Learning Communities
INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF LEARNING IN SOCIAL CONTEXTS
SPECIAL ISSUE: ETHICAL RELATIONSHIPS, ETHICAL RESEARCH IN ABORIGINAL CONTEXTS: PERSPECTIVES FROM CENTRAL AUSTRALIA

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CONTENTS

Introduction to Special Issue: Being here matters .................................................. 2
Barry Judd

Editorial ..................................................................................................................... 12
Al Strangeways

“You helped us and now we’re going to all help you”: What we learned
about how to do research together ........................................................................ 16
Lisa Hall, Linda Anderson, Fiona Gibson, Mona Kantawara, Barbara Martin and
Yamurna Oldfield

Ngapartji ngapartji ninti and koorliny karnya quoppa katitjin
(Respectful and ethical research in central Australia and the south west) ............... 32
Jennie Buchanan, Len Collard and Dave Palmer

Researching together: Reflections on ethical research in remote
Aboriginal communities .......................................................................................... 52
Tessa Benveniste and Lorraine King

The dancing trope of cross-cultural language education policy ................................ 64
Janine Oldfield and Vincent Forrester

Different monsters: Traversing the uneasy dialectic of institutional and
relational ethics ........................................................................................................ 76
Al Strangeways and Lisa Papatraianou

Research for social impact and the contra-ethic of national frameworks ............. 92
Judith Lovell

Altyerre NOW: Arrernte dreams for national reconstruction in the 21st century .... 106
Joel Liddle Perrurle and Barry Judd

The making of Monstrous Breaches: An ethical global visual narrative .............. 116
Judith Lovell and Kathleen Kemarre Wallace
“Out here nothing changes, not in a hurry anyway, you can feel the endlessness with the coming of the light of day.” So wrote the singer songwriter Shane Howard who in the early 1980s had come to Uluru in central Australia and camped with Pitjantjatjara people in the hope he would discover himself and the continent that he called home. By the closing decades of the 20th century, the search for new and deeper meanings of both self and place that had brought Howard to the Centre reflected a kind of pilgrimage, a right-of-passage that had become a well-worn path for those seeking entrée to the authenticity of a place, a space, a landscape, and an imagining, that had come to define what many claimed to be the “real” and “true” Australia. In this way, the Centre has been transformed into a significant cultural landscape for settler–colonial society and narratives that invent, imagine and define the Australian nation.

Central Australia has played a pivotal role in shaping national imaginings since the first settler-colonists moved into the region during the 1860s. In the 19th century, the Centre became imagined as a remote place that existed at the very margin, as the northern frontier of the British Colony of South Australia. It was a place, distant and removed from the safety and
civility of the so-called “settled-districts” that lay far to the south. Explorers were soon followed by others including telegraph men who connected the region to the imperial metropole of London, pastoralists who brought cattle and sheep, missionaries who brought the bible, and police who enforced British law. Each group of settler–colonialists took possession of the place in their own particular way. They wrote home about their experiences, informing an emergent Anglo-Australian nation about the realities of life in an arid inland landscape they had conceived as hostile desert and an empty wasteland. Their stories augmented already well-established ideals of the nation and focussed on the bushman, the pioneer, the drover and the swagman as the archetypal Australians.

On this frontier of settler–colonialism, the importance of the Centre to national imaginings has always hinged on the place being a point of an uneasy, sometimes openly hostile, but nevertheless enduring co-existence between the incoming settler–colonialists and the Aboriginal peoples who have occupied the region for at least the past 20,000 years according to archaeological records, and since time began according to their own creation stories embedded in Tjukurpa (Dreaming). Being a region in which the economic interests of settler–colonialism have remained tenuous and the Aboriginal population significant has made central Australia important in settler–colonial efforts to define and represent themselves in contrast to Aboriginal peoples as the original occupiers of the country. The constructed self-image of Australia that was to emerge was an idealised bundle of attributes: modern, productive, enlightened and progressive. The self-image of the Australian people came to define itself against the negatives traits and values attributed to an Aboriginal people who became Othered. Aboriginal peoples then, became represented in settler–colonial discourse as stone-aged, child-like, lazy, treacherous, savage. In this way the representative stereotype of “the Aborigine” came to stand as the negative opposite of the Australian nation. The Australian self, in imagined and idealised form, of course, belonged within the new Anglo-Australian nation being contrasted. The Aboriginal Other did not. Aboriginal peoples, thus situated both discursively, and I would argue psychologically, in the national imagination as the antithesis of the nation were considered redundant to the “modern” task of contemporary Australian nation building.

In central Australia, the process of rendering a national identity in contrast to the alien otherness of Aboriginal peoples and their cultures commenced with the journals of the Scots explorer John McDouall Stuart, the first white man to traverse the region in the 1860s. Later the writings of colonists in region made it the last frontier of settler–colonial nation building. During the latter part of the 19th century, the various writings of Mounted Constable William Willshire some published as books, depicted the Centre as a wild and hostile place and its inhabitants savage. Willshire, a nationalist, was careful to style himself as the heroic Australian bushman, and his police work as absolutely necessary to bring Anglo-Australian (i.e. British) civilisation, law and order to region. The murders of Aboriginal men he is thought to have committed were ultimately justified by the project of nation building.

In the early to mid 20th century, central Australia attracted another group of settler–colonialists, including Sidney Nolan and Arthur Boyd, whose artistic works depicted visions of Australian nationhood through visual representation. In their central Australian works, these artists in their particular ways came to the uneasy realisation that Anglo-Australians remained outsiders to, and largely ignorant of, the continent on which they had built their white nation. Boyd in particular found the presence of Aboriginal peoples in central Australia an unsettling reminder of being somehow “out of place” and disconnected from the landscape despite personal and societal claims of possession. While other settler–colonial nationalists sought to emphasis differences between an Australian national identity and the “foreignness” represented by Aboriginal peoples, artists like Nolan and Boyd used their work in an effort to incorporate Aboriginal elements into the narrative of Anglo-Australian nationhood.
However, it is the writings of settler-colonial scholars and their contribution to Anglo-Australian notions of national identity and Aboriginal otherness articulated through engagements with central Australia that are most relevant to the theme of this, special edition, journal. Perhaps the most important intellectual relationship to exist between settler-colonial thinkers in this part of Australia was the most unlikely one that developed between Frank Gillen and Baldwin Spencer. Gillen, station master on the Overland Telegraph Line, in charge of the repeater station located at a place the settler-colonialist called Alice Springs but known to the Arrernte people as Mparntwe, formed a lifelong working partnership with Baldwin Spencer, a professional researcher and professor of biology at The University of Melbourne. Together, their ethnographic studies of Arrernte and other Anangu peoples, their cultures and in particular their complex systems of metaphysical belief did much to confirm the alien otherness of Aboriginal peoples as indisputable “scientific fact” and authoritative knowledge. Their works characterised the otherness of Aboriginal peoples as being incommensurate and incompatible in an absolute sense with the Anglo-derived culture of settler-colonial Australia; they concluded that Arrernte and other central Australian “tribes” had no future in a nation defined by ideas of white racial purity and British cultural superiority and its state apparatus, the Commonwealth of Australia.

