cease. He has been subjected to personal threats and intimidation by union members. In short, David's co-workers 'fail[ed] to accord him the respect and regard which the uncontaminated aspects of his social identity...led him to anticipate receiving' (Goffman, 1963: 8-9). David is keenly aware that, in work situations, there are aspects of his self that he must keep hidden, and that he will suffer discrimination if these aspects become publicly visible.

In the management of his spoiled identity, David initially resorted to classic techniques of 'information control' (Goffman, 1990: 141):

[Y]ou either had to disclose that you were on the waterfront, or hide the fact. And the risk of someone actually spotting you...and working out who you were, and it's a pretty big risk. At this stage I've actually taken, like, the waterfront stuff off my resume – that whole period.

However, any attempt to control discrediting information has pitfalls, and David found the need to continually hide the discreditable aspects of self to be a source of considerable worry and anxiety, to the point where he felt unable to apply for jobs in which he could use his newly-acquired skills:

[It was] such a huge, huge setback. It was major. Not to be, like, being employed in a decent sort of job...and always having to worry about, you know, the unions finding out where you are [working], and the amount of threats...that comes from that. Huge risk, yes.

David has been unemployed for four years. 'I've tried to retrain, you know, try to cover where I got my tickets [qualifications] from – my plant operating tickets from. That hasn't really worked. So I actually looked at starting my own business.' When asked 'Did you set out to be a businessman or an entrepreneur?', he unequivocally replies 'No, that's just through necessity. If I was ever going to get a decent job again, this was the only way I was going to do it.'

In his efforts to start a small business, David increasingly resorted to his self-definition as Aboriginal. Together these developments facilitated a 'transformation of self' (Goffman, 1963: 9) – in terms of how he presents to others. He used a sense of himself as Aboriginal and the traditional association of Aboriginal people with the land and sea both to identify his business opportunity – pearl-growing – and to obtain business advice and finance to set up his business through an agency (Australian Indigenous Development) that provides enterprise support to indigenous Australians.

In order to effect this self-presentational transformation, David employed two types of strategies by which people typically seek to manage spoiled identity – 'withdrawal' (Cuzzort and King, 1989: 286) and 'normification' (Goffman, 1963: 31). First, Australian Indigenous Development (AID) was an organization into which he could withdraw, where others sympathized with his unemployment and unfair treatment by 'white-fellas'. That is, AID was a source of 'sympathetic others' (Goffman, 1963: 19), amongst whom he was accepted as a disadvantaged but enterprising person. AID was also a source of symbolic materials by which to construct an identity as an Aboriginal entrepreneur, and itself was a 'prop' that validated David's claim to Aboriginality. Second, David used his entrepreneurial activities to effect 'normification', which is the term Goffman (1963: 31) gives to attempts by the 'stigmatized individual to present himself as an ordinary person'. Setting up a business enterprise allowed him to hide from others his history of exclusion from work due to his strike-breaking activities. Equally, David's association with AID allows him to obscure the fact that his unemployment resulted from the stigma associated with these activities. Aboriginal people are

overrepresented among the ranks of the unemployed, and people might reasonably assume that he was unemployed due to his membership of a structurally disadvantaged group. Consequently, David's identification and presentation as an Aboriginal entrepreneur allows him to 'pass', through the 'management of undisclosed information about self' (Goffman, 1963: 42).

Robert: A Flash Black-fella

Robert says that he is caught between two worlds. He is what is known in Aboriginal communities as a 'flash black-fella' – someone who has succeeded in the Anglo-Australian world. For Robert, this means that he lectures at university occasionally and runs his own consulting business, in which he provides both enterprise and life-skills training to Aboriginal people and cultural awareness workshops for government departments and corporations. Like many Aboriginal people who grew up in the 1960s, Robert experienced direct discrimination and racism. His early years were spent moving around the different rural missions of New South Wales, following the sheep shearing work of his father.

As a kid...if you're black you weren't allowed in the swimming pool...[W]hen I was a kid you went into the picture theatre and there's a rope down the centre, blacks that side and whites that side. It's only certain shops in the town that blacks could go and get their groceries and buy their clothes, you know.

For Robert, the identity spoiling effects of unofficial segregation were compounded by being forcibly removed from his family.

[M]y life was interrupted when I was about five and a half...Dad was out shearing and the Welfare came and took us away. So I'm a 'stolen generation' [person]. So I spent my first four nights in jail at [the] police station. I've still got – can still vividly see that – have memories of that, every day. Staying in the police cell. They took 14 kids away from the Mission that day. I didn't see my mother again till I was about 13 or 14 and it just had a whole impact on the whole

family. But I always say I'm one of the lucky ones....[T]hat broke my Mum and Dad's marriage up, and so I was a state ward then till I was 18 – but Dad actually got us out of the home several years later.

Robert's father died when he was 14, his family dispersed, and he looked after himself with the assistance of neighbours.

Interestingly enough, Robert traces his first significant opportunity to improve his life-chances to his prowess at ball-sports.

