

WPS DEVELOPMENTAL NOTE #73

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Topic: Some reasons why abattoir groups work well

In mid August 2005, five young people, pictured below, were placed into work on the slaughter floor of the Bordertown abattoir. Bordertown is located in the South-East region of South Australia, a short distance from the Victorian border. The group was placed in caravans in the local caravan park with no external supervision apart from my fortnightly visits and the occasional telephone call. On the 22 December 2005, the group was sent home when the abattoir closed down for the Christmas/New Year break (see WPS Developmental Note #29).



Pictured above are the participants of the 2005 Bordertown trial

The success of this trial led to the establishment of the Wonthaggi¹ and Albany² abattoir groups. Both of these groups have worked well. The Wonthaggi group began on 25 October 2006. At the end of 2007, 23 of the 32 participants placed into the group were still present or had completed their 7 months or 1 year participation agreement. This equates to a 71% success rate.

¹ The Wonthaggi abattoir group was based upon the learnings of the Bordertown trial and the Weman group (see WPS Developmental Note #29, #38 and #52). The town of Wonthaggi is located approximately 2 hours drive south-east from Melbourne in South Gippsland, a short distance from the coast. The town has a population of about 6000 people with no local Aboriginal community. A short distance from the town is Tabro Meats; a privately owned abattoir employing between 180 and 200 people. Our group has between 20 and 25 male participants.

² The Albany abattoir group was based upon the success of the Wonthaggi group. The town of Albany is located approximately 400 kilometres south-east from Perth. The town has a population of about 30,000 people with a small Aboriginal population. Located a short distance from town is Fletchers International Export abattoir employing about 500 people. Our group has 10 participants; 8 males and 2 females working in the abattoir.

The Albany abattoir group began on 22 August 2007. At the end of 2007, 8 of the 9 participants placed into the group were still present.³ This equates to an 88% success rate. This note identifies and discusses some of the reasons for the success of these groups.

There are a number of reasons why these abattoir groups work well. In no particular order of significance, these reasons include:

1) Many young Aborigines, particularly those from remote northern communities, enjoy this type of work and they are very good at it. They are good at it for a number of reasons.

A) Young people in good health usually have good eyesight, good reflexes, good fine-motor skills and good hand-eye coordination – all necessary attributes for good knife work.

B) Most young males from remote communities are accustomed to the slaughtering of wild animals for food, along with the accompanying sensations (texture, sights, sounds and smells) involved in this sort of work. You can see this taking place in the following pictures that I took years ago in the Torres Strait.



Today, like in traditional times, male prestige is associated with bringing in meat. This is certainly the case in the Torres Strait and in many northern Aboriginal communities.

³ 4 of these 9 participants are from the forestry trial.

C) The families of many participants have a historical connection to the pastoral (cattle) industry. It is on this point that I draw upon my earlier work in narrative therapy. Narrative therapists believe that people live their lives by stories, and no one's life story is free from ambiguity or contradiction. The role of the therapist is to help search out more preferred stories from the client's mass of experiences, and to elevate these alternative narratives to a more central position. My recruitment of young people to work in the abattoirs involves my telling the story of how this type of work is part-and-parcel of what their great-grandfathers, grandfathers, fathers and uncles were doing over the past 125 years before the time of welfare and CDEP. Young applicants and their families are shown the following pictures as part of the initial recruitment interview.



It's a return to the 'golden age' when their families were the mainstay of the northern cattle industry. It's this historical connection that gives **context** and **relatedness**.

2) How we feel about time and how we organise time can greatly influence our motivation. Many of our participants have been raised by families who are more orientated towards the present rather than the future. They don't think much about the long-term or plan events far into the future. Their orientation with the 'here-and-now' is accompanied by low motivation, lack of individual striving and lack of occupational success. It's more about being content to 'get by' rather than any real desire to 'get ahead'. An understanding of this present or future orientation can help in knowing how to motivate many of our young participants. Young people, in general, tend to be motivated by immediate reward. The abattoirs pay good weekly wages which give our young participants more immediate gratification and therefore motivation. While this is taking place, we are instilling values and attitudes that promote deferred gratification – postponing current pleasure and enjoyments in order to reap even greater rewards in the future.



The above picture shows an excited young Elroy Raymond from Kowanyama showing off his first week's wage at Tabro Meats. Never before has he received so much money.

3) Notwithstanding the above comments. F.W. Taylor, founder of *scientific management*, assumed that people are primarily motivated by economic reward and he therefore placed emphasis on piece-work (linking an individual's pay directly to his output) so that workers had incentives to produce as much as possible in a given period. This assumption has since been questioned as oversimplifying the complex nature of human motivation. His ideas had been superseded by those of the *human-relations school* which place importance on the influence of group norms and values. The human-relations school is closely associated with the name of Elton Mayo who published the results of the famous Hawthorne Experiments which concluded that the **attitude** of the workers and their **feelings** about their work were of strategic importance. Good relations and a positive atmosphere are responsible for high morale and good productivity. This certainly has been achieved in our abattoir groups for all the reasons stated above and below.

4) The school of scientific management and human-relations both maintain that the nature of work in industrial societies is not very satisfying. Marx also argued that the nature of work in capitalist societies (its fragmentation, specialised division of labour, confinement of workers to narrowly defined aspects of production) is *alienating*. In other words, the work is uninteresting, meaningless, unfulfilling and unrewarding. One of the most often quoted empirical studies of *alienation* was by Blauner. He argued that not all workers are equally alienated. According to Blauner, the technology most likely to give rise to alienation is assembly-line technology, epitomised in motor-car production, which is not dissimilar to abattoir work.



