

# POPULATION STUDIES RESEARCH BRIEF

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## TOP ENDERS AND CENTRALIANS - BECOMING A TERRITORIAN

### KEY FINDINGS

- Many non-Indigenous people who move into the Northern Territory come to regard themselves as Territorians.
- In order to become a Territorian, a process of acquiring vocabulary, and reorienting one's perception of space, place and time is followed by residential identification and group differentiation and, finally, adopting the label of a Territorian.
- Other factors related to the unique social, historical and physical environments of the Northern Territory also affect identity formation.
- Negative factors operate to produce stereotypical images of Territorians, thus leading to potential social exclusion of individuals who do not fit these images.
- Personal and social identities as Territorians can help to create a sense of belonging and identification with the community. How can inclusive social identities be developed to strengthen Northern Territory communities?

### RESEARCH AIM

To investigate the factors which may encourage people who move into the Northern Territory to consider themselves to be Territorians, and the effect this has on identity and sense of belonging.

This Research Brief draws mainly on themes arising from in-depth interviews conducted as part of the Northern Territory Mobility Project.

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## **Becoming a Territorian**

As part of the Northern Territory Mobility Project, participants were asked whether they thought of themselves as Territorians. This question was intended as a proxy measure of identity and/or attachment to the Northern Territory. Such a simplistic measure has little validity. However, an analysis of the question responses illuminated interesting aspects of the interaction between identity and place and, therefore, how the identity of a Territorian is constructed.

Although this may seem to be a light-hearted subject, individual identity (i.e. a unique sense of self) and group identity (i.e. the characteristics attributed to a person by others) can influence self-esteem, a sense of belonging, and the successful formation of communities. People who were born in the Northern Territory express a strong sense of, and pride in, being a Territorian. But what of those non-Indigenous people who have moved into the Northern Territory and decided to stay? Do they identify as Territorians and what does it mean to 'become a Territorian'?

## **Theoretical framework**

In an investigation of identity and community on the Alaskan frontier, Cuba (1987) outlined three identifiable stages in 'becoming an Alaskan': learning a regional vocabulary, adjusting to an unusual winter climate, and coping with the effects of distance from the continental United States. Two decades later and in a vastly different though still frontier region, these stages are relevant to the process of 'becoming a Territorian', although the geographic and climatic references are necessarily different. Drawing on an expanded version of Cuba's (1987) theoretical framework, the following six points briefly explain some of the stages which must be mastered in 'becoming a Territorian'.

### ***Stage 1 - Acquiring vocabulary***

Confidently using the correct vocabulary helps an in-migrant to shed their status as an outsider. Vocabulary used in the Territory can be distinguished from that used in other regions of Australia because of unique conditions relating to climate and weather, natural and man-made objects particular to the region, activities carried out in tropical and desert environments, the relationship to Indigenous people, and the naming of geographical areas.

### ***Stage 2 - Reorienting space***

While Top Enders recognize they live on the northern edge of the continent by referring to the rest of Australia as Down South, Centralians describe themselves as living "in the middle of everywhere". Across the whole Territory, there is a sense of being very far removed from the rest of Australia. Even within the Northern Territory, distances that must be travelled from one centre of population to the next are massive compared with what the majority of Australians experience.

### ***Stage 3 - Reorienting place***

Place is not only related to geography as space may be. Place is also socially constructed and very much connected to identity. According to Walmsley (1995), “where we are influences who we are...where we are from influences who we are allowed to become”. Many interview participants said they immediately felt a sense of being “at home” when they arrived in the Northern Territory and ascribed this feeling to both the people and the place.

### ***Stage 4 - Reorienting time***

Time in the Northern Territory appears to be measured in a different way to the rest of Australia. Newcomers are often told that ‘NT’ stands for ‘Not Today, Not Tomorrow’ in the same way that the Spanish ‘manana’ or the Greek ‘avrio’ signifies that there is no rush and whatever needs to be done will be done – eventually. Time is not purely measured by clock time, hence the Northern Territory’s non-participation in daylight saving, but through events occurring in the natural environment.

### ***Stage 5 - Identifying and differentiating***

Residential identification is certainly evident within the greater Darwin region and possibly in Alice Springs and other towns in the Territory. Affectionate or derogatory names are applied to various suburban and rural areas and the people residing in those areas in order to differentiate them from other groups. These personal and social identities held by individuals and perceived by others affect the way in which individuals and groups interact and the quality of this social interaction.

