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Payback and Forward: Relatives as a Source of Weakness or Strength

Marika Moisseeff

- 1 We are all aware of the dreadful death rates of Aboriginal youth linked to suicide and other self-destructive behaviour (ABS 2012, Silburn *et al.*, Brady 1992, Moisseeff 2011, Robinson 1992 a&b, 1990, 1995). During my last fieldwork in Australia, an Aboriginal friend in charge of an Aboriginal Youth Centre, Sherry, emphasised a problem which may seem obvious but which we need to understand more fully in order to allow for solutions that are more effective than those that already exist: youths are most vulnerable during the transition from childhood to young adulthood (Martin 1993, Moisseeff 2011, Myers 2011, Robinson 1992 a&b, 1990, 1995, Robinson *et al.* 2008). It is during this transitional period, Sherry pointed out, that young people have to decide for themselves how they want to live their lives. Belonging to a community which has been highly discriminated and which, for this reason, has become heavily dependent on the non Aboriginal welfare State for its survival, these young people are in the position of having to make such decisions all the while having to process the many negative and traumatic experiences they and their relatives have had and still have to undergo. Sherry went on to say “At this stage of our lives, we self-absorbed everything. We are like a sponge and you need to squeeze that sponge to get out the negativity. They don't want death, they seek the deadening of pain. Some have the strength to fight back, others make the choice of considering themselves as the mere victims of circumstances”.
- 2 My discussion with Sherry took place just before she had to explain to potential funding agencies why the Youth Centre was worth founding. To convince them, she chose to tell them a story which would show what one can achieved by supporting youth activities run by Aboriginal people. She took the opportunity of my visit to rehearse her presentation, and in turn, I am taking the opportunity of this conference to draw on her remarkable insights regarding a crucial issue for the attainment of adulthood in a contemporary Aboriginal community. I will call this factor “the

transmission of the capacity for relational responsibility” and I will try to both outline and illustrate what it might be.

Nurturing and filiative parental roles, and the transmission of relational responsibility

- 3 In previous publications (Moisseeff 1992, 2004 a&b, 2006), for heuristic and comparative purposes, I proposed to distinguish two parental roles according to the types of dependency between parents and children they entail: a nurturing function and a filiative function. During its early years, a child is emotionally and materially dependent on other individuals for survival and development; this is supposed to be a transitory State. But to be a child also means being the offspring of parents, a State which relies on kinship ties and enables individuals to continue to be their parents' children beyond childhood itself. In the first case, dependency refers to the *nurturing function* that is exercised by parental figures in accordance with socially defined parental rights and duties towards under-age children (feeding, socialization, emotional sharing and so forth); it refers to parenthood. In the second case, dependency refers to a *filiative function* in which an individual is assigned a position within a kinship system that extends well beyond the immediate family to define a larger set of relational categories. Assuming a filiative function consists in bestowing a relational identity upon one's children by transmitting to them one's kinship relationships and, thus, inscribing them in one's kinship network; this allows the children to inscribe their own children within a relational network connecting the different generations.
- 4 My discussion with Sherry made me realized that it was worthwhile distinguishing the filiative function from another dimension that I mentioned above: the transmission of the capacity for relational responsibility. Up to that point, I had conflated them together as a single aspect of parental roles. The transmission of the capacity for relational responsibility also implies a hierarchical orientation. However, I take it to be distinct from either of the two parental functions already mentioned. It is a constitutive feature of sociality that pertains to the social system as a whole. In the case of Aboriginal society, this social system happens to coincide with the kinship system itself. It is, in this sense, an essential, generative dimension of what, in anthropology and more specifically with regard to Aboriginal Australia, has often been called “relatedness” (Myers 1986, 2011, Martin 1993). To assume a relational responsibility is to participate in the development of another person's relational competencies so as to allow them to expand their own relational network and to provide them with the means to exercise, in turn, a relational responsibility towards others. A fully fulfilled relational responsibility may thus be thought of as a “meta-function” in Bateson's sense: the transmission not so much of something than of the ability to transmit. The difference is analogous to that between teaching a given content and training others to teach. It consists in passing on the capacity to pass on to others. The responsibility assumed by Aboriginal initiators in the past and, to a certain extent, in certain remote communities at present, is in many ways paradigmatic of the type of responsibility I am trying to get at here. Of course, not everybody attains the more advanced grades of being an initiator.