In 1899, on the eve of Anglo-Australian political Federation, Gillen and Spencer published their globally influential work, *The Native Tribes of Central Australia*. This emblematic ethnography of central Australian Aboriginal peoples did much to place Alice Springs and central Australia on the international map as a region of primary global importance to emerging intellectual understandings of human society and the processes of technological development as well as in the development of discrete traditions and belief systems. Most notably, the central Australian work of Gillen and Spencer became a pivotal text throughout the English-speaking world in terms of the insights these thinkers provided to the relative cultural and intellectual capacities of Aboriginal peoples. Gillen and Spencer argued that such differences had emerged as a direct result of biological differences associated with race. The collected writings of the ethnographical researchers Gillen and Spencer about the Arrernte and other Anangu of central Australia, and the findings of their field investigations, “confirmed” as “scientific fact” the populist ideas that circulated widely in narratives of Australian nationalism: that Aboriginal peoples were, as a matter of biological fact, inferior both racially and culturally to the settler-colonialists. In the domain of national politics, the works of Gillen and Spencer were applied in the service of the nation: to rationalise the exclusion of Aboriginal peoples from the Australian constitution of 1901; to formally deny them civil and political rights through government legislation and bureaucratic regulation and procedure throughout much of the 20th century; and to forcibly remove mixed race children without the consent of their Aboriginal family or kin and with no avenue to legal review, for reasons of racial hygiene and the eugenic well-being of the nation.

Emphasising the incommensurate difference between national self-identity and the alien otherness of Aboriginal peoples, the hierarchies of race and culture that emerge in the works of Gillen and Spencer lent intellectual authority to and continue to exert widespread influence on the ways contemporary settler-colonial nationalism in Australia represents Aboriginal peoples and seeks to exclude them from the nation and its imagined community of belonging. The continued influence of Gillen and Spencer in shaping the Australian national imagination has become so culturally and politically embedded it is *almost* invisible, but its influence is everywhere apparent. For example, the vast majority of Anglo-Australians who live in the highly urbanised south-east of the continent continue to believe that central Australia remains one of the few places inhabited by authentic Aboriginal peoples. Arguably, Gillen and Spencer made the physical and metaphysical manifestations of Arrernte culture iconic and representational shorthand for all Aboriginal peoples in Australia. Their works had the effect of homogenising and masking significant diversity in culture, economy and physical appearance.
that existed across some 250-plus separate and distinctive nations that occupied continental Australia. Furthermore, ideas about Aboriginal incapacity that Gillen and Spencer circulated and propagated as “scientific fact” in publications that circulated and informed intellectual debates world-wide have continued to be implicit in Australian national political decision that impact on Aboriginal peoples today, whereby politicians and policy makers continue to position Aboriginal people according their supposed inherent deficit.

The story of settler–colonial incursion into central Australia outlined above indicates how the writings of Anglo-Australian newcomers in the region have shaped understanding of a national identity constructed in binary opposition to the alien otherness of Aboriginal peoples. As individuals, the settler–colonialists who came to central Australia, had little in common in purpose, interest, or approach. However, all might be said to be implicated in the process of Australia’s particular brand of settler–colonialism and – whether by accident or design – in the creation (or recreation), circulation (or recirculation) and verification (or reverification) of narratives about national belonging and national exclusions. More subtly perhaps, but so too are all implicated in ethical questions that arise concerning the engagement each had with Aboriginal peoples in central Australia. In the case of William Willshire, a man who notoriously misused his authority as a policeman to murder Aboriginal men with impunity, such misgivings are easily discerned. In the case of the painters Boyd and Nolan and the singer-songwriter Shane Howard, settler–colonialists whose nationalist agendas sought to appropriate and accommodate rather than denigrate and exclude Aboriginal peoples and cultures from the project of Anglo-Australian nation building, the question of ethics becomes more difficult to judge. And what of the ethnographers Gillen and Spencer? Gillen, the amateur ethnographer and collector of Arrernte stories and artefacts acting as sub protector of Aborigines, was the man who ensured Willshire would be charged and tried for the murder of two Aboriginal men at Tempe Downs south of Alice Springs in 1891. Spencer, who later became chief protector of Aborigines in the Northern Territory, used this position of colonial authority to implement the forced removal of Aboriginal children, propagating what would later be known as the stolen generations. How should we assess their intellectual and interpersonal relationships with Aboriginal people in terms of these being ethical engagements? Regardless of the ethical assessments that might be attributable to each of the settler–colonialists discussed in brief above, we might consider that each of them, with the possible exception of Howard, gave questions of ethical engagement, including the consent of their Aboriginal informants in central Australia, little or no thought.

The question of ethics is especially relevant to those who will read the articles contained in this special edition journal. Today, scholars who engage with Aboriginal people through their research activity are governed by national frameworks that require the informed consent of Aboriginal participants. Researchers also need to justify the nature of their research involvement with Aboriginal peoples in terms of direct and indirect benefits to the community. In previous writings I have drawn attention to the limitations of the national ethical frameworks that currently govern professional research engagements with Aboriginal peoples in Australia. In particular, I have questioned whether the conceptual framing of ethical practice within the western academe has any relevancy to the systems of ethics that continue to operate “on the ground” in specific Aboriginal group contexts. Such questions are highly relevant in this context, as the articles contained in this special edition speak to Aboriginal peoples who continue to be informed by practices and protocols that pre-date settler–colonialism as part of their everyday existence.

As the discussion of nationalist discourses above makes clear, consideration of research and the ethics of research extends far beyond the realm of the university to encompass the world of politics, public policy and modes of governance. The research conducted by the scholars
of today, their writings and public utterances, like those of settler–colonial thinkers of the past, do not operate in a vacuum. Just as the writings of Gillen and Spencer provided a “scientific” rationale that shaped and influenced the way in which the Anglo-Australian state sought to impose colonial governance on Aboriginal peoples, contemporary research engagements with and about Aboriginal peoples continues to be entangled with narratives of nationalism, ideas of national belonging and exclusion as well as powerful ideas of possession. Whether our scholarly writings are celebratory of the nation or critical in consideration of settler–colonial relationships with Aboriginal peoples, intellectual interventions in Australian Indigenous Studies are implicitly political. The political nature of research involving Aboriginal peoples remains particularly important in the context of central Australia which very much remains a northern frontier of settler–colonialism. Here, questions of national belonging and exclusion are fought out in the everyday exchanges between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. In recent history, intellectuals and their “expertise” in the Aboriginal space, including those who claim an Aboriginal identity, have been at the forefront of debate concerning the nation and the limits of settler–colonial power and authority to govern and control Aboriginal peoples in the absence of treaty, compact or agreement that address and resolve issues that remain undone as a result of British colonialism in Australia. The ongoing linkage between academics, their research expertise and narratives of nation have been clearly demonstrated in recent times by the Northern Territory Emergency Response. In 2007, the Commonwealth of Australia instituted the NTER as a major policy intervention into the lives of Aboriginal people residing on remote communities throughout the NT. The NTER, or Intervention as it commonly became known, was enacted through the denial of racial discrimination protections for Aboriginal peoples living in so called “designated areas.” Research and academic expertise functioned to underpin settler–colonial state rationales for denying Aboriginal people rights associated with Australian citizenship. More often than not, academic support for the Intervention was forthcoming from “experts” who live, work and research in and write from the eastern seaboard of the continent.

Writing about central Australia with the authority that comes with being a professional researcher raises other questions concerning the ethics of research. Research, the scholars who conduct it, and who claim “expertise” about Aboriginal peoples in central Australia, are more often than not likely to be fly-in and fly-out “experts.” The nexus between research and settler–colonial narratives of nation, the determinations of national belonging/exclusions implicit in such discourse and the political impact that research has on the daily life experience of Aboriginal people must compel academic researchers to consider issues of representation as central to the process of research that involves, gives voice to and speaks on behalf of Aboriginal subjects and informants. Getting the story right as researchers is an imperative in the context of the power that narratives of nation continue to wield. “Knowing” the context in which research is carried out therefore becomes a key ethical consideration. As someone who commenced a professional research relationship with Luritja people at Papunya in 2011, and who attempted to “know” Aboriginal concerns – social, political, economic and cultural – in respect to the organisation of Australian (Rules) Football in central Australia, I quickly became aware of the many limitations inherent in the fly-in, fly-out model of research. I came to believe that my research could not accurately give voice to the people of Papunya when my direct interactions with them were limited to just a few weeks a year. I came to consider my status as a fly-in, fly-out researcher as unethical as I could never have deep insight into the experience of what it means to be a young Aboriginal footballer living at Papunya without living in the central Australian context myself. Being here makes a difference. Being here matters.

