

Attitudes Toward Indigenous Australians: A Guide

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Historical Context: Pre-Federation and Early Contact

The attitudes held by non-Indigenous Australians toward Indigenous Australians are deeply rooted in the historical framework established during the initial periods of European colonization, beginning in 1788. These early attitudes were fundamentally shaped by the legal fiction of **terra nullius**, meaning "land belonging to no one," which served as the philosophical justification for dispossession. This doctrine allowed colonizers to perceive Indigenous populations not as sovereign owners of the land, but rather as obstacles to progress and civilization, thereby rationalizing the widespread violence, land theft, and destruction of traditional ways of life that characterized the frontier period. The inherent belief in European racial and cultural superiority positioned Indigenous Australians at the bottom of a perceived civilizational hierarchy, fostering an immediate environment of paternalism and profound disrespect for established Indigenous laws, governance, and spiritual connection to the land.

Initial interactions were characterized by a complex mix of curiosity, fear, and overt hostility. While some early reports noted the sophisticated nature of Indigenous societies, the dominant colonial narrative quickly shifted to one of inherent savagery and inferiority, necessary to justify the violent expansion of settlements. This early prejudice was institutionalized through various mechanisms, including the denial of basic human rights and the implementation of punitive measures designed to control and contain Indigenous mobility and resistance. The rapid decline in the Indigenous population due to introduced diseases and violent conflict only reinforced the prevailing attitude among settlers that Indigenous culture was destined to vanish, paving the way for a homogenous, European Australia. This foundational belief system cemented the view that Indigenous people were a 'dying race' requiring 'protection' rather than recognition or negotiation.

The legacy of these early attitudes persisted well past the colonial era and into the period leading up to Federation in 1901. The creation of the Australian Commonwealth further solidified racial exclusion through policies such as the **White Australia Policy**, which, although primarily aimed at non-European immigrants, reinforced the notion that Australia was a nation inherently defined by whiteness. Indigenous Australians were largely excluded from citizenship, electoral participation, and social benefits, being specifically omitted from the census count under Section 127 of the Constitution. This institutionalized exclusion demonstrated a collective national attitude that viewed Indigenous people as outside the body politic, subjects of the state to be managed rather than citizens with rights, thereby embedding discriminatory attitudes into the very fabric of the new nation's legal and political structure.

The Era of Assimilation and Protection (1900s-1960s)

Following Federation, official attitudes toward Indigenous Australians coalesced around the twin pillars of 'Protection' and 'Assimilation,' policies that profoundly shaped intergroup relations for over

half a century. The 'Protection' era involved establishing reserves and missions, ostensibly to safeguard Indigenous people, but practically serving to segregate them from mainstream society and exert total control over every aspect of their lives, including movement, employment, finances, and marriage. These policies reflected an attitude of extreme paternalism, based on the assumption that Indigenous people were incapable of managing their own affairs, thereby perpetuating dependency and stripping communities of self-determination. The administrators of these policies held vast, unchecked power, reinforcing the widespread societal belief that Indigenous people were wards of the state, not independent agents.

The subsequent adoption of 'Assimilation' as a nationwide policy goal, particularly after World War II, represented a slight ideological shift but maintained the fundamental goal of cultural erasure. Assimilation policies were predicated on the attitude that Indigenous Australians could only achieve equality and well-being by abandoning their traditional culture, languages, and identities and adopting European customs entirely. This strategy reached its most devastating expression in the forced removal of thousands of Indigenous children from their families, known collectively as the **Stolen Generations**. The rationale driving these removals was explicitly racist--it was believed that mixed-race children could be 'bred white' and successfully absorbed into white society, while full-blood Indigenous people were still considered incapable of assimilation. This institutionalized cruelty reflected a national attitude that prioritized racial homogeneity over family integrity and cultural preservation.