If you were good at sports you got that attention....I was like one of the lucky ones that was able to stay on and finish my school certificate, and the only thing that kept me at school was that I excelled in sports....[T]he teachers took a lot of interest in me at the school....And it was because of my sports background that got me that job [in the local council] because I was known [to] the people in the Council.

At the suggestion of his Vocational Officer, he gave up his local council job and moved to Sydney to become an assistant clerk in the public service. Robert was 'scared as anything. You know, little black fella from the bush'. As Robert's education progressed, and with the help of mentors and friends, he began to learn more about Aboriginal history after colonization. The 1970s and 1980s were times of growing Aboriginal activism. The identity materials that Robert used to effect a self-transformation, from a 'little black fella' who was stolen from his family, to an analytically-minded and socially-engaged Aboriginal entrepreneur, were supplied both by university education – he took a degree in business studies – and by key social activists with whom he eventually became involved.

[T]hroughout my working career, and even you know the last eleven and a half years in business, I've been able to hear a lot of views of different people who I associate with. And I listen, and 'oh, I didn't think about it from that angle'....[P]eople say [to me in my training courses] 'Robert how come people – Aboriginals – are angry?' So I've been able to learn that, well why the person is

angry is because, if we were able to sit down and have a look at their background and history they're probably really frustrated that things haven't moved in Aboriginal affairs too quick. So that's a way of them venting their anger....I draw parallels with the union movement, and this is stuff I learnt at Uni[versity]. So that's where I'm able to give this broad view about when I'm talking about Aboriginal history because I draw that parallel stuff.

While avowing 'It was because of my Aboriginality that I started in business', Robert also occasionally adopts this dispassionate, analytical and professional attitude. The discrimination he fatalistically accepted in his youth became a mobilising resource for his decision to start-up his own business, and something against which he crafted his public self as an entrepreneur.

Robert drew on aspects of this work history to develop his business concept. He had been involved in providing enterprise support while working as an Aboriginal employment assistance officer for the Commonwealth Government. Later, his voluntary work in the Indigenous community and the knowledge and confidence he gained via his degree in Business Studies seemed to be providing more of a challenge than his role as Senior Employment Officer at the State Rail Service. Robert thought that he should look for ways to earn a living – 'to set up an Indigenous management consulting company' – from what he was already doing. In addition to providing security and prosperity for family, Robert's objectives were to foster Aboriginal economic development. With the help of a friend and mentor Robert slowly started winning projects and building his business. He now facilitates and delivers the services that he used to commission earlier in his career.

Robert describes his orientation to his business as collective: 'A lot of people refer to me as a social entrepreneur', a descriptor with which he appears to be comfortable. To succeed in the white-fella's world Robert has had to become an uptown black-fella. Potentially this discredits him in the eyes of some of his 'mob'. However, the nature of Robert's business and his social entrepreneurialism – which draws upon and champions Aboriginality – combined with his community and political involvement, affords acceptance among Aboriginal people. To be accepted in the black-fella's world he has become a special type of *social* entrepreneur, who actively engages with Aboriginal cultural norms, both in the traditional sense of collectivism but also in the contemporary sense of redressing

past and present injustices. Robert's form of entrepreneurship thus provides him with the potential simultaneously to present himself in a way that Aboriginal people accept and praise – and which allows him to 'pass' in the white-fella's world.

Despite Robert's potential to be 'passable', the circumstances of his everyday life are not without tension. Becoming a successful entrepreneur and community leader has enabled him to mitigate the negative effects of stigmatization that structured the first part of his life. However, he still feels the need to remain a creditable person in the presence of others. In the training sessions he runs, 'the questions Aboriginal people would often ask me, "Robert, what qualifications have you got to do this?"' Conversely, sometimes 'I'm seen as an uptown black-fella. Too flash...They just straight away assume that you've had no culture – you haven't had an Aboriginal upbringing.' For Robert, as a strategy for managing spoiled identity, entrepreneurship is a double-edged sword that generates ongoing challenges to maintaining convincing performances.

DISCUSSION

The contrasts between the cases show that entrepreneurship can be a practical response to stigma that derives from different sources. In Goffman's terms, David is a 'discreditable' person whose work history potentially spoils his identity in the eyes of others. Conversely, Robert is a 'discredited' person – one of Australia's many 'tribally stigmatized persons' (Goffman, 1963: 23) – who, as an ethnically Aboriginal person, has the visible marker of race. As Aboriginal entrepreneurs, there are differences in the types of identity management strategies that each of our study participants adopted in response to stigmatization – in line with the different sources of their stigma. David used withdrawal, normification, and information control. However, information control is not available to those who are automatically discredited by a visible identity marker (Goffman, 1963: 42). Consequently, Robert relied more on a strategy of normification by presenting himself as someone who has overcome the disadvantage he suffered early in life – he is, in his own words, 'a success'.