Being in place enables a different level of engagement to emerge. Relationships with Aboriginal peoples and their communities deepen, and in many cases gain a life of their own beyond the formalities of the project and the university. Relationships play an important role in keeping researchers honest in the way they represent the Aboriginal peoples with whom they work, and
on whose behalf they often speak in academic and public debates that occur in the context of national and sometimes global discussions and debate. But more than this, being in place allows professional researchers to gain greater insight and understanding of the issues, social relations, attitudes and ways of doing things that shape the everyday lives of all who live in central Australia. Concepts such as “remoteness” will never be truly understood by researchers who think flying economy class to Alice Springs from Melbourne or Sydney is a major hardship. Gaining insight into the daily realities of life in central Australia requires researchers with an ethical commitment and willingness to be in place. Being in place allows researchers to experience at least something of the issues their Aboriginal collaborators experience every single day. If colonisation is not an event but an ongoing process that continues to shape the character and power relations that underpin the Anglo-Australian settler-state, then being in place enables professional researchers to experience the consequences of the past in all their subtle and nuanced forms that continue to characterise, shape and maintain central Australian race relations in the present time.

A recent trip I took down the Ann Beadell and Connie Sue tracks underlines the considerable gains available to researchers who come to “know” central Australia by living in the region. Travelling with an old friend I have known since the 1990s when I worked at The University of Melbourne, we set off as a convoy of two in British 4x4s and as people who proudly identify as descendants of Aboriginal peoples of central Australia, me Pitjantjatjara and he Yankunytjatjara. The many ironies of this did not escape us. As people who had been regular visitors to central Australia since our childhoods we wanted to cross the Ann Beadell and Connie Sue for the peace that isolation in the arid inland provides. We wanted to traverse country and we wanted to make camp along the way. New ways of following well-worn paths, perhaps.

Yet my other motivation for this holiday lay in the darker history of the tracks as service roads for the British nuclear test program of the 1950s. Now these tracks are celebrated by Anglo-Australia as important places for remote-area 4x4 touring adventures, but no one seems to talk about or acknowledge the original purposes of these tracks and others like them that traverse the interiors of the Australian continent. At a place called Emu Field in the Great Victoria Desert, South Australia, a British nuclear weapon called Totem 1 was detonated on 15 October 1953. The detonation of Totem 2 followed two weeks later, on 27 October. For me, being at these sites made thinking deep and hard about the ongoing consequences of colonialism, settler-state nationalism and Australia’s entanglement in the folly of British imperial dreams unavoidable. But for the inscribed blocks of concrete that mark ground zero one might not know that the lands at Emu are poisoned with so much radiation they will remain of limited use to the Aboriginal peoples who claim ownership of the plains for many millennia to come. Signs in Pitjantjatjara inform local people that while Marlu (kangaroo) is safe to eat, Ngura (camp/home) remains unsafe. This is colonial dispossession every day and today. Totems turned from purposeful Dreamings into inexplicable nightmares, seemingly without end. Beyond the undeniable colonial dispossession of Emu Field the power of settler-state nationalism and its continued operation across central Australia is manifest in small acts of frontier violence that have become so embedded in Anglo-Australian culture they represent the normal order of things.
While visiting the site of an old plane wreck 40 kilometres from the Pitjantjatjara-owned roadhouse at Ilkurlka in Western Australia, a group of old white men from Perth informed us, as a matter of fact, that the remote Aboriginal community of Warburton was a dangerous and violent place. As they proceeded to warn us that if we didn’t watch our vehicles while refuelling all gear that wasn’t “bolted down” would go “walkabout”, one old man turned to my young daughter Tilly and pointing toward her said, “they’ll steal her too if you don’t watch her.” About 200 kilometres from Warburton down the Connie Sue Track we met another old white man. This one carried a large hunting knife. He strongly encouraged us to take a side track close by to see a beautiful deep waterhole populated by the most zebra finches (nyi nyi) you will ever see. Given that our permits clearly specified that travel along side tracks was off limits we were hardly surprised that the side track in question was clearly marked with Ngaanyatjarra Land Council signs declaring the waterhole a sacred site with outsiders permitted no right of access. That this message from the Ngaanyatjarra people had been shot through with multiple bullet holes speaks to the continued disrespect and disregard for Aboriginal peoples claims of ownership to their lands and their sacred places. The persistent power of Anglo-Australian narratives of nation and of national belonging and exclusion continue to make it so.
At camp that same night, with the Great Central Road within reach, our thoughts turned to the idea of an ice-cold beer and how we might gain access as we moved closer to Uluru and the resort township of Yulara. With alcohol only available to those staying at the Yulara Resort and our preference for bush camping, we started serious deliberations on an elaborate scheme to get grog into our camp. I was meeting a PhD student at Yulara and it was decided I should call him on the satellite phone to request a slab and arrange a place and time for the transaction to be completed. After about half an hour of planning we looked at each other and laughed. I said, “now we know what the every-day is like for family who live on remote communities where alcohol is not permitted.”

Having insight into the lived experience of Aboriginal people who live in central Australia is a must for research that is grounded in knowledge and understanding of context, for research that is more likely to represent and translate Aboriginal perspectives into academia and the national public sphere with accuracy, and for research that is grounded in the relationships that make ethics front and centre of the research process.

Knowing the context in which we do our work as researchers is the purpose of the articles gathered together in this special edition about ethical research in central Australia. All the papers involve contributors who live and work in central Australia and all contributors are committed to better researcher engagements between professional researchers based in universities and the Aboriginal peoples whose country is the region we collectively now call central Australia. The writings contained here, although diverse in topic, share a commitment to the kind of ethical research that can only take place through an everyday engagement with context that comes by being in place. Charles Darwin University through its Central Australian Research Group and other engagements in central Australia has a proud history and growing national reputation for “knowing” central Australia in ways other Australian based universities who engage with Aboriginal peoples across this region do not and – in my view – cannot.
In the present time, the region remains important in the national imaginings of Anglo-Australia and in the policy agendas of the settler–colonial state that continue to shape race relations between Anglo-Australian settlers and Aboriginal peoples as the first Australians. The region also remains as significant as it always has been in the imaginings of Aboriginal peoples across the continental land mass of Australia and its adjacent islands. In 2017, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander delegates numbering 250 gathered for a national convention at Uluru in central Australia in an attempt to reconstitute the Australian state by enlarging the nation to include the indigenous peoples of the continent. The Uluru Statement: From the Heart that emerged from the convention sought recognition and a first peoples’ voice to be enshrined in the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Australia. The Statement also sought a process of national truth telling and peace making adapted from the Yolngu concept of Makarrata, which describes the practice of dispute resolution by ceremonial spearing of the wrongdoer. The Federal government led by Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull rejected the Uluru Statement, saying its recommendations were inconsistent with the core principles of the Westminster system of government by which the Anglo-Australian state operates. This decision of the Prime Minister leaves Australia at an impasse when it comes to resolving longstanding issues that continue to make settler–colonial relationships with Aboriginal peoples backward looking and beset by seemingly insurmountable issues, problems and complexities. The answer, I believe, to resetting settler–colonial Australia and its narratives of national belonging and exclusion lies not with Canberra and its politicians but within Australia. It will be the people – Aboriginal, Anglo and many others – and the institutions of Australian civil society, football and netball clubs, churches, business associations, land councils, health services, art galleries, museums and universities that will progress the ideals contained in the Uluru statement. The researchers and research collaborations showcased in this special issue demonstrate that Charles Darwin University is committed to a vision of a better and forward-looking Australia; an Australia that is enriched, deepened and strengthened by a full embrace of Aboriginal peoples and their inheritance that comes of 75,000 years occupation of the Australian land mass. Speaking at the Garma Festival 2018, the widely celebrated Australian novelist Richard Flanagan said that finding a better Australia inclusive of Aboriginal peoples and their deep cultural inheritance requires us to accept that after 200 years we have become kin. Making this point Flanagan said:

*In Yolngu the word for selfish is gurrutumiriw, which translates as lacking in kin, or acting as if one has no kin. And Australia as a nation, after 200 years, is faced with a fundamental truth. We are now entwined peoples; by custom, by humour, by friendship, by love, by work and by sport, in art, in music, in words, and through the land; in all these ways we have over 200 years found ourselves in each other. Black and white, we have become kin. We cannot be selfish…*

*For Australia lies before us, waiting to be written into the Dreaming and the Dreaming into it. It is far from easy, but I believe that if the Uluru statement is taken to Australia, rather than to Canberra, that Australians are ready for this new story, that there has never been a better time, and that we must dare everything in our telling. Yothu yindi. Garma. Makarrata. Yolngu words that mean: coming together. Working together. Making peace together. This is our indispensable task as a nation and we cannot shirk it one more day. It is our time. Let us begin our country, as nobly as we are able, with kindness, with courage, with the love of brother and sister for brother and sister. Let us seize the fire.*

The researchers whose writings are contained within this journal are aware of the truths that Flanagan speaks. I hope the insights into ethical research in central Australia outlined here will encourage the youth who aspire to do good research to also find these truths. Now more
than ever research that is accurate, ethical and grounded in place and in honest and enduring relationships is what central Australia and a nation in urgent need of reconstitution require. Shane Howard went to Uluru in central Australia looking for *Spirit of Place*: this volume in its small way continues that journey as we look into the heart of the continent to find new solutions and new futures that lay beyond the persistent settler–colonial agendas of white nation belonging and Aboriginal exclusion.
Editorial: Ethical relationships, ethical research in Aboriginal contexts: Perspectives from central Australia

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How do protocols, ethics and values intersect in the quest for meaning-making in multidisciplinary and intercultural central Australian research settings? The practice of establishing and developing ethical relationships in these settings is a complex dance, involving interactions among individuals and contexts that are not always reflected in the intellectual processes of the academy’s ethical procedures. Such relationships are, however, vital to the success and validity of the research undertaken. In this special issue, we share the experiences, the challenges, the positions and the reflections of researchers from diverse backgrounds who are working in a range of discipline areas in central Australian Aboriginal research contexts. What emerges from these different perspectives is a map of the ethical terrain across which researchers and research participants traverse, and which will, we hope, inform both the academy and those embarking or engaged on journeys across this terrain.

Werte. The idea for this special issue of Learning Communities arose at a symposium hosted by Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Education at the Desert People’s Centre campus just south of Alice Springs in the autumn of 2017. The Knowledge Intersections symposium was convened to bring together researchers working in central Australia to explore the concept of “Crossings – Iwerre-Atherre” that was NT Writers’ Festival theme for that year. The significance of the local Arrernte language term, iwerre-atherre, lies in its more nuanced meaning of two roads that cross without blocking or erasing each other. The conference papers explored areas as diverse as education, the arts, ecology, and service provision. One rich thread, or “knowledge intersection,” that wove its way with increasing vigour through the presentations, question sessions and informal conversations was the question: How do we work to ensure our research in central Australia is responsible and responsive to the ethical codes and practices of all those participating? The attention I’m giving here to describing the geographical and language contexts that inspired this special issue is intentional. It embodies a central answer to the ethical question above that all the authors in this special issue address: as researchers in these intercultural settings, we have a relational–ethical imperative to work on understanding the particular cultural, language and relational elements which shape the content and the processes of our context-specific work.

Many of the papers in this issue draw on case-studies, narratives or reflections on particular experiences of research in these contexts: in such forms, they emphasise the “lived” and situated nature of undertaking research in intercultural contexts, and how the embodied forms of thinking that narrative offers allow us to better encounter these complex, ambiguous and shifting spaces.

The first three papers explore the different elements of ethical practice that these authors determine as essential to the success of their research relationships and processes in the contexts in which they have worked.
Lisa Hall’s paper, co-written with five Aboriginal teachers who were her research co-participants, is both an analysis and a depiction of the intentional dialogic process she and her co-authors adopted to ensure the research methods they chose when working together left them all with a “good feeling” at the end of the project. Moving between the voices and perspectives of all its authors, the paper makes a strong case for the importance of attending to the process of working together as equally important as the research aim or *product* of that work. Hall et al. contend that it is only by focusing on these processes and relationships that we can develop the necessarily responsive ethical research practices. The paper offers a valuable picture of the important methodological choices the authors made and highlights the ways in which good communication, ongoing negotiation of consent, trusting relationships, and reciprocity enabled the group to ethically navigate the research space together and, by doing so, achieve outcomes that were satisfying to them all.

In their paper, “Ngapartji ngapartji ninti and koorliny karnya quoppa katitjin (Respectful and ethical research in central Australia and the south west),” Jennie Buchanan, Len Collard and Dave Palmer use a similar dialogic form to Hall et al. They present a series of conversations between themselves, as Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal researchers and long-term colleagues, about the ethical challenges of working with Aboriginal communities in the central and south-west regions of Australia. They reflect on building ngapartji ngapartji and karnya birit gnari Noongar, broadly translated as reciprocity and respectful and authentic ways of working together. In choosing to use a dialogic form and to move between the languages of Noongar, Pitjantjatjara and academic English, the authors intentionally unsettle the western conventions that, they contend, limit intercultural understanding. They demonstrate the value of the back-and-forth rhythms of “yarning” as a way of collaboratively constructing knowledge and understanding of the complexities involved in undertaking ethical intercultural research in Aboriginal communities. A central point of their paper is the necessity for researchers to recognise that ethical behaviour shifts from place to place. And so, the authors turn to the discourses of the Noongar people of the South West and the Anangu people of central Australia: through these discourses they articulate how the cultural value and practices of these two groups, such as birniny (digging and scratching), kulini (being and listening) and dabakarn dabakarn, wanyu (steady and steady) can inform and guide ethical research in these contexts.

Tessa Benveniste and Lorraine King’s paper, “Researching together: Reflections on ethical research in remote Aboriginal communities,” explores the ways in which the two authors, an Adelaide born non-Aboriginal PhD researcher and a Pintupi-Luritja Warlpiri Senior Aboriginal Community Researcher, developed research strategies to ensure ethical practices when working with remote Aboriginal families and communities. From an analysis of their joint experience, the authors identify a series of elements of ethical practice that may inform research in similar contexts. The key elements Benveniste and King explore comprise: addressing the past, transforming formal ethical requirements into practice, developing cultural contextual and language knowledge, approaching communities respectfully, and building trusting working relationships.