The pervasive nature of these attitudes meant that discrimination was not limited to government policy; it was endemic in social life. Indigenous Australians faced severe social distance, exclusion from pubs, shops, and public transport, and widespread employment discrimination. Non-Indigenous Australians generally maintained strong negative stereotypes reinforced by media portrayals that depicted Indigenous life as primitive, tragic, or dangerous. This societal consensus, supported by legal frameworks that denied voting rights and adequate wages, meant that challenging these attitudes was extremely difficult. The prevailing psychological mechanism at play was often **dehumanization**, which made it easier for the majority population to ignore the immense suffering caused by segregation and forced removal policies, viewing Indigenous people as problems to be solved rather than fellow citizens to be respected.

The Shift Toward Recognition and Rights (1967 Referendum and Beyond)

A significant turning point in attitudes occurred in the mid-20th century, spurred by global decolonization movements, growing international scrutiny, and intensive activism by Indigenous leaders and their allies. The landmark event was the 1967 Referendum, which saw an overwhelming 90.77% of Australians vote 'Yes' to amend the Constitution to allow the Commonwealth to legislate for Indigenous people and include them in the national census. While often simplistically viewed as granting citizenship, the 'Yes' vote primarily signaled a major shift in

public attitude: a rejection of the discriminatory policies of the past and a national willingness to recognize Indigenous people as part of the Australian populace. This massive mandate provided the political legitimacy required for subsequent governments to dismantle the protective and assimilationist administrative structures.

This period inaugurated the era of self-determination, where government policy nominally shifted toward empowering Indigenous communities to manage their own affairs. The growing political awareness led to crucial policy developments, most notably the establishment of the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976 and, later, the historic 1992 Mabo High Court decision, which overturned **terra nullius**. These legal victories were both reflections of and catalysts for changing attitudes. The Mabo decision forced non-Indigenous Australians to confront the historical injustice of dispossession and acknowledge that Indigenous people held pre-existing rights to the land. While these changes were met with resistance from certain sectors, they fundamentally altered the legal and moral landscape of race relations in Australia, making overt, legally sanctioned discrimination increasingly difficult to maintain.

The rise of the Reconciliation movement throughout the 1990s and 2000s further focused public attention on the need for healing and relationship building. Events like the massive public marches for reconciliation and the 2008 National Apology to the Stolen Generations, delivered by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, marked moments of collective national reflection and a formal acknowledgment of past wrongs. These public gestures were crucial in shaping attitudes, moving the national conversation away from denial and toward acceptance of historical responsibility. However, the complexity of reconciliation meant that while goodwill increased, understanding of ongoing structural inequality and the necessary steps for genuine equity often lagged, leading to a gap between symbolic recognition and practical change.

Contemporary Manifestations of Prejudice and Discrimination

While overt, legally sanctioned racism has largely diminished, contemporary attitudes toward Indigenous Australians often manifest through more subtle, systemic, and implicit forms of prejudice. One significant area is the persistence of **systemic discrimination** within key institutions, particularly the justice and health systems. High rates of Indigenous incarceration and disproportionate negative health outcomes are often attributed by the public to individual failings or cultural deficits, reflecting a fundamental attribution error. This tendency to blame the victim ignores the deep-seated structural barriers, lack of access to adequate resources, and the ongoing intergenerational trauma resulting from past policies, indicating a failure by many non-Indigenous Australians to fully grasp the enduring impact of colonization.

Implicit bias plays a substantial role in maintaining contemporary negative attitudes. Research consistently shows that while many Australians express strong egalitarian values and reject explicit

racism, unconscious biases remain prevalent. These implicit attitudes can influence everyday decisions in areas such as hiring, housing rental applications, and interactions with law enforcement, leading to cumulative disadvantage for Indigenous individuals. Furthermore, casual racism--often expressed through jokes, microaggressions, or dismissive language regarding Indigenous issues--is a common manifestation of lingering prejudice. While these acts may be dismissed as harmless by perpetrators, they contribute to a hostile social environment and reinforce the historical marginalization of Indigenous people, demonstrating a lack of empathy or understanding regarding the cumulative effect of such behaviors.