- 5 Nurturing and filiative functions, as I have defined them, are included in the legal definition of parenthood in the West. However, from a legal or institutional standpoint, parenthood does *not* entail relational responsibility. Thus, it is not an institutionalized obligation for parents to contribute to the development of their children's relational networks, or to transmit their own parenting roles to them. On the contrary, everything is organized so as to avoid parents imposing their wishes in these areas upon their offspring. In contrast to this, in Aboriginal Australia, the transmission of relational responsibility by parents was an integral aspect of the kinship system. However, colonization and the violence with which it was imposed, in destabilizing this responsibility, subverted parent's capacities to fulfill both their nurturing and filiative functions: the nurturing function was weakened by the workings of the Welfare system (Finlayson 1989 & 1991, Martin, 2001, Pearson 2000), the filiative function was weakened, among other things, by taking children away from their parents and, in certain cases, erasing all traces of their Aboriginal descent.
- 6 Reflecting on years of affiliation with Aboriginal friends, which has allowed me to follow the itinerary of a number of individuals, I could see that those young people who had been able to step out of delinquency and/or depression did so because they were given the opportunity to take on responsibilities for others. In doing so, they were able to recognize that they could become irreplaceable figures for certain of their relatives and, in certain cases, for the community itself. Previously, "burning the candle at both ends" had seemed to them to be the only way to replace an obstructed imagination of their future with an exhilarating present centred on the extreme body experiences afforded by risky behaviour like alcohol abuse or petrol sniffing (Brady 1992, Robinson 1990, 1992b). Samson, in the movie *Samson and Delilah* (Warwick Thornton 2009), is a good example of such a self-destructive choice. Persons such as Samson are stuck in a State of being nurtured by others, incapable of insuring a nurturing function for others or of helping others to develop their relational identity. Rather than choosing to develop their own relational personhood by assuming responsibilities for others, they remain totally dependant on others for their subsistence and survival. Being able to control one's body by denying or giving it pleasure or pain, by oneself, becomes, for them, a way of trying to by-pass this reliance on others. Unable to become independent, they try to be self-dependant. And this death-dealing logic often leads them to suicide as the only liberty which remains open to them.
- 7 The alternative is to take one's relational responsibilities seriously, that is, with the perspective of transmitting them to the next generation. Envisaging oneself as a role model in this way allows one to project oneself into the future as a key figure within one's kinship network.
- 8 In my view, this is what Sherry was trying to convey to the representatives of the Youth Centre's potential funding agencies. An ethnographic vignette, along with Sherry's account of the lessons she learned by setting up an Aboriginal basketball team, will allow me to illustrate different aspects of relational responsibility and to show how certain Aboriginal persons, by assuming this responsibility, even in precarious circumstances, are able to transmit it to others.

