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Singular influence

Mapping the ascent of Daisy M. Bates in popular understanding and Indigenous policy

Lisa Waller

ABSTRACT: *Daisy M. Bates's influence on Indigenous affairs has often been attributed to her once romantic legend as 'the saviour of the Aborigines', obscuring the impact of the powerful news media position that she commanded for decades. The ideas advanced by the news media through its reports both by and about Bates exerted a strong influence on public understanding and official policies that were devastating for Indigenous Australians and have had lasting impacts. This paper draws on Bourdieu's tradition of field-based research to propose that Bates's 'singular influence' was formed through the accumulation of 'symbolic capital' within and across the fields of journalism, government, Indigenous societies, and anthropology, and that it operated to reinforce and legitimate the media's representations of Indigenous people and issues as well as government policies.*

Introduction

This paper examines the mechanisms through which Daisy Bates came to exert a strong influence on public understanding and government policy in the area of Indigenous Affairs during the first half of the twentieth century. It offers historical and theoretical contexts for understanding how Bates acquired 'singular influence'—the term used here to provide a way of understanding the power of the state and the media to consecrate an individual as 'the voice of reason', by defining what counts as capital in the policy environment and using their symbolic capital in other fields to influence social space generally through the circulation of representations. It

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also offers ways of thinking about how the state and media create an illusion of distance from representations that are closely identified with an individual. This paper draws on recent biographies of Daisy Bates by Bob Reece (2007b) and Susannah de Vries (2008). Both historians used the National Library of Australia's large collection of Bates's writings, including her journalism, ethnographies, and personal correspondence, to research their subject. Pierre Bourdieu's tradition of field-based research provides the theoretical tools for exploring the ways that Bates accumulated symbolic capital through her journalism, embedded position in Indigenous communities, scientific knowledge, and authority as Honorary Protector of Aborigines. However, on its own, this cannot account for the power to shape popular understanding or influence policymaking. Bates's 'symbolic capital' must be considered in terms of how it relates to state and media 'meta-capital' (Bourdieu, 1992).

Couldry (2003) argues that the media, like the state, has the power to decide what counts as capital in other fields and to influence social space through the circulation of media representations. This paper will show that, while Bates failed in her quests for valorisation by the scientific community and for the state power invested in the office of Protector of Aborigines, the media's coverage of her scientific and welfare work resulted in popular recognition of Bates as *the* expert in these fields. Late in her career, when this symbolic capital was objectified in her book of collected journalism and embodied in her media-generated image, they worked in tandem to exert a retrograde influence on public understanding and official policy in their 'strong message that both race and culture would soon disappear' (Reece, 2007b, p. 125).

The historical and symbolic significance of Daisy Bates in the development of Australian Indigenous policy is relevant today for a number of reasons. Firstly, there is a need to better understand the role of journalism in policymaking from an historical perspective. Secondly, Bates's negative representations of Indigenous people have proved highly durable. For example, as late as the 1990s, Pauline Hanson of the One Nation political party quoted Bates in her attacks on Indigenous Australians. Thirdly, an analysis of how Bates became so influential could further understanding of the contemporary context in which some individuals have occupied the intersection between news media and policymaking, by appearing to define the terms of public discourse on Indigenous policy and even suggesting policy solutions.

Daisy Bates was a professional journalist and an ethnographer who spent many decades of her long life (1859-1951) living alongside Indigenous Australians in Western Australia and South Australia. As well as writing about and researching Indigenous societies, Bates was involved in the people's welfare through her position as an (unpaid) Honorary Protector of Aborigines. By the mid-1930s she had become an Australian household name (de Vries, 2008) as a well-known newspaper correspondent, as 'the saviour of the Aborigines' because of her welfare work (Mohr, 1999), and as one of the great outback characters of the 20th century.

The highly influential bestseller, *The Passing of the Aborigines* (1938), was written by Bates in the offices of the *Adelaide Advertiser*, with the help of two other journalists (Reece, 2007b). It first appeared as a series of 21 widely syndicated articles in 1936 under the banner 'My natives and I', towards the end of her career in news; however, it has often been classed as a book of ethnography, rather than journalism. Her once romantic legend has served as a distraction from the strategic role she played through the media and led some scholars, including Rowena Mohr (1999) and Ann Curthoys (1993), to concentrate on the effects of Bates's popular myth without considering the media's role in creating it. In these analyses, the impact of Bates's journalism is virtually ignored. The carefully constructed representation of Daisy Bates was an important factor in her singular influence; but, if it is not understood as a product of the media, and is instead seen as a 'self-representation' as described by Mohr (1999), it continues to obscure the media's power in shaping popular understanding and the Indigenous policy environment.