A notable contemporary challenge involves attitudes surrounding land rights, native title, and economic development. While the legal framework for native title exists, public debate often frames Indigenous claims as threats to economic productivity or private property rights, rather than as restorative justice. This framing often relies on outdated stereotypes of Indigenous people as lacking economic sophistication or being overly reliant on welfare, thereby undermining genuine attempts at self-determination and economic independence. The persistence of these economic prejudices highlights the difficulty in moving beyond a colonial mindset that views Indigenous ownership and governance as inherently illegitimate or secondary to mainstream Australian economic interests, demonstrating that changes in law do not automatically translate into changes in deeply held societal attitudes regarding power and resource allocation.

Psychological Theories of Intergroup Attitudes

Understanding attitudes toward Indigenous Australians benefits greatly from applying established psychological theories of intergroup relations. **Social Identity Theory (SIT)** suggests that individuals derive part of their self-esteem from their membership in a social group (the ingroup). In the Australian context, the historical dominance of the non-Indigenous ingroup has fostered a strong tendency toward ingroup favoritism and outgroup derogation concerning Indigenous Australians. This manifests as a defense of the status quo and a resistance to policies that might be perceived as benefiting the Indigenous outgroup at the expense of the non-Indigenous majority, such as land rights or specific funding initiatives, thereby maintaining a positive social identity for the ingroup by upholding historical advantages.

Furthermore, **Realistic Conflict Theory (RCT)** provides insight into negative attitudes, arguing that prejudice arises from perceived competition for scarce resources, such as jobs, housing, or government funding. While this perceived conflict may not always be objectively real, the belief that Indigenous specific programs divert resources away from the general population fuels resentment and negative attitudes, particularly among socioeconomically disadvantaged non-Indigenous groups. This perception of competition is often amplified by political rhetoric and media narratives that sensationalize disputes over land or government funding, reinforcing the stereotype of the 'undeserving' recipient and justifying exclusionary attitudes based on supposed economic threat.

Attribution biases are also crucial in maintaining negative attitudes. The **fundamental attribution error** leads non-Indigenous observers to attribute negative outcomes experienced by Indigenous Australians (e.g., poverty, poor health) to internal, dispositional factors (e.g., laziness, cultural failure) rather than to external, situational factors (e.g., historical trauma, systemic discrimination, lack of infrastructure). Conversely, the successes of non-Indigenous Australians are often attributed to merit and hard work. This cognitive bias serves to rationalize and perpetuate existing inequalities, allowing individuals to maintain a belief in a just world where outcomes are deserved, thereby absolving the majority group of responsibility for addressing systemic disadvantages and hindering the development of genuinely empathetic attitudes.

The Role of Media and Education in Shaping Attitudes

Media representation and educational curricula play a pivotal role in either perpetuating or challenging existing attitudes toward Indigenous Australians. Historically, mainstream media has often relied on sensationalist reporting, focusing disproportionately on negative social issues such as crime, substance abuse, and community dysfunction, thereby reinforcing negative stereotypes that frame Indigenous people as inherently problematic or perpetually victimized. When positive stories are reported, they are frequently framed through a narrative of exceptionalism--an individual 'overcoming' their background--rather than reflecting the strength and resilience of communities. This pattern of negative or simplistic coverage contributes to a societal attitude of fear, pity, or distance, making it difficult for the non-Indigenous public to see Indigenous people as diverse, complex, and contemporary citizens.

Educational systems have also historically contributed to biased attitudes by minimizing or omitting the true extent of colonization, dispossession, and violence in Australian history. Traditional curricula often presented a sanitized version of history, focusing on European achievement and portraying Indigenous culture as belonging only to the past. This deliberate omission fostered a collective ignorance among generations of non-Indigenous Australians, making them unprepared to understand the root causes of contemporary disadvantage. Without a comprehensive understanding of historical context--including the impact of the Stolen Generations and systemic racism--it is difficult for non-Indigenous people to develop attitudes based on empathy and informed respect, often leading to defensive reactions when past injustices are raised.

However, significant attitudinal change is being driven by improvements in both media accountability and educational reform. Increased Indigenous representation in media production and journalism is leading to more nuanced and authentic storytelling, challenging monolithic stereotypes. Similarly, the integration of mandatory Indigenous perspectives and histories into school curricula--a process often referred to as 'truth-telling'--is vital. By exposing younger generations to the realities of colonization and the richness of 65,000 years of culture, educational efforts aim to cultivate attitudes of respect, critical engagement, and shared responsibility. These

institutional changes are essential for fostering a national identity that genuinely embraces Indigenous history as central to the Australian narrative, rather than viewing it as a marginalized footnote.