### ***Stage 6 - Adopting the label***

For in-migrants, calling themselves Territorians when away from the Northern Territory is a matter of pride in distinguishing themselves from other Australians. This is further expressed in the division between Top Enders and Centralians. However, not referring to oneself as a Territorian when in the company of born-and-bred Territorians recognizes, among other things, the status conferred by place of birth and the locational relevance of such a label.

## **Further factors in the process of becoming a Territorian**

When these stages are understood and mastered, does one have the right to call oneself a Territorian? Not necessarily, as the in-depth interviews highlighted other factors which must be understood in the development of the personal and social identities of Territorians.

### ***The impact of Cyclone Tracy***

One of the most dramatic determinants of the social identity of Darwin residents is the aftermath of Cyclone Tracy which struck Darwin in late December 1974. Those who stayed to rebuild the city and those who returned as soon as they could after being evacuated hold a certain status which is recognized by others. Usually, this

signifies a positive strong relationship with Darwin the place and the Darwin community but it can also operate in a negative way by differentiating between 'old' and 'new' Territorians.

### ***'Old' and 'new' Territorians***

This division between 'old' and 'new' Territorians can be felt by older in-migrants who suffer the bias expressed against those in the Top End who were not residents before Cyclone Tracy. Criticism of the importation of 'southern ideas' and the perceived threat to the Territory 'lifestyle' by the introduction of regulations common in other parts of Australia is often voiced. Younger in-migrants are faced with the difficulty of infiltrating strong friendship groups which were formed during school years and have been maintained since then.

### ***Todd River in flow and Centralian Dinner***

In Alice Springs, you are recognized as a local once you have seen the normally dry Todd River flow three times. At an official level, long-term residents of the Alice Springs region are recognized as Centralians through invitation to the annual Centralian Dinner, which is held in honour of those who have lived in the region for 25 years or longer. Thus length of residency and experience of local events are both criteria for becoming a Centralian and, by default, a Territorian.

### ***Generational connection***

Older residents who moved into the Northern Territory during their young adult years may have lived in the Territory for decades but consider that they are not 'real' Territorians. By bestowing this label on their children and grand-children, they become Territorians vicariously though their generational association with descendants who were born in the Territory. A similar vicarious connection can also be claimed by those who have married born-and-bred Territorians.

### ***Emotional attachment***

Recent in-migrants to all areas of the Northern Territory have expressed an emotional connection to the Territory which is engendered by the friendliness of the people, satisfaction with the lifestyle and available activities, and connection to the natural environment. Although many will be temporary residents, they strive to become authentically 'in and of the place' (Bauman 1996) for the period that they are living in the Territory.

## Comments

So what does all this tell us about becoming a Territorian? Becoming a Territorian is a complex process which involves realignment of personal identity to position oneself in a new place. Over time, association with particular groups assists in establishing a social identity in this new place. However, this process occurs in a unique social and physical environment in which past history has a strong bearing on the present.

Although Territorians come from diverse backgrounds, the in-depth interviews showed the conception of a popular Territorian stereotype as being almost exclusively male, wearing a singlet, thongs and displaying a beer gut. This stereotype certainly did not include Indigenous people, who make up approximately 30% of the Territory population, nor did it include women. It was generally commented upon in a humorous way and interview participants were quick to reassure interviewers that “the Territory is really not like that” but this is the perception of Territorians held by others, those from Down South.

Within the Northern Territory itself, this consideration of ‘otherness’ has also established strong stereotypes through discriminating between ‘old’ and ‘new’ Territorians, those who lived in the Territory ‘before Tracy’ and those who have moved into the Territory since then. Although this differentiation may seem harmless, several interview participants expressed a strong dislike for the concept of a Territorian as they understood it to be parochial, discriminatory and divisive.

The need for all Northern Territory residents, however long or short their residency may be, to be given the opportunity to identify with the Northern Territory and/or as Territorians is important for the development of personal identity and a sense of belonging to and engagement with the community, however they may define it. To build strong and inclusive communities, the diverse backgrounds of all in-migrants to the Territory should be recognized and efforts made to overcome current informal and formal practices of social exclusion.

## References

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