A woman of her times

It is important to foreground this discussion with a brief overview of the public policy and news media contexts that Bates entered in 1902 as a professional journalist eager to establish a reputation and make a living from her work (Reece, 2007b). In the opening decades of the 20th century, colonial administrators, missionaries, and the first anthropologists, influenced by the theory of social Darwinism, were of the view that Indigenous Australians were doomed to extinction (Flood, 2006). Historian Susannah de Vries says that Bates did not manufacture this idea: 'In fact she inherited this theory as the received wisdom of her era from a series of public servants and politicians' (de Vries, 2008, p. 248). Her deprecatory views on Indigenous people of mixed heritage also reflected official positions on 'half-castes', such as

policies that mandated the removal of children from about 1900, and the Northern Territory's and Western Australia's genocidal policies of 'breeding out the colour' (Manne, 2009).

Australia's newspaper editors at this time saw their role as defending the rights of colonists to occupy and to take the land from Indigenous people (Grassby, 1981), although there were 'whisperings' from newspaper letter writers and some news reports in Australia and the UK that were critical of pastoralists' and administrators' treatment of Indigenous people. Historian Henry Reynolds (1987) says that the news media's negative representations of Indigenous people took three forms. The coverage of 'native outrages' delivered a message of the dangers posed by 'savages', and the need to 'keep them in their place' was constantly voiced. Ideas of white superiority were advanced by the portrayal of Indigenous people as exotic, immoral, uncivilised, and well beneath Europeans on the evolutionary tree. Indigenous people were also represented as figures of fun in newspaper cartoons. Bates was not responsible for the established attitudes of colonial administrators or newspaper editors, but she was to play a strategic role in disseminating and supporting their positions long after the Segregation period came to an end in the late 1930s.

Bourdieu's field-based research and symbolic capital

In this paper, I draw on Bourdieu's intertwined concepts of field, habitus, and capital. I also outline how some scholars, 'thinking with Bourdieu' (Neveu, 2007), have drawn on and extended aspects of his work to look beyond the media as a static reproducer of power relations to how it is situated among other fields in which agents act and are acted upon across and between fields (Lingard & Rawolle, 2004). Bourdieu defined areas such as politics, education, journalism, science, and economics as fields. Within and across these fields, human action is organised around relations of power. He likened these dynamic fields to physical force fields, in which the action of social agents produces reactions (Webb, Schirato, & Danaher, 2002). Bourdieu speaks of the 'taking in' of rules, values, and dispositions of a field as the 'habitus', which he defines as 'the durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations ... [which produces] practices' (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 78).

Neveu (2007, p. 338) explains the importance of habitus to the operation of fields:

A social space comes to work as a field when the institutions and characters who enter it are trapped in its stakes, values, debates,

when one cannot succeed in it without a minimum of practical or reflexive knowledge of its internal rules and logics.

Symbolic capital, which is obtained through reputation and prestige and depends completely on people believing that the individual possesses valuable qualities, can be seen as the 'energy that drives the development of a field through time' (Moore, 2008, p. 105). The relative social power of agents depends on their positions within fields and the relative position of the fields in which they engage (Bourdieu, 1977). Symbolic capital and habitus can be approached in terms of two dimensions: accomplishment and transposability. Moore (2008) explains that some agents may be highly accomplished, but only in a limited number of fields. A person who has great accomplishments that can transfer across a broad spectrum of social spaces has more symbolic capital.

The 'rules of the game' establish what Bourdieu called a 'logics of practice', which lays down what rationalities will guide decisions for those in a particular field (Bourdieu, 1990). It is a key concept for understanding how habitus operates and has been used as a tool for theorising what has been described as 'mediatisation' (Fairclough, 2000) and 'media colonisation' (Meyer, 2000) of politics and policymaking. In Bourdieu's only work that deals with news media specifically, *On Television and Journalism* (1998), he discusses the influence of the field of journalism in France. His main focus is describing the inner workings of this field and what separates it from other fields, but he also examines the effects it has on other social spaces, especially politics. In recent times, scholars from a range of disciplines have drawn upon and extended Bourdieu's ideas on journalism's effects on other fields to develop theoretical understandings of the mediatisation of policy processes (Hattam, Prosser, & Brady, 2009; Lingard & Rawolle, 2004; Stack, 2007; Stack & Boler, 2006; Thomas, 2003). These studies rely on Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, the logics of practice, and cross-field effects to reveal the structural effects of one field on another. In this way, the logics of journalism can be seen to be operating 'in the offices of politicians and policy producers, thus affecting the very processes of policy production' (Lingard & Rawolle, 2004, p. 362). Bourdieu's ideas about capital, which is also a central concept in field theory, offer ways of understanding how an individual can have an impact in one field or across many.