The “two types of ethics, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal (western)” that Lorraine King identifies and the often-fraught relationship between these value systems are the focus of the next three papers. In “The dancing trope of cross-cultural language education policy,” Janine Oldfield and Vincent Forrester tell a cautionary tale of how their use of Indigenous and decolonising research methods came into conflict with “the academy’s ethical procedures and institutional gatekeeping.” Both researchers, one Aboriginal and one non-Aboriginal, had extensive cultural and family ties to the participants in the two remote Indigenous communities involved: they analyse the ways in which this cultural knowledge and connection were disregarded by the academy and other institutions involved in the research. They describe their discomfort in the
ways the authenticity and validity of their research came close to being compromised both by the gatekeeping practices of the ethical and educational institutions and by the domination of western methods of “atomised” data analysis in the reporting of their project.

The second paper in this group, “Different monsters: Traversing the uneasy dialectic of institutional and relational ethics,” is by this author and Lisa Papatraianou. It adopts an arts-based approach to better express and understand the frustrations of experiencing the conflict between institutional and relational ethical requirements. It also uses these methods to find a way forward that moves beyond these traditional conflicts between bureaucracy and researchers. Using a collage-cartoon that re-works elements of the artwork “Monstrous Breeches,” the final paper in this issue, we caution against positioning ourselves with a deficit perspective of institutional ethical practice. We suggest that the chaffing of relational and institutional ethics would be better viewed as a productive friction that can offer a generative dialectical discourse through which meaningful change is made possible.

Judith Lovell’s paper, “Research for social impact and the contra-ethic of national frameworks” also offers a vision of a more productive relationship between the bodies that commission and administrate research and the remote community contexts where such research can occur. She proposes the development of institutional processes that operate after the research is “complete.” This would involve “research commissioners and administrators provid[ing] feedback as to the uptake or not of research findings.” Such feedback would not only, she suggests, provide valuable records, baselines and metadata for future research, but would also support the researched communities in their use of the research knowledge generated. Lovell offers a strong vision of why and how such a process could function within the existing Human Research Ethics Committee structures. She recognises, however, that the implications of her proposal, which involve more “equitable accountability of the public investment in research” and a shift in power from government bureaucracy to academic institutions, mean that such a vision is unlikely to be realised in the current socio-political climate.

The final two papers of this issue focus on other relationships that sustain or constrain researchers’ work. They also take the reader into two quite different research contexts, that of the sometimes-difficult relationship between an Arrernte researcher and non-Aboriginal institutions that hold significant collections of Arrernte cultural materials, and the very different collaborative relationship between an Aboriginal and a non-Aboriginal artist. Joel Liddle Perrurle and Barry Judd’s paper, “Altyerre NOW: Arrernte dreams for national reconstruction in the 21st century,” offers an insight into the perspective of an Aboriginal researcher engaged in research that focuses on his family. It raises questions about the ways western institutions exert authority and ownership over Aboriginal cultural materials and knowledge. The addressing of such questions becomes even more urgent when posed in the context of Aboriginal researchers using research as a “tool for cultural revival, the rediscovery of identity, the reconnection to Country…what might be broadly called Aboriginal national reconstruction.”

Judith Lovell and Kathleen Kemarre Wallace’s paper, “The making of Monstrous Breaches: An ethical global visual narrative” closes this special issue. It presents a previously unpublished collaborative artwork, “Monstrous Breeches,” and a critical narrative that takes the reader on a journey across the relational, cultural and artistic landscapes that the authors traversed in creating their large-scale monoprint. The account of how the authors applied “artistry across artistic traditions” and the artwork itself offer us both an optimistic depiction of how intercultural arts-based research can work, and an invitation to become an ongoing part of this fruitful collaboration.
“You helped us and now we’re going to all help you”: What we learned about how to do research together

Lisa Hall, Linda Anderson, Fiona Gibson, Mona Kantawara, Barbara Martin and Yamurna Oldfield

Abstract
This paper is a critically reflective “think piece” that explores a collaborative process of doing research in an intercultural space as well as identifying what focusing on such a process produces. While it originates from a PhD project centred on the concern for the low number of people becoming qualified as teachers from remote Aboriginal communities in central Australia, this paper does not directly discuss that topic. Instead it discusses how a non-Indigenous researcher (Lisa) worked with a group of fully qualified Aboriginal teachers (including Linda, Fiona, Mona, Barbara and Yamurna) to explore this common concern. The focus here is on the collective processes we used in doing the work together, and how that ensured that the research happened ethically and relationally, such that everyone was left with a “good feeling” at the end of the work. This paper talks about the conversational or dialogic approach we took in our work together and how we discovered the paths that felt “right” for the research to take. It contains some examples of our conversations that we recorded throughout the research process and names some of the things that made the work we were doing together feel “right”. Together we discovered new knowledge about how we communicated with each other, what true informed consent looked and felt like for everyone involved, the central importance of our existing relationships, and the role of reciprocity in intercultural research.

Introduction
This paper is attempting to draw attention to two things: first, a process of working together in an intercultural setting; and, second, a reflection of what focusing on process produces, how this works and what it does both for the present and the future. This paper grew out of a series of oral conversations that were built into a PhD research process involving a non-Indigenous researcher and a number of Aboriginal teacher participants. We had pre-existing professional and personal relationships before this research began. The idea for the research came from the previous work we had undertaken and the conversations about the research began well before the actual research did. Because the research began as conversation, and
out of a philosophical orientation that placed value on protecting and maintaining our existing relationships, we deliberately built ongoing intentional conversations into the research design. This conversational approach, based on strong evidence relating to Indigenous research paradigms, was designed to ensure relational and ethical accountability between the researcher and the research participants as the research process continued. What we discovered was that these conversations and our reflections became an iterative process enabling us to learn as we went about the best way to do this research together. Together we discovered new knowledge about how we communicated with each other, what true informed consent looked and felt like for everyone involved, the central importance of our existing relationships, and the role of reciprocity in intercultural research. By the end of the work, as we discussed what we had done with a wider group of people, we realised that this design provided an excellent road map for the kind of process that supports good intercultural work to occur. We decided to write this paper to share what we learned with others so that they might be able to reflect on and adapt their own practice. We also hope that our findings might help to develop better policies about doing intercultural research.

Background and context

In 2011 Lisa, who is non-Indigenous, enrolled to do her PhD. This decision came after a long period of working with a group of Aboriginal teachers from remote communities in central Australia. This group of teachers included Linda (from Papunya), Fiona (from Nyirripi), Mona (from Ntaria/Hermannsburg), and Barbara and Yamurna (from Yuendumu).

Figure 1: Map of central Australia; blue stars mark the co-authors’ communities.
In our original work together, Lisa was a lecturer supporting the teachers to complete a 4th year qualification in teaching. During that period of working together it became clear that all of us shared a very real and passionate “common concern” (Addelson, 1994) for the low number of people becoming qualified as teachers from the respective communities where the teachers lived and worked. We talked about this issue a lot and wanted to explore it further. After a great deal of discussion we decided that Lisa could focus on it as a PhD project (Hall, 2016). All of the teachers would work with her to explore this common concern by sharing their stories of how they became teachers then, all together, deciding what important knowledge and ideas we could learn from these stories. As the project started from our existing relationships this presented some interesting paths to navigate in the research landscape, including resistance by western ethic committees who are frequently sceptical of relational research because of a perceived “potential to bias” (Kovach, 2010, p. 42) This research, which was inherently intercultural, had to walk along a line of tension between an Indigenous paradigm and western qualitative research. What helped us to walk this line was a sense of clarity about our “philosophical orientation” (Kovach, 2010, p. 41). In our pre-research conversations this was expressed simply as wanting everyone to be left with a “good feeling” at the end of the research. Helen Verran (2013) talks similarly about the need to work together in “good faith”. To this end we took a conversational or dialogic approach in our work together. Kovach (2010) explains the conversational method as a “method of gathering knowledge based on oral story telling tradition….It involves a dialogic participation that holds a deep purpose of sharing story as a means to assist others. It is relational at its core” (Kovach, 2010, p. 40). Some of this method was pre-planned and built into the early stages of the research, where a long “conversational phase” of over a year was factored in. However, we also realized the need to continue in conversation with one another throughout the entire process and these conversations were “dialogic, relational and reflective” (Kovach, 2010, p. 46). This open and honest dialogue was an important aspect of working together ethically. As Kovach (2010) points out, taking a conversational approach enables an inter-relationship between the method, ethics and care within the research. In this dialogue we were able to observe, identify and name some of the things that made the work we were doing together feel “right”. Together we discovered new knowledge about communication, true informed consent, relationships and reciprocity. This paper includes sections of our recorded conversations that illustrate what we learned together as we undertook this research work.