The Frazer/Tylor Payback

- 9 The Aboriginal people of the community I am referring to here live either in town, Hammerton, or in what used to be a mission established in the late thirties three kilometres away from Hammerton, later transformed into an incorporated Aboriginal Community. The latter is still designated, in the area, as “The Reserve” which I will call Clearview. During my last fieldwork in Clearview, I arrived in a community in which many houses had been recently wrecked and all the street lights destroyed. “Be prepared Marika, I was told, the reserve is not the same: it's shell-shocked”. Nine months earlier, a twenty year old man had been killed, repeatedly stabbed by a twenty two year old, presently in jail. Now, everyone in Clearview is related to everyone else in several ways. However, the victim and his murderer belonged to two families that had a long history of violent conflicts with each other. I will call these families the Frazers and the Tylors. As a result of the death, “a payback was on”, as people put it, and the community was strikingly subdued in comparison with its usual, noisy, lively State. As an Aboriginal friend expressed it: the community was in “lockdown”. A few months before I arrived, about six months after the murder, Joshua, a young man from the victim’s family, the Frazers, threatened with an iron bar Ruby, the big nana, the ancestress of the Clearview Tylors, saying that he was going to kill her. A few weeks later she had a stroke and had to be flown to the Adelaide hospital.
- 10 All the members of Ruby's family were afraid, waiting for one of them to be killed; some of their houses had already been destroyed, in one case by a fire lit while some old people were still inside. Just after the murder, the younger Tylor children were sent away to the APY lands¹ for several months, their relatives being unable to guarantee their safety on the reserve. Thus, strangely enough, it was the little children and the old grandmother, those who were the least involved, who were presumed by all to be the feud’s next victims. As Paul, an eminent community member, explained to me: “They will go for the one that hurts the most, the innocent one”. “Of course, reiterated his wife, they'll always go after the innocent one”.
- 11 Because the members of the murderer’s family were all descended from Ruby who had looked after most of them, killing her was a way to deeply harm all of them. Although she was innocent, she nevertheless had to pay for someone else’s action. The same applied to the Tylors’ little children. This payback situation emphasizes both the positive and the negative aspects of relational responsibility, that is, of fulfilling one’s commitments as a relational being. On the positive side, by being relationally responsible, one acquires a network of persons who are the potential supporters of one’s undertakings. Those belonging to my network are able to help me, share my joys and griefs, thereby reinforcing my social status and enriching my emotional experiences. In this sense, relational responsibility is a source of pride and strength. However, at the same time, and for much the same reasons, it is a source of potential weakness. Indeed, relational responsibility implies mutuality. When a family member is struck down, I am struck down as well, and however I choose to act, I will be held accountable for my behaviour as a member of a relational network: there is no possible neutral stance. Doing nothing or refusing to take sides are themselves clear Statements that position a person within his/her network. In a similar way, when someone from my family strikes down someone from another family, I must be prepared to be struck down, even if I didn’t participate in, or even approve of their action. Indeed, killing an

innocent family member, especially one who is taken to be the root or a bud of the family tree, is a way of making the offending party responsible for the death of someone dear in their own relational network.

- 12 This first example, the Frazer/Tylor payback, gives some idea of the stakes involved in relational responsibility. I now want to go a step further by providing some examples of how it may be transmitted. As mentioned before, the passing on of relational responsibility is an integral part of relational responsibility itself, such that to fully assume this responsibility is to transmit it to others. Not every one does this, the difference being that between those who are content with being a member of a relational network, and those who actively promote its reproduction and growth. On one level, relational responsibility implies mutuality. However, when more fully realized, that is, when it entails transmitting to others the ability to transmit, relational responsibility brings a hierarchical relationship into play.

Clearview Basketball Team

- 13 Over the previous few years, Clearview had been facing cuts in Government funding for all the services its Council had managed on its own since the 1980s when its Aboriginal CEO had successfully pushed the Hammerton Town Council to hand these services over to them. The Youth Centre was the only one which was still funded, and therefore, continued to be in Clearview, Aboriginal hands, rather than in Hammertonn, mainstream ones. This is why Sherry, who was in charge of the Youth Centre, was so determined to maintain its funding. She wanted to convince potential funding agencies by explaining the positive outcomes of the Clearview boys' basketball team she had set up the year before in spite of considerable hardships. Her story will hopefully allow me to further describe what fully assuming relational responsibility entails.
- 14 Each week, Sherry took her son Kevin to basketball practice, as he was a member of the Hammerton Basketball team. This led the other Clearview boys of Kevin's generation to ask her to set up an under-13 basketball team of their own. With the exception of another boy with a limited experience of the game, the other Clearview boys who were determined to be part of this new team had no basketball experience at all. Sherry had only two weeks to apply for funding for this initiative; considering the poor attendance of Aboriginal kids in ongoing, organized activities in general, she was not sure that the effort was worthwhile. Her son and the other boys she shared her worries with managed to convince her to give it a try. She decided to trust them, but explained the rules she expected them to follow. They had to take responsibility for the choice they would make: they had to commit themselves to attend training every week or drop out but, in this case, to be respectful to her and her attempts to set the program, they had to let her know honestly.
- 15 Two adult players to whom she asked, accepted to coach the new team, and she put the boys in charge of making a list of who could be part of the team, of finding a name for it and of choosing the design for the uniforms. They were very excited and put their heart into these tasks. With the help of her co-workers, Sherry also asked the boy's parents to support their kids by attending the training sessions and games, both in and outside of Clearview, which most of them did, accompanied by other family members. Sherry's son, who had played basketball for years in school, belonged to the Hammerton team which was *the* team to belong to. He was thus guaranteed to

participate in a grand final. However, she asked him if he would leave this team and come over to lead the inexperienced Clearview team. He accepted gladly and was seconded by the other, slightly experienced boy.

