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What do Aborigines & people in a former mining community in NE England have in common?

By Joe Mellor, Deputy Editor Drawing on culture to promote well-being: communities united by their precarious circumstances Leading academic Matthew Johnson, Aboriginal community leader Mary Graham and Ashington community researcher Tony Bennett, examine how so-called 'good culture' can unite communities on opposite sides of the world. The Northumberland pit village of Ashington and Aboriginal settlements [...]



by **Joe Mellor** — March 26, 2015 in **Environment**

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Drawing on culture to promote well-being: communities united by their precarious circumstances

Leading academic Matthew Johnson, Aboriginal community leader Mary Graham and Ashington community researcher Tony Bennett, examine how so-called 'good culture' can unite communities on opposite sides of the world.

The Northumberland pit village of Ashington and Aboriginal settlements around Brisbane are communities united by their experience of relatively stable and long-established social systems being

As a result, people in such communities often face public criticism for being welfare dependent, while at the same time having their support services cut in austerity drives. There is some private sector work available, but it is often based on uncertain and short-term contracts. Both communities now face circumstances which are 'precarious' and inflict considerable and unrelenting stress on people.

This has increased the pressures on families, and relationships in general, leading to social disintegration, isolation and loneliness, as well as fostering mental health problems and 'lifestyle' illnesses such as diabetes.

In response, members of the two very distant, distinct and different communities are coming together to develop new, ground-breaking, approaches to tackling these challenges and to promoting collective wellbeing.

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They will identify and draw on traditional values, such as equality and solidarity, to advance institutions capable of encouraging collective action, challenging harmful behaviour, minimising isolation and loneliness and improving health.

So, just what do these communities, on opposite sides of the globe, have in common to enable them to discuss what we describe as 'good culture'?

While not wishing to romanticise the groups or obscure the enormous geographical, historical and cultural differences involved, certain core themes have emerged.

Many of today's major problems, such as poverty, social disintegration, alienation, loneliness and ill-health arise from the increasing absence of a 'good culture', characterised by strong community spirit, an ethos of looking after one another and less social isolation.

Historically, there has been a shared objection within both communities to the 'aggressive egoism' of big business – quite often coinciding with or leading to an appreciation for modesty and self-

This is something that the medical sociologist Aaron Antonovsky saw as vitally important in helping people to manage stress and promote well-being.

If life is coherent, the experience of stress is not overwhelming and flourishing lives are possible, even when faced with different circumstances, like those faced by both communities historically.

By working with the land, people in Aboriginal communities developed an intimate relationship, not just with the land, but with each other.

In a completely different context, people in Ashington worked together to shape and manage the land in their native North East through mining.

They developed a shared sense of identity and purpose around which to base their relationships with each other and other communities.

In both cases, by working together with some measure of equality, solidarity and non-domination within groups, they ensured that events were largely comprehensible, challenges manageable and activity meaningful.

Breaking the active, everyday engagement between people and their land, through colonial dispossession in Australia and the closure of the mines in the North East of England, meant that some of the cultural resources that had been essential means of upholding communities in their particular circumstances were lost.

Aboriginal Australians, dealing with often harsh natural environments, developed forceful forms of responsibility sharing within kin or family units.

Having an entitlement to a share of goods within networks meant that unpredictable elements of the environment were made more comprehensible, bearable and manageable.

And emphasising that people had an obligation to share meant that they could not hold the recipients of goods beholden or indebted, underscoring a sense of equality and solidarity.

It is claimed, as a result, that there is no Aboriginal phrase for 'gratitude', with a notion of business being completed or 'over' in its place.

In Northumberland, the feudal system from which Ashington gradually emerged was brutally hierarchical, with generations of Northumbrians perpetually beholden to wealthy landowners and, subsequently, mine owners for their very existence.

People, particularly of our grandparents' generation, often preferred not to eat than to take on debts which would leave them subject to the power and unpredictable whims of individuals and institutions.

In place of this, credit unions, building societies and social clubs were developed in which people, scraping together resources, felt that they were engaging constructively as equals to mitigate and manage unpredictable parts of their lives.

But since the link with the land has been lost, and people have been moved onto welfare systems grounded on often demeaning notions of indebtedness or pushed into precarious forms of employment, people's well-being has decreased.

In an era of so-called 'Big Society' and the 'well-being agenda', we ought to remember that the links with the land and the related 'resistance resources' were systematically undermined because they were threatening to various powerful interests and agendas.

For communities to restore coherence, they need to work with one another across radical difference to present alternatives to these moribund approaches. The work has just begun.



Joe Mellor

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