The collaborative research process

Throughout the almost five years of working together on this research we moved flexibly back and forth between story and dialogue as we discovered the paths that felt “right” for the research to take. Sometimes this occurred in the negotiation of the data collection, at other times this was done one-to-one, as part of the story telling sessions. There were times when the conversation involved everyone, for example when we came back together to do the analysis work. We took the time to talk together at different stages of the research process. At those times we shared ideas about how to work together as well as talking about how we were feeling about our participation as the work was happening. These ongoing and intentional conversations throughout the research process provided what Verran (2013) calls “interrupting tools”. Verran talks about the need to pay attention to moments of epistemic disconcertment and to be alert to the differences we encounter. These intentional conversations about the research process helped us to “go deeper inside the encounter” (Verran, 2013, p. 147) to explore how the way we did things actually helped us to work in “good faith” with each other. There were a number of specific choices we made about how to undertake the various stages of this research together that were important. Those stages are outlined below.
1) A long conversational phase at the beginning of the research enabled Lisa and the teachers to have extended discussions, enough thinking time and time to ask questions about the research process before any of the stories were recorded. Central to this was a two-hour group discussion in November 2013 about the project where almost all of the teacher participants were present, including the five co-authors of this paper and two other teacher participants. This conversation was recorded and transcribed with people’s consent and permission. This led to a number of ad hoc group and individual conversations taking place over the following months which were not recorded or transcribed but many of which were included in Lisa’s reflections in her research notes. No narrative recording sessions commenced until each teacher indicated their readiness to begin. The first of the narrative recordings began in January 2014.

2) At the end of each narrative recording, Lisa and the teacher she was working with had a final reflective conversation. The focus of this conversation was to document how both people were feeling about the research process so far. In each instance it was a moment of ethical and relational accountability to each other, to ensure that the consent given at the beginning of the process still felt true for both people. These conversations were recorded on audio only and transcribed, again with full consent.

3) After all the narratives had been recorded, we came back together to analyse the collective stories and to decide together on the important ideas contained within them. We also talked about what kind of research outcomes and dissemination processes might work best to share the stories more widely.

The conversations during these three specific stages were recorded and then transcribed. When we looked at the transcripts of those conversations they showed us that certain things were important in helping us to work ethically together. Those things were ongoing communication, finding a way to establish true ethical consent, relationships and reciprocity. Each of these four areas will be discussed in the findings and discussion section below, along with examples from our conversations related to those ideas.

Findings and discussion

Communication: Intentional conversations and staying in touch

One of the things that really helped us to work together on this project over a period of more than five years was our ability to keep the lines of communication open. This was done in both intentional and iterative ways. When we looked at the transcriptions of the intentional conversations that we had, we realised that good communication – both planned and spontaneous – made a real difference to people wanting to keep going with the research.

As stated previously we had an intentionally long “conversational phase” at the beginning of the research. This allowed us more than a year before any recordings were made to discuss the research design, participation, consent and the process for data collection. This phase included one intentional conversation altogether as a group that took place at Batchelor Institute Top End campus (south of Darwin in the Northern Territory) in 2013. During this conversation a number of people talked about the importance of talking about things before starting them, to give people time to consider and understand. For example, Linda said, “and it’s alright that you’ve come today, you know to let us think about it…just have it in our minds”.

This group conversation was followed by a number of individual follow-up conversations to check in about when would be a good time to start the process with each person. Very often the conversational phase also included, where possible, a conversation on country with Elders...
and leaders in the respective communities. These conversations took place to explain the research we were doing together and to invite input from the Elders. These conversations were not recorded or transcribed, but helped shape the way that we conducted the research as well as informing our later discussions about dissemination of the research.

After these intentional conversations that helped in the research design process, staying in touch and communication were very important. They were especially important during the time before each of the teachers sat down to record their story with Lisa. The following conversation between Lisa and Fiona reflects on this.

Lisa: I’ve seen you a lot during the year and you’ve been saying to me “don’t worry I won’t forget about you!”

Fiona: Yuwayi (yes) (laughs), I won’t forget about you. Because you know those problems that I had…my health problems, but I was still thinking “Oh I’m gonna do something with Nampijinpa (Lisa)”. 

Lisa: That was good for me because you were really good at communicating to me that you still wanted to do it…you still wanted to participate in the research, but that you would let me know when it was a good time, when it was the right time for you.

Fiona: Yeah.

Lisa: So how did you work that out for yourself? What were you thinking about in terms of when you were ready?

Fiona: Because like lot of appointments was coming and I had to be on that dialysis like three times a week and that made me feel really like worried about “when can I help Nampijinpa (Lisa)?” and then I thought to myself I’ll just text message her and we might work out the dates, like after Christmas, you know like after New Year’s. I think that’s a good time. And like days when I don’t have dialysis, Monday Wednesday, Friday, Sunday is good.

Another example is this excerpt from a conversation between Yamurna and Lisa reflecting on how we had gone about the process of organising the recording her story,

Lisa: Have you been happy with how we’ve done it so far with me coming out here and sitting down together?

Yamurna: Yep, (you’re) not like catching me in the street, it’s good sitting down, just doing your work here and telling me, reading questions and you know telling me, it’s really good…it’s been really good because you’ve been sending messages, telling me that you’re coming and I’m ready. See I was going to go hunting today but I stopped. I usually go hunting on Saturday (both laugh).

Lisa: Oh I feel bad now that I stopped you!

Yamurna: No lawa (no/nothing), I didn’t plan for going hunting. I knew that you were coming.
One of the things that was helpful in keeping the communication open was Lisa’s previous experience working with Aboriginal people for many years. For example, Mona said this to Lisa when they were reflecting on how they were feeling at the end of recording Mona’s story:

_I think you weren’t pushy. You weren’t ringing me up all the time “oh when are you going to do it”. I think it was the right time…how can I put it, you thought of the right time as well. Yeah ’cos one time you emailed me for something and said “when is that thing gonna happen?” and I think you’re good at understanding, yeah really good I’d say. ’Cos you know, if I said “no it’s not a good time ’cos I got problem”, something came up with the boys or something you know or I wasn’t well, I think you’re really good at that, you know “oh kala (ok), leave it”. I think you learned a lot about Indigenous culture and that really helped, helps you and me, you know, to understand each other. Yeah, you’re not (saying) “I’m coming this week, be ready!” you know. And I think time (and) space was good, you know we talked about it and then you know you got in touch, emailed me and said “is it a good time?” Just getting in touch with someone._

Thrift (2004) talks about having knowledge, experience and relationships with people with whom you are working as being essential for enabling “ethical encounters”. He sees this as being part of the real ethics of doing research and suggests that things such as “knowing when to wait for a response, knowing when and when not to foreclose a situation, knowing when to be playful and when to be serious…can open out the ethical possibilities of an encounter and allow both the researcher and the researched to trust their judgement” (Thrift, 2004, p. 120). Finding ways to communicate with each other that are respectful and flexible helped us to keep talking to each other about the work we needed to do. This involved regular checking in ways that weren’t pushy or forced, but instead invited an ongoing conversation about discerning the right time for people to work together.