- 16 Two months down the track, Jerry, one of the team members, sent a message through a team mate: “Tell Nana Sherry, I am shame. I made my choice. I can't go to training anymore. I'm picking a life of petrol sniffing and crime”. So he stayed away, and sure enough, was locked up a couple of times. When Sherry saw him, she told him that while she was disappointed, at least he had made his choice, adding “You have to know that the friends you are following will destroy your life, but I still love you”. Five weeks later he wanted to come back to the team. Sherry's initial reaction was to vehemently refuse. However, her son, Kevin, told her:

- “It's not for you to decide.”
- She kept saying: No! No! No way!
- “Mum, you are not listening to me,” he said, “You have to leave it to us”.

- 17 After half an hour, she gave up.
- 18 Jerry came to training and the boys decided to have a meeting of their own without any adults. They sat in circle with Jerry in the middle. Afterwards, they called all the youth workers together and told them that they had made a decision: “We want him to be back on the team, but for a few months he is never to take the starting five [that is, be part of the game's starting players]; he is a reserve”. Jerry accepted, and the team was happy, and he played all season. Because he had missed so many practice sessions, he lagged very far behind. He admitted that he should not have given up and apologized to the boys.
- 19 Sherry drew the following conclusion from this episode: “ It was a lesson for me as a mum and as the boss of the Youth Centre. I came to realize that I needed to empower the boys and to trust them about the fact that they would make the good decision. This boy was not ostracized. It was what I was most worried about. It was also reassuring to see that no matter what he had done, he was still accepted. At the end of the season, he stood up and got an award with the other players”.
- 20 Before pursuing Sherry's story further, let's look at how it exemplifies what I am trying to convey regarding the transmission of relational responsibility.
- 21 First, the expressed desire of the boys to set up their own team was a way for them to imagine themselves in a positive undertaking which went beyond their immediate present and their solitary persons. They had a goal which involved others. Second, asking her son Kevin to leave a highly qualified team shows how Sherry was ready to give up her and his personal expectations of success to embark on a more hazardous, collective venture. By doing so, she handed over him her relational responsibility towards the community rather than towards their personal and nuclear-family wellbeing. Moreover, in asking Kevin to lead the team, while giving him the opportunity to act as a positive role model for others, she also passed on to him a relational responsibility similar, although at another level, to the one she had assumed by being in charge of the Youth Centre. Transmitting such responsibility necessarily goes together with recognition of the other's increased autonomy in making their own decisions. And indeed, Kevin demonstrated that he was independent enough to oppose her when she refused Jerry's return. However, Kevin did not take sole responsibility for reintegrating Jerry, but – a still further case of transmission – required that the decision be made together with the other players of his team. The boys made their

decision, on the one hand, by excluding the adults from their meeting, and on the other hand, by including Jerry in it. The adults accepted this, showing that they were ready to acknowledge the boy's autonomy and ability to decide for themselves. This would seem to be a clear example of the meta-function I qualified, in a Batesonian, systemic perspective, as the transmission of transmission.