In assembly-line work or production-line work, the worker is required to follow a set routine at a constant pace; the line controls both the quality and quantity of the product with physical movement restricted to a few feet from one's 'station' on the line. Blauner argues that this sort of work isolates the worker because it does not require the workers to conceive, plan and initiate their work task. In addition, the line's speed, and the workers' separation from one another, inhibits conversation and the establishment of personal relations. As a result, workers are likely to be self-estranged and experience their jobs as dull and monotonous. In a general sense, this may be correct but in the case of the majority of young people from remote communities, this type of work has proven to be ideal.

Most academics and armchair intellectuals do not fully appreciate how difficult it is to manage the behaviour of young people with behaviours such as:

- * lack of curiosity
- * cognitive impairment
- * low impulse control
- * unpredictable
- * difficulty containing inhibitions
- * strong attraction to drugs and alcohol
- * negative attitude towards authority
- * excessive vulnerability to peer influence
- * poor imaginations
- * memory deficits
- * attention and hyperactivity problems
- * wild mood swings
- * demand immediate gratification
- * unwilling to accept responsibility
- * lacking work ethic
- * lacking manners and social skills

Abattoir work does require workers to be separated and their pace of work is set by the speed of the conveyer. This certainly does remove their choice in effort and it does inhibit their conversations. Having said this, all workers are rotated to other jobs throughout the day and week by week. In regard to the establishment of personal relations, most of our young people are related to each other or come from the same community and they continue to live together in the same home or live in close proximity to each other. In other words, personal relations have already been establishment with co-workers and besides, there is no restriction on conversation while working on the production-line as long as they complete their tasks as required.

5) Our society offers many rites of passage that signal a new status and help young people establish an identity. For many people, their first "real" job is a rite-of-passage from boyhood to manhood. To work fulltime in an abattoir and earn good money can signify this transition.

In many Aboriginal families today, we have a situation where parents are often very young and men have withdrawn from their traditional roles of providing economic support and the rearing of older boys. All too often they have been replaced by women, usually grandmothers or older aunties. It is these women who carry out the crucial roles of maintaining the household and nurturing the children. This has resulted in many young people growing to maturity where there is no formal, socially sanctioned means by which older boys are removed from the indulgences of women. Most are welfare dependent and have never worked in the mainstream. Some of them actively discourage their teenage boys from going away to work and/or are constantly trying to get them back home.



The above picture shows young 17 year old Greg Cox from Kalumburu at work amongst **men** and being instructed by an **old hand** and plant manager, Jim Noland.

6) Abattoirs provide on-site nationally credited MINTRAC training that can be delivered to people low in literacy and numeracy skills. This enables opportunities for promotion to higher skilled, higher status positions and greater income.

7) The WPS is not required to provide any on-site supervision. The abattoirs are best left to their own devices managing the behaviour of their employees and they appear to do a good job. I can see two reasons for this.

A) I have often talked about welfare workers and welfare programs all too often patronising and infantilising Aboriginal people; forever rescuing them from competition and not allowing them to take responsibility for their actions, including the actions or lack of action of parents towards their own children. Many of the recipients have come to *accept* this sort of response and now *expect* this sort of response. They have also learnt the art of manipulating people, especially welfare workers; exploiting whatever benefits they can. I call this art form 'dancing the welfare worker'; others call it being 'street-wise' or 'system-smart'. In the past, these welfare workers would dance them; now they dance the welfare workers. Abattoir groups, however, have no WPS on-site supervisors. I have removed all possibility for the inclusion of gullible would-be welfare workers in the form of on-site supervisors

wanting to rescue our young people from competition and responsibility for their actions.

B) The second reason why this scheme is more effective compared to social welfare programs is the degree by which the requirement for conformity and the application of restrictions can be personalized and then construed as a test of the young person's ingenuity to overcome the restrictions. Like many challenges, the reward is inbuilt. The defying of a stricture, the defeating of an external foe, the beating of a system, can all produce great self-satisfaction, superiority and causes for celebration. Whereas, in this scheme, the demands and restrictions are depersonalised and expressed in terms of universal requirements of work. This, combined with the fact that participants can leave the scheme at any time, means there is no test of their ability or great pleasure to be gained from defying the restrictions.

8) This provides the opportunity for the WPS to concentrate on off-site support and supervision, including assistance with sport and recreation activities, health, income management and educational opportunities. In turn, this enables the WPS to give greater attention to the recruitment of competent off-site supervisors, cooks and domestic support workers.

9) This stability in employment for young people enables the WPS to provide better quality rental housing with their own room and regular meals at cost when requested.

10) Many of the families are much more supportive of this sort of work which has enabled us to develop 3-year participation agreements; replacing the 7-month participation agreements used in horticultural work.

The clear conclusion is that the WPS should focus more on this type of production-line wage work that provides context and relatedness and seek ways to minimise our reliance on the horticultural industry and the use of on-site work group supervisors. This decision proved to be fortuitous; within 12 months of the establishment of the Wonthaggi group the horticultural industry in the Riverland, Sunraysia and Murray Valley regions was in crisis due to the continuing drought and the unprecedented loss of fruit picking jobs.