Transcript of excerpts from *Cultural crossroads: a guide for DSS Staff in contact with Indigenous people*

Excerpt 1

**Ernie Dingo**: But cultural and language differences still pose as a major problem. This is where the Department of Social Security and you will make a lot of difference.

The main objective of the department is to make sure that all Australians in need receive the payments they are entitled to under our Social Security Act.

The department has come a long way since its inception in 1941. It has evolved from a small branch of the Federal Treasury into one of Australia’s largest organisation, with a nationwide network of about 17,000 staff and it’s a responsibility of everyone working for the DSS to make sure that all Australians, including Aborigines and Islanders, receive their proper entitlements. And this is where you may face some difficulties. Because of cultural differences, some workers find it hard to properly service Australia’s Indigenous people. Likewise, Aborigines and Islanders sometimes have some difficulties understanding White Australian culture and how the bureaucracy works.

Excerpt 2

**Ernie:** To help you better assist your Aboriginal and Islander client, let us first take a look at some specific cultural problems that you may have to address.

Eye contact. To some Aboriginal and Islander people it is culturally unacceptable to look others straight in the eye, which is virtually opposite to European culture. Or an Aboriginal or Islander man might not feel comfortable discussing his problem with a female officer and vice versa. Some cultural lifestyles don’t allow them to mix freely with the opposite sex, let alone discuss their personal details. You also need to be aware of your tone of voice when interviewing some Aboriginal and Islander clients. If you are talking with someone who is obviously feeling uncomfortable, pay special attention to your tone of voice and try not to be condescending. These things might seem unimportant, but if you can try to understand and respect these differences, or at least be aware of them, your job will become a lot easier.

Name sharing. Sometimes Aboriginals share the same name, for example father and son. Now, according to some tribal laws, it is not acceptable to speak or use the name of a deceased person for fear of the dead spirit rising. So, when this man’s father dies, he is obligated to change his name. Now this may cause some very obvious problems if he is receiving a benefit. Also, the spelling of tribal names may cause duplicated payments to be made. So, you have to clear this with your liaison officer for clarification, whether it be change of name or spelling.

Excerpt 3

**Ernie:** The introduction of our Social Security payment system did not take into account all Australian cultural backgrounds and the complexity of the system was difficult for some Aboriginal and Islanders to understand.

Answering correspondence, filling in forms and attending interviews at a specific time is far removed from their usual lifestyle.

Excerpt 4

**Ernie:** As DSS staff, it is your responsibility to assist all DSS clients. If communication is a problem, try to share information by asking indirect questions or discussing a joint interest.

Don’t be surprised if an Aboriginal or Islander client asks especially for a DSS officer they know and they may look for an Indigenous staff and ask them for help rather than other counter staff. And if you still have a problem, talk to an Aboriginal or Islander Liaison Officer. If you can’t reach a Liaison Officer, contact your nearest Aboriginal Service Unit for help. Most areas in Australia also have community groups you can contact for specific advice.

But above all, as a DSS officer, whether you work behind the counter, in the field, or just answering phones, remember you are there to help in any way you can. Now we don’t expect to solve these problems overnight but with a better understanding and knowledge of the cultural differences, would make things a whole lot clearer.

So, what’s the answer? What can you do now to make every situation a positive one? Well, unfortunately, there is no absolute answer. It really depends on you gradually improving the communication between the department and the Aboriginal and Islander clients. Just being aware of the cultural backgrounds that exist could be a place to start.