**Genuine informed consent: Looking for the right time, waiting until I’m ready**

One of the most important aspects of allowing lots of time for conversation before the research itself started was that it offered an important opportunity to explain the research process slowly and also helped people understand the concept of informed consent. In addition to Lisa being able to explain things from the university side, it also offered everyone the chance to talk about a preferred way of operating. This is highlighted by the following extract from the group conversation we had together in 2013 about consent,

_Lisa: (and) even if you say yes at the beginning you need to understand you can say no to me again, if things get hard, if you have sorry business…if something gets hard in your life and you don’t have time anymore, you can say no at any point down the track. Yeah? Just because you say yes to me at the beginning, doesn’t mean you have to keep going, keep going, keep going. You can still say no and it’s important that you understand that._

_Mona: Not usually, you know straight answer “no” but you know, “give me time”._

_Barbara: Yeah, “I’ll think about it”._

_Lisa: Also, you might have some worries along the way. I might have come out and you might have talked about something and you might be thinking about it and think “Oh I shouldn’t have said that” or “I should have said this other thing, I’m just_
thinking about that now”…but instead of worrying about it then just tell me about it, talk to me about it…you can say to me, “oh Lisa I’ve been thinking about this a lot and I’m a bit worried about this” and then we can talk about it and find a solution together.

Linda: Talk about it, yeah.

Lisa: …I’d like it so that no one gets to the point where they think “Oh I’m so worried about it I’m gonna drop out”, you know?

Linda: …talk about you know if you’re not happy with that, find another way of explaining.

In our work together we didn’t treat consent as a one-off thing that we did at the beginning of the research. Our attitude to informed consent was that it was something we had to co-create. We needed to keep checking in with each other throughout the process to see if it still felt true and to find out if people still felt like they could freely participate in what we were doing together. This perhaps points towards a point of difference in relation to ethics which can be identified and consent granted into the future through western metaphysics, but in Indigenous knowledge and understandings it is always provisional as reality itself emerges (explored in greater detail in Hall, 2017). In a conversation between Lisa and Fiona at the end of recording her story, Fiona reflected on the importance of planning the research together as something that supported her to participate.

Lisa: How have you felt about how I’ve done things as a researcher? Have I done my job alright?

Fiona: I think we planned it really well. I gave my plan to you, I told you don’t worry I’ll give you a date, what date we can work when I’m ready. I was text messaging you, you know. And so that way we can like have a good talk…but you never forced me, you didn’t tell me what to do. You only asked me questions, you showed me the questions in the paper, and I’ve answered those questions, I did the right thing, the right thing for you, the right questions that I’ve answered back. We talked about the papers that you showed me and I signed it. Yuwai (yes) that was really good that we shared, you asked me a lot of good questions.

The fact that Fiona kept saying she would let Lisa know when she was ready indicated that she was thinking about her participation and making conscious choices about the right time to start. Lisa had to trust in her relationship with Fiona that she would identify the right time to move forward with her participation in the research.

A similar experience was articulated by Barbara in conversation with Lisa. When asked about how she had found the research process, Barbara said,

Barbara: My only worry that I had was this is the end of year now and all the time I haven’t come in and talk(ed) to you, we left it for last minute, you know for very long time, and I felt deeply in my heart I felt guilty, you know. All the time (I was thinking) I need to sit down with Pitjan (Lisa), yuwa (yes), I need to sit down. I didn’t forget you, I kept thinking about you and your project, PhD…
Lisa: I always knew that you wouldn’t leave me without finishing it off. And we have talked about it a few times…you were very good at coming back to me and saying “when are we going to finish that work, when are we going to finish that work?”

Barbara: And ringing you.

Lisa: And we just had to wait for the right time I felt…I think part of it is, you’re busy, you’ve got a lot of things going on in your life and some stresses and some worries.

Barbara: Yuwa (yes).

Lisa: I’m busy, I’ve got work full time too, and so we can’t always do things exactly when we want to do things.

Barbara: We look for the right time.

Mona and Lisa also talked about the need for collaborative planning and preparation that allows time for both sides. They said,

Mona: I think you’re a really prepared woman, you know! I like working with you ‘cos it’s not rush, rush, rush. Yeah, you really got that time, you know, how can I put it? You really look at the timeline “oh this is best”.

Lisa: Yeah and I’ve tried hard to think about the timeline both that I have to fit in with…but not just from my side, also thinking “what’s going to be the right timeline for the people that I’m working with?”

Mona: Mmmm, awa (yes), and then I need to get organised with family as well, you know and it’s really good, I still have that email or that phone call in mind all the time and I think “oh I need to get organised for these kids, when I’m going, who’s gonna look after them”, you know.

Allowing this kind of time for conversation and readiness felt more informed, and more like genuine consent. It also ensured that the narratives that came from that process emerged comfortably and confidently. Interestingly, Mona also talked about the timing for her being right in a much broader sense. She talked about feeling like the time was right in her life and her career to have a story to tell:

Mona: I think it was the right time, yeah. ‘Cos I’ve experienced enough you know, working in the school, and that build-up of the knowledge. I had the knowledge that built up the experience, I’ve learned through teaching, and I think it was the right time to tell this story. Yeah, the main thing is about my career and how I started and where I am at now, at this point. And I think it was the right time.

Often in university-based research one of the points of stress is the time constraints people have to work under. In this work we actively pushed against that linear sense of time and took a more seasonal approach, paying attention to things such as readiness as an indicator to proceed. The interesting thing about doing it this way was that even though we took quite a long time in the beginning to talk and make sure everyone felt ready and happy to proceed, this meant that other parts of the process happened more quickly and effectively because we were all consensually working together towards the same goal.


Relationships: We need to be honest, we can’t tell each other lies; we can’t leave you by yourself

The pre-existence of relationships in research work is one of the areas that causes a great amount of friction between western ways of knowing and Indigenous ways of knowing. While Indigenous scholars identify careful and meaningful attention to relationships as central to any research conducted with Indigenous participants (Kovach, 2010; Martin, 2008; Moreton-Robinson & Walter, 2009; Wilson, 2009), ethics committees continue to use it as a reason to deny approval. In the ethics approval process for this research Lisa had to apply for ethics clearance from both Charles Darwin University and the Education Department of the Northern Territory. The CDU process had steps built in for Lisa to explain the existence of relationships between herself and the teachers and she was able to gain this clearance, although she was still required to talk about some ethical concerns in this area. The Education Department had its own ethics committee and the committee denied Lisa’s application twice on the basis of (amongst other reasons) “the subjectivity of the project as submitted (arising from the sample of participants chosen, the existence of relationships between yourself and the chosen participants)” (NT Department of Education personal correspondence, 14 September, 2013). Kovach (2010, p. 42) addresses this directly, stating that “certain western research paradigms frown upon the relational because of its potential to bias research”. She also reminds us that methodologies that come from an Indigenous research paradigm challenge western research paradigms because they “embrace relational assumptions as central to their core epistemologies” (Kovach, 2010, p. 42). Ultimately, the NT Department of Education ethics committee suggested that the research project could be conducted “outside Northern Territory government schools and instead in the community…if the research does not involve the Department’s endorsement or resources” (NT Department of Education personal correspondence, 13 December, 2013). This issue was something that Lisa discussed directly with the teachers, as shown in this conversation between Lisa and Fiona:

Lisa: In doing this project you have to go through this process called ethics where you have to think about “are you going to do it in the right way?” One of the things when I was talking to the University about this, they said to me “oh we’re a bit worried because you’re already friends with all of these ladies”. They were worried about that.