Policy Initiatives and Reconciliation Efforts

Policy responses aimed at addressing historical disadvantage and improving outcomes also influence national attitudes, often generating significant public debate. Initiatives such as the "Closing the Gap" strategy, established in 2008, aimed to achieve parity in life expectancy, education, and employment between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. While the goals are widely supported, public attitudes toward the strategy are complex. Failure to meet targets often leads to frustration and sometimes cynicism among the non-Indigenous population, which can be misdirected toward Indigenous leadership rather than toward the systemic failures of policy implementation or insufficient funding. This highlights an attitudinal difficulty: the expectation that deeply entrenched, centuries-old inequality can be resolved quickly through short-term policy fixes.

The concept of **Reconciliation** itself is a long-term initiative intended to foster positive attitudes through relationship building, historical acceptance, and achieving equality. Organizations like Reconciliation Australia monitor public sentiment and promote initiatives designed to bridge the social distance between groups. The success of reconciliation depends heavily on the willingness of non-Indigenous Australians to move beyond symbolic gestures toward practical action, including supporting Indigenous self-determination and political agency. The debate surrounding the proposed Indigenous Voice to Parliament, for example, serves as a crucial contemporary measure of national attitudes toward sharing power and affording Indigenous people a constitutionally recognized mechanism for input on policies directly affecting them.

Ultimately, the evolution of policy reflects a continuous negotiation of national attitudes regarding justice and equity. When policies are perceived as handouts or special privileges, they trigger negative reactions rooted in historical prejudice and resource competition. However, when policies are framed as necessary measures of restorative justice or investments in national equity, they tend to garner broader support. Effective policy change requires not just legislative action, but a sustained campaign to shift the underlying public attitude from one of passive tolerance or paternalistic pity to one of active partnership, mutual respect, and shared responsibility for the nation's history and future.

Measuring and Tracking Attitudinal Change

Measuring attitudes toward Indigenous Australians is a vital component of tracking social progress, typically utilizing sophisticated surveys and social indicators. These measurements often reveal a significant discrepancy between expressed explicit attitudes (what people say they believe) and

underlying implicit attitudes (unconscious biases). Explicit survey data generally indicates high levels of public support for reconciliation, recognition, and equality. For instance, the majority of Australians consistently express pride in Indigenous culture and support the notion of addressing historical disadvantage. This suggests a strong societal consensus against overt racism and a commitment to egalitarian principles, reflecting the success of decades of anti-discrimination education and public campaigns.

However, indicators of **social distance** often reveal the persistence of deep-seated attitudinal barriers. Social distance measures the level of intimacy or proximity individuals are willing to accept with members of an outgroup--for example, willingness to have an Indigenous person as a neighbor, colleague, or family member. While acceptance has increased over time, certain surveys still reveal reluctance in more intimate social contexts, suggesting that while non-Indigenous Australians may support equality in principle, underlying discomfort or stereotyping persists when it comes to close personal interactions. Furthermore, tracking attitudes towards specific, contentious issues--such as mandatory sentencing, welfare reform, or heritage protection--often reveals highly polarized views, indicating that general goodwill does not translate into consensus on how to implement difficult structural changes.

The ongoing challenge in attitudinal change is moving from surface-level acceptance to genuine structural support. While most Australians acknowledge that Indigenous people face disadvantage, a significant proportion still resists the idea that this disadvantage is caused by contemporary systemic racism or the ongoing effects of colonization, preferring instead to view it as a historical relic. Therefore, future efforts to track and improve attitudes must focus not just on measuring explicit prejudice, but on evaluating the level of public understanding regarding systemic inequality, historical truth, and the necessity of political and economic empowerment for Indigenous Australians. Achieving true attitudinal parity requires sustained public education that addresses the root causes of contemporary marginalization, moving the national conversation beyond mere tolerance towards profound respect and shared destiny.