- 22 Third, Sherry asked all the boys to commit themselves to the basketball project, and accepted Jerry's choice to drop out on the condition that he take full responsibility for his decision, that is, to have the guts to let her know clearly, rather than let youth workers lose their time running after him. In doing so, she also respected the all-important Aboriginal sense of autonomy. According to her, the main reason she had opposed to Jerry's reintegration was that she feared that he would be humiliated and ostracized. "Love, as she insisted, is very important". The "love" she was referring to, I think, has to do with the emphasis Aboriginal ethos places on caring for others, also conveyed by the interjection, *nganga*, "poor one", "sorry" in Adnyamathanha, one the languages spoken in Clearview, expression which is very similar, to my mind, to the Martu term Bob Tonkinson referred to yesterday.
- 23 One can see here that caring for others, and taking responsibility for them, is certainly not doing something *for* them, or in their place, *instead* of them, as endorsed by many welfare services workers. Of course, caring for others by accepting their self-destructive choices – because it is their body and their choice – has its disadvantages. If Sherry had maintained her decision to not reintegrate Jerry, he might well have continued on his path of petrol sniffing and crime with a potential lethal ending. But it is precisely because she assumed a *full* relational responsibility by accepting the team's decision and their way of making it, that the actual ending was a happier one.
- 24 Among the other, not dissimilar difficulties Sherry and her co-workers had to overcome, was the case of David. David was living in a very unstable environment, constantly moving between four to five different houses; the youth workers had to go looking for him. As a result, he had very poor hygiene and the other boys made fun of him. At one point, his sport shoes were stolen and he got flogged for it. The Youth Centre decided to lend him a 200\$ new pair of shoes which he could use each time he played, making him the promise that at the end of the season they would be his. According to Sherry, he was a typical victim with a very low self-esteem: he would not stand up and defend himself. However, he wanted to fit in and did not miss a single game.
- 25 The day Sherry discovered that he had not been fed for four days, she decided that that was enough. She could not but do something about it. She took the matter to her co-workers, asking them how they would address such a sensitive issue. At the end of their discussion, Sherry decided to give David's mother, who was also Sherry's niece, an ultimatum: within a week, she had to come up with a better home: "You better do something about your kid! He may be taken away from you, and it will be your own fault". As a result, David's mother immediately managed to place him with a more stable relative who fed him properly. His hygiene started to improve and he gradually gained more and more self-confidence. As a result, the other boys started to relate more positively to him and by the end of the season, David was seen as a major player of the Clearview team.
- 26 For Sherry, confronting David's mother, and the latter's action was better than to have handed his case over to the Welfare Services. Indeed, Sherry does not trust in the

latter's ability to insure a proper follow-up. According to her, giving the choice to the mother was very important because it put her in control of her actions, which allowed her to bolster her maternal role. As it turned out, David came back to live with his mother afterwards. Sherry's ability to play a positive role model for David's mother in giving her an alternative to the Welfare Services proved to be a way of giving her back the capacity to exercise a real nurturing function, while his team mates acted as positive role models for David himself.

- 27 Sherry stressed the fact that in dealing with the different issues she and her co-workers had to overcome, they themselves had been learning about the different challenges individual members of their community had to face. Indeed, they had to deal with many other problems as well, among them, the removal for several months of three children on the basketball team who belonged to the killer's family in the Frazer/Taylor feud I spoke about earlier, and the workers' and young players' deep grief following the suicide of a eighteen year old who was related to all of them.
- 28 Despite all these hindrances and the boys' inexperience, the Clearview team managed to go to the second Grand Final, missing out by only one point. The youth workers had wanted the boys' families to be involved and the latter surely demonstrated that they were: the Hammerton stadium was packed with people from Clearview. And when, at the end, the Clearview team lost, one of the boy's cousins who was with the Hammerton Team and had played against them, joined his Clearview team cousins and cried with them as did all the grand-mothers who came to offer them consolation. The final result was that the Clearview basketball team became an inspiration for all the Aboriginal kids of Hammerton. Many of them asked to join this new team.
- 29 This happy ending was an important occasion that soothed the many griefs the community experienced during the basketball season, and which are so typical of what any Aboriginal community has to face. It did not erase any of these traumatic events, but it gave both parents and children the possibility to be proud of being Aboriginal, of being parents, of being team mates. In the end, all were in a better position, each in their own way, to assume a relational responsibility. Hopefully, I have given you a glimpse of what, through Sherry's story, I came to understand as the transmission of the capacity for relational responsibility. To assume a relational responsibility is to participate in the development of another person's relational competencies so as to allow them to expand their own relational network and to provide them with the means to exercise, in turn, a relational responsibility towards others.

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NOTES

1. The acronym “APY lands” stands for Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara and refers to a large Aboriginal local government area located in the remote north west of South Australia. It consists of the Pitjantjatjara, Yankunytjatjara and Ngaanyatjarra peoples (or Anangu).

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