The concept of symbolic capital alone cannot account for the power to shape popular understanding or influence policymaking. It must

be considered in terms of how it relates to state and media meta-capital. In *Introduction to Reflexive Sociology* (1992) Bourdieu uses the term 'meta-capital' to describe the concentration of different types of capital in the state, giving it power to decide what counts as capital in specific fields. Couldry argues that the media's power can be theorised the same way:

Just as the state's influence on cultural capital and prestige ... is not confined to specific fields but radiates outward into social space generally, so the media's meta-capital may affect social space through the general circulation of media representations. (2003, p. 688)

Bates and the policy environment

Policymakers recognised Bates's usefulness from as early as 1904. She had already proved herself to be a committed and articulate apologist for Western Australia's pioneering pastoralists when she wrote a letter to *The Times* in 1904, responding to allegations that they mistreated Indigenous people, saying 'no state in the Commonwealth has done more for them' (Reece, 2007b, p. 46). Soon after, the West Australian Government commissioned Bates to write a pamphlet in support of its notorious 1905 Aborigines Act (Bates, 1907), which had been criticised in the Australian and British press. In the pamphlet, which galvanised her alignment with ruling interests, she argued that the extinction of Indigenous people was inevitable due to their failure to cope with 'civilisation', and she represented interventions by governments and missionaries as being ultimately futile (Reece, 2007b, p. 53). In the years that followed, Bates's ethnographic research led her to many Indigenous communities, where she lived alongside the people. She gained knowledge of culture and languages as well as public recognition of her welfare work. While her publicly stated attitudes on Indigenous affairs remained constant, her 'expert' knowledge and experience gave them legitimacy with her readership and the wider public, which could, in turn, be used by governments.

In later decades, Bates advised State and Commonwealth governments on the necessity for policies that 'protected' and restricted Indigenous people, and she was invited to give evidence at a number of State and Commonwealth inquiries into Aboriginal Affairs where she advocated this position. Her attendance and views were widely covered by the media. For example, in 1914, she was interviewed by the South Australian government committee of inquiry into Aboriginal Affairs, where she spoke against any policy of 'uplifting' or 'amelioration' of

Desert people by placing them in missions or allowing them to gather on the fringe of towns (Reece, 2007b, p. 73). In 1933, she was called to Canberra by the Lyons government to provide advice on Indigenous policy in the north. She told the federal government that Indigenous people should be kept separate and allowed to die out in peace (de Vries, 2008).

Bates's influence on the maintenance of policies that restricted the rights of Indigenous people and forcibly removed children of mixed heritage continued for many years through the restatement of her views in her 1936 newspaper series, *My Natives and I*, which was syndicated throughout Australia and then appeared in book form as *The Passing of the Aborigines* (1938). This body of work coincided with the emergence of competing voices: the beginnings of the Indigenous political struggle for recognition and rights (de Vries, 2008) and more progressive understandings of Indigenous people and issues among academics, politicians, and creative artists (Mohr, 1999; Reece, 2007a). Despite these developments, the views Bates espoused continued to dominate public policy. It was the period when the growing population of people with an Indigenous heritage was causing alarm in official circles, which prompted the 'Destiny of Race' biological absorption resolution of 1937 that ushered in the Assimilation era (Flood, 2006). Reece observes that Bates's negative views on 'half-castes' were given wide publicity at the time (2007b).

Bourdieu's ideas on the workings of meta-capital are helpful for understanding how the state used its power to bestow more symbolic capital on Bates in the field of Indigenous Affairs than on other experts, such as the anthropologist A.P. Elkin, or those engaged in welfare work, including prominent missionary, Dr Charles Duigud, whose symbolic capital was limited to one field. She was unique at the time and of great strategic importance because she had knowledge and standing in a range of fields, including ethnography, welfare, and the media. Bates ensured that governments heard what they wanted to hear 'from the ground' in policy consultations; her 'evidence' justified policy positions and provided a response to challenges from Indigenous people and pressure for more progressive policies. Most importantly, she had a platform in the news media for representing and generating public support for government policy.

The media environment and symbolic capital

Unlike most mainstream journalists working on Indigenous rounds today, Daisy Bates lived among Indigenous people, spoke their

languages, and was formally recognised as a community member. Her fascinating and often controversial life has been a rich source of inspiration for creative artists and scholars from a range of disciplines, but Journalism Studies is not one of them. The result is that, instead of understanding Bates as a professional news producer and her legend as the product of news media, scholars have focused on her as a 'colourful outback character' and assessed the highly influential *The Passing of the Aborigines* as an ethnographic work, rather than as journalism. However, recent research by historians Bob Reece (2004, 2007a, 2007b) and Susannah de Vries (2008) has emphasised the importance of Bates's journalism and news media profile.