Fiona: Mmm?

Lisa: And I said, “no that’s really important I think having those relationships already, because we worked together before and now we’re coming back together and doing some more work together, and we’re friends in between”. I said, “no I think that will help the research not make it harder”.

Fiona: Mm hmm.

Lisa: What do you think about that? What would you think about doing the research, telling this story with me, as opposed to doing it with someone you didn’t know?

Fiona: Maybe that someone that you work with if you don’t know them very well, he might give you wrong stories and everything. But someone who we’ve worked with and who has helped us through the study, we’ve got a lot of things that you can get out for your research. Maybe for this research you might not pass it from working with other people that you don’t know. But with us, I think that’s really
good, you got us back together. You helped us do our studies and then got us back to help you. Yuwai (yeah). And I think you should be proud of yourself, you know, happy, because you got the same people back helping you. But if you would have got other people maybe and you wouldn’t have known them.

For Fiona it seems that the kind of research that was undertaken relied on the relationships, rather than seeing them as a risk. The greater risk would have been for Lisa to do this research with people she didn’t know. Mona and Lisa also talked about how already having that relationship and knowing that we can trust and rely on each other helped us to work together again.

Mona: I think we built that relationship and trust in each other when we were, you know, part of your team, yeah.

Lisa: When we were doing that other work?

Mona: Yeah and it just built up, and that’s why.

Lisa: And so does that make it, you more interested in doing this work now, because you already had that experience and because we already had that existing relationship and trust?

Mona: Mmmm, awa, and I can, you know, if I want to do things, like go on to do... you’re going to be there, you’re going to be helping me, I trust you.

Relational trust was mentioned many times in our conversations about how we worked together. Knowing each other and trusting each other had been a foundation that had built up over time and had helped us all to feel comfortable working together. In reflecting on her own research Kovach (2010) states “the relational factor – that I knew the participants and they knew me – was significant…. With this method the researcher must have a certain amount of credibility and trustworthiness for people to participate in the research. With more trust there is the likelihood of deeper conversations, and consequently the potential for richer insights to the research question” (Kovach, 2010, p. 46). Barbara expands further on this idea that, in knowing each other, it is important to include not only familiarity and feeling comfortable, but also the idea of being able to be honest with each other because of this relationship.

Barbara: I feel very happy to help you with your research because I’m your friend, I want to be part of you, I want to share my knowledge to...all those educational research questions made me think about, you know, I want to do it (the) right way... We need to be honest, we need to be really strong about it. We can’t tell each other false or lie. We need to be truth(ful) about it, yuwa (yes) because I can’t tell you lies, sorry for you. I need to be honest to you. And how I feel about it it’s really good and it’s a really strong conversation.

Relationships also guided the process of analysing the data for the research. A conversation between Barbara and Lisa highlighted the importance of collaborative research finding ways for everyone to remain involved throughout the entire process of the research.

Lisa: That’s my job to find those important ideas and those important learnings, but I don’t want just me to be the one who decides what’s important.

Barbara: We’ve gotta look into it.
Lisa: Yeah, so that’s what I’m asking is for all of you to help me again to work out what are the important ideas.

Barbara: Yuwa, and look for what are the good ideas.

Lisa: Yeah, so it’s not just my…me and my ideas.

Barbara: No, we can’t leave you by yourself, we gotta use everyone’s eyes and ears and search for it.

The idea of not leaving people by themselves is something we came to talk about using the word “marlpa”. This is a word used in the Warlpiri, Luritja and Pitjantjatjara languages. It has equivalences in many other Indigenous languages. It is often translated simply as “company” but has many other layers of meaning. At its core marlpa is relational. It is about friendship, doing things together and not leaving anyone out. It is a way of being with others that ensures harmony, connectedness and relational responsibility. Marlpa is often experienced bodily as a “good feeling”. It was of central importance to how we worked together in this research process.

Knowledge itself was also seen as relational. Warlpiri scholar, Pawu Kurlpurlurnu (also known as Steve Patrick) reminds us that for Indigenous epistemologies the knowledge lies in the “relationships”, not in the “separate parts” (Pawu Kurlpurlurnu, Holmes & Box, 2008, p. 15). In our conversations this concept is perhaps best demonstrated the following excerpt from Barbara, who said:

Barbara: …sharing all my experiencing with you, through video, through talking, recording me, I don’t feel shy for them now…my history is helping both you and me because that’s like our country helps us to do our language and culture, it’s like that. History is a good (way) of sharing our stories and, you know, finding out about our history. What I’m trying to say is, it’s a key word, a key thing to sit down and talk about it but using that for your PhD. Yuwa (yeah). Ngurrjunyayarni (really good)…in Yapa (Warlpiri) way we don’t teach adults we learn from each other, by talking and walking together, sharing together everything. See like we (are) both teaching each other and having (an) educational conversation…I’m getting ideas from you so that I (can) work with Elders (and) adult people. (That) give(s) me experience not to feel shame for that adult person, because I want to show that person that I’m a leader…so that person can learn from me and I want to learn from that person…and it is good so that we leave each other with a happy feeling.

Rose (2004) asserts that relationships are crucial to doing effective decolonizing knowledge work because it is through these relationships among people and between people and place that alternatives to the ways we have done things in the past can arise. We need these relationships to derive a new sense of ethics, an “ethic of connection”, where we see ourselves as “mutually implicated humans whose primary duty is to respond to the calls of others” (Rose, 2004, p. 14). Rose calls this an ethics of responsibility, not guilt, an ethic that “demarcates a path towards decolonization…towards a human condition of living with and for others” (Rose, 2004, p. 12). Relationships provoke us to be vulnerable and responsive in our knowledge work and to honour our connection to each other above all other outcomes.
Reciprocity: You helped me so I have to help you

In considering ethical consent around this research project, especially with work that was built on the foundation of pre-existing relationships, we had to explore on a regular basis the motivations of why people said yes to participating. Lisa was really concerned that she didn’t want to people just to say yes to being part of the project because they were friends with her. What she had to learn was that reciprocity is an important part of working together. The connection to the previous work we had done together was a really strong reason why people wanted to keep going with this work. People saw it as a continuation and in many ways a reciprocation. For example in the group conversation that happened in 2013 the following exchange took place.

   Barbara: Alright well Pitjan (Lisa) you helped us get through upgrading, now we gonna all help you.
   
   Yamurna: Yuwayi (yes).
   
   Lisa: Thank you.
   
   Mona: Yeah.
   
   Barbara: Help you get through your PhD, we’re your family.
   
   Lisa: Thank you and I like that, this what I call reciprocity.
   
   Linda: Owa, palya ngapartji ngapartji (yes, that’s good, giving back).

This feeling of reciprocity or “ngapartji ngapartji”, from the Luritja and Pitjantjatjara languages meaning “you give something to me and I give something to you”, continued to be spoken about as the research work went on. In a conversation with Lisa, Fiona said,

   Fiona: I really wanted to help you…I can’t let you down because you helped me through my study and I have to help you pass your PhD…I would always help you in anything to pass your research or any other work that we can do. Yuwai (yes) I’m really happy to do that to help you out you know. Yuwai (yeah).

A conversation between Mona and Lisa also illuminated the current work as something that was seen as part of an ongoing reciprocal relationship, not just with the past, but also into the future:

   Mona: And like some of us are like looking at doing Masters, and you know that’ll really help decide.
   
   Lisa: And that’s the other thing, if as part of this I can help you with something, you know you’re helping me with something, if I can help you achieve something that you want to do then that would make me happy to, that if we can