The discussion of Robert's life story, if not also David's, provides the opportunity to address the issue of institutional and discursive constraint and structuring of persons. Robert's engagement with social entrepreneurship might be construed as another step along the path of discursive

predetermination by an emergent culture or ‘discourse of enterprise’ (e.g., Cohen and Musson 2000). This type of view finds some support in Goffman’s work regarding how persons and selves are constructed by institutions (Goffman, 1968). This is apparent even in *Stigma*, in the latter part, where he addresses how institutionalized ‘codes of conduct’ sponsored by ‘professionals’ provide ‘recipes for an appropriate attitude regarding the self’ (Goffman, 1963: 111). Considered in these terms, much of Robert’s life has been bound up in a particular and profound way with ‘professionals’ who make claims about and structure, via Government policies and institutional debate, ‘what he should do and feel about what he is and isn’t’ (ibid: 124). Consequently Robert, perhaps more so than David, has found ‘himself in an arena of detailed argument and discussion concerning what he ought to think of himself’ (ibid.). However, there is nothing ‘automatic’ about the type of person that emerges in response to stigmatization. Rather than being discursively or culturally overdetermined or ‘wrapped’ – whether by Aboriginal or enterprising cultures – an equally plausible interpretation is that Robert consciously and actively uses aspects of each of these repertoires to style himself as an enterprising person in order manage ongoing self-presentational challenges – so he can ‘pass’, in both worlds, as a ‘social’ entrepreneur. In this sense, his use of Aboriginal culture is as deliberate and ‘conscious’ – and no more or less authentic – than David’s.

CONCLUSION

How the entrepreneur is constituted has once again become a matter of debate, as the edifices of personality trait theory and the psychological approach more generally have started to crumble under the weight of current trends in social thought (Taylor, 1989; Giddens, 1991; Dunne, 1995). In our contribution to this debate, we have emphasised entrepreneurialism and the ‘decision to entrepreneur’ as an agential response to stigmatization. Our use of the spoiled identity concept shifts the focus from psychological dysfunction, to both the self-related and life-chance effects of stigmatization. Stigmatization and the self are not primarily psychological phenomena, but rather *social* phenomena. Rather than emphasizing psychological depth, we emphasize the surface appearances and impressions that actors manage in interaction with others in the situations of everyday life. By using Goffman’s work, we are suggesting to those interested in indigenous entrepreneurs, or indeed the enterprise

activity of any individuals, that a sociological and interactionist view of the person provides an alternative to the psychological orthodoxy – in both its non-critical (e.g, Mitchell, et al. 2002) and critical incarnations (e.g. Jones and Spicer, 2005) – which continues to colour the debate.

References

- Cohen, L. and Musson, G. (2000), 'Entrepreneurial identities: Reflections from two case studies', *Organization* 7(1): 31-48.
- Cuzzort, R. and King, E. (1989) *Twentieth-Century Social Thought*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Dunne, J. (1995) 'Beyond Sovereignty and Deconstruction: The Storied Self', *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 21(5/6): 137-157.
- Giddens, A. (1991), *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Goffman, E. (1963) *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Goffman, E. (1968) *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Goffman, E. (1990) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Jones, C. and Spicer, A. (2005) 'The Sublime Object of Entrepreneurship', *Organization* 12(2): 223-246.
- Kaplan, H. and Liu, X. (2000) 'Social Movements as Collective Coping with Spoiled Personal Identities: Intimations from a Panel Study of Changes in the Life Course Between Adolescence and Adulthood', in S. Stryker, T. Owens and R. White (eds) *Self, Identity and Social Movements*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Kets de Vries, M. (1977), 'The entrepreneurial personality: A person at the crossroads', *Journal of Management Studies* 14(1): 34-57.
- Kets de Vries, M. (1996) 'The Anatomy of the Entrepreneur: Clinical Observations', *Human Relations* 49(7): 853-883.
- Link, B. and Phelan, J. (2001) 'Conceptualizing Stigma', *Annual Review of Sociology* 27: 363-385.
- Mills, C.W. (1983) *The Sociological Imagination*, New York: Penguin Books.

- Mitchell, R. K., Busenitz, L., Lant, T., McDougall, P. P., Morse, E. A. and Brock Smith, J. (2002) 'Towards a theory of entrepreneurial cognition: Rethinking the people side of entrepreneurship research', *Entrepreneurship, Theory and Practice* 27(2): 93-104.
- Plummer, K. (1983) *Documents of Life*, London: George Allen and Unwin.
- Reynolds P. (1991), 'Sociology and entrepreneurship: Concepts and contributions', *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice* 16(2): 47-70.
- Stafford, M. and Scott, R. (1986) 'Stigma Deviance and Social Control: Some Conceptual Issues', in A. Becker and L. Coleman (eds) *The Dilemma of Difference*, New York: Plenum.
- Taylor, C. (1989), *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press.

Notes

¹ In Goffman's analysis, phantom normalcy is based on 'phantom acceptance' by others that is structured in the following way: 'The stigmatized individual is asked to act so as to imply neither that his burden is heavy nor that bearing it has made him different from us; at the same time he must keep himself at that remove from us which ensures our painlessly being able to confirm this belief about him. Put differently, he is advised to reciprocate naturally with an acceptance of himself and us, an acceptance of him that we have not quite extended him in the first place' (1963: 122).