Bates's status as a media authority on Indigenous people and issues was built upon her reputation and prestige in the fields of government and anthropology and her unique place in Australian journalism as a reporter embedded in an Indigenous community. Bates had considerable agency in building that capital, but, ultimately, it was the state and the media's power to decide what was of most value in any field that ensured that Bates's voice dominated other anthropologists and people with expertise in Indigenous welfare.

Bates's professional journalism training in London was her induction into the journalistic habitus, and her career in news spanned more than three decades, during which she developed a strong 'feel for the game'. She has been described as 'a splendid observer and an ever-patient listener' (White, 1993, p. 60) who made and maintained many useful contacts, including a number of important newspaper editors and proprietors in Australia and Britain, who ensured that she always had outlets for her work (Reece, 2007b). Bates also exhibited strong news sense. For example, she wrote a series of sensational reports that alleged that maternal infanticide and cannibalistic practices were common, which appeared in Australian newspapers in 1921, 1928, 1930, and also featured in *The Passing of the Aborigines* (Reece, 2007b). Both Reece and de Vries (2008) comment that Bates was probably motivated to write these fanciful stories because she understood that the material would arouse keen reader interest and 'delight her editors' (Reece, 2007b, p. 86).

In the field of anthropology, she used skills developed through both journalism and ethnography to observe and interview Indigenous people, gaining valuable information about social organisation and spiritual beliefs. This information formed the basis of much of her journalism, which made her Australia's best known authority on

Indigenous Australians. While she had a high public profile for this work and was accepted as a member of Australia's anthropological fraternity (White, 1993), she never received the accolades that she craved from within the field. She battled for decades to have her major work, *The Native Tribes of Western Australia* (Bates, 1985) published, but this dream was not realised until more than 30 years after her death. In the early 1940s, she approached Professor John Cleland, a member of The University of Adelaide's governing body, in the hope that he would recommend her for an honorary degree in recognition of her research, but he 'told her regretfully he could not do so' (Reece, 2007b, p. 249).

Her greatest achievement in anthropology relates to journalism because the well-developed habitus she brought to her research, such as her finely-honed observation, interviewing, and note-making skills (including the recording of names) were innovations that resulted in a significant cross-field effect: the development of participant observation, at least a decade before others, including Bronislaw Malinowski and Margaret Mead, would employ similar methods (White, 1993).

Bates was a powerful figure in the Indigenous field as a result of the authority conferred upon her by both colonial and Indigenous powers, and this gave her media reports credibility. In 1910, Bates was given the respectful name 'Kabbarli' by the women of Dorre Island off the WA north coast and she continued to use it for the rest of her life (de Vries, 2008, p. 159). But, as early as 1905, the Bibbulmun people of the south-west of WA had admitted Bates into a phratry and given her totems. Reece comments: 'Consequently, her status was not that of *jang'ga* (ghost, or white person) but of *moorut* (blood relative)' (2007b, p. 49). Bates was unsuccessful in her bids to gain the office of Protector of Aborigines but she was given unpaid 'Honorary Protector' positions in both South Australia and Western Australia; this gave her state authority (but no pay or funding) for the day-to-day welfare of Indigenous people. These roles also provided her with an official position from which to comment in the media on the state of Indigenous people and to recommend government measures for improving their health and wellbeing.

Daisy's long shadow

For Bourdieu, capital is the expression that general power takes in specific forms (Bourdieu, 2006). He says that the various types of capital can exist in three different forms that can be understood as 'continuous

with each other... as moments of one thing rather than three different varieties of the thing' (Moore, 2008, p. 105). It can be objectified (things invested with capital, such as books), habitus (knowledge of the rules of the game), or embodied (in attributes of a person). In this way, Bates's journalism and *The Passing of the Aborigines* are objectified forms of Bates's symbolic capital and her media-generated legend is the embodied form. These durable manifestations of Bates's symbolic capital extended her singular influence for several decades after she retired from public life.

The Passing of the Aborigines recycled three of the major themes that Bates had been writing about in the news media for more than 30 years: that Indigenous Australians were doomed to extinction and should be segregated and protected from the wider society so they could die out in peace, that Indigenous women should be kept away from white men, and that children of mixed heritage should be removed from Indigenous communities. She also restated her long-held and widely published claims that cannibalism was a fairly common practice. The first two are understood as dominant frames for Australia's Segregation period, and her sensationalist reports about cannibalism continued the media tradition of 'othering' Indigenous people as wild savages who could not be civilised.

Bates's deal with the *Adelaide Advertiser* for the series of articles and book included a £500 advance, which puts a financial figure on the 'economic capital' her journalism represented for the newspaper, and its managing editor, Russell Dumas. She boasted to the book's British publisher, John Murray, that she had received 'the largest sum ever given for an Australian writer's work—more than generals Monash and Haig had been given for their war-time diaries (Bates to Murray, March 15, 1939, quoted in Reece, 2007b, p.114).

Bates was a popular subject for the news media and what was written *about* her added greatly to the symbolic capital embodied in her legend as the 'saviour of the Aborigines' (Mohr, 1999). Journalist Ernestine Hill's 1934 newspaper profile on Bates, 'The woman of Ooldea' (Hill, 1934) confirmed her legendary status when it was syndicated throughout Australia. Hill was not the first, and certainly not the last, journalist to consecrate her as a romantic heroine of the outback. In June 1923, *Woman's World* gave her a national profile with Frances Taylor's article, 'The Great White Queen of the Never-Never Lands'. Reece describes Taylor's portrayal of Bates as 'a saintly, feminine image ... which other female journalists were to embellish

and recreate time and again, with Daisy's active encouragement over the next 30 years' (2007b, p. 99). State, media, and public attitudes on Indigenous affairs were transformed by the 1967 referendum, in which voters overwhelmingly endorsed citizenship for Indigenous people. Bates's legend has subsequently been dismantled by understandings of her damaging influence, as well as revelations of her fabricated past and bigamous marriages (Blackburn, 1994; Hiatt, 2006). Bates's once legendary status should be remembered as a product of the news media that was further enhanced by public memorials and creative works based on her life story.

The media, like the state, has the power to decide what counts as capital in other fields and to influence public understanding through the circulation of media representations (Couldry, 2003). The media's consecration of her scientific and welfare work resulted in popular recognition of Bates as *the* expert in these fields. The book, which ran to six reprints, and Bates's media-generated image, continued to shape public understanding of Indigenous people and issues for many years.

Conclusions

This paper's analysis of the historical and symbolic significance of Daisy Bates in the development of Australian Indigenous policy is relevant today for a number of reasons. The first is the need to better understand the role of journalism in policymaking from an historical perspective. Recent scholarship on the mediatisation of policy suggests that media logics are increasingly important in guiding policy processes. The impact of figures such as Bates provides context for understanding how mediatisation has evolved and provides valuable evidence of its long-term effects. Public policy scholar, Mark Considine, says policy problems can be 'the second, third, or fourth generation of effects produced by previous policy actions and instruments' (Considine, 2005, p. 21). It is arguable that Bates's singular influence contributed to Indigenous policies that public inquiries have linked to intergenerational dysfunction, poverty, poor health, low levels of literacy and numeracy, and high levels of incarceration and deaths in custody. Addressing these travesties of public policy remains one of the nation's great challenges.

The second reason is the durability of Bates's negative representation of Indigenous Australians. As recently as the 1990s, Pauline Hanson, of the One Nation political party, quoted her work in support of attacks on Indigenous Australians (Hiatt, 2006; Mohr, 1999). The fact

that Bates's 'smoothing the pillow of a dying race' philosophy could re-enter national debate on public policy and be used by scholars to encapsulate the mood of the Segregation period (Bennett, 1999) points to its having become a 'media template', which Kitzing (2000) has described as crucial sites of media power that serve as 'rhetorical shorthand' to highlight one perspective with great clarity.

In recent times, some individuals have occupied the intersection between news media and policymaking by appearing to define the terms of public discourse on Indigenous policy and even suggesting policy solutions. The most prominent example is Noel Pearson's 'singular influence' during the Howard years, when he began to write regular columns in *The Australian*; this has prompted other Indigenous leaders to comment that 'all the Commonwealth Government hears is one voice, not all voices' (R. Marika in Maddison, 2009, p. 130). The concept of 'singular influence' provides a way of understanding the power of the state and the media to consecrate an individual as 'the voice of reason', by defining what counts as capital in the policy environment and using their symbolic capital in other fields to influence social space, generally, through the circulation of representations. It also offers ways of thinking about how the state and media create an illusion of distance from representations that are closely identified with an individual. Bates was, first and foremost, a journalist and a news media celebrity; but, as this paper shows, her highly influential book and legend have not always been recognised as news media products, resulting in her 'singular influence' often being mistaken for *individual* influence. This provides a smoke screen for the news media's power and responsibility for shaping public understanding and the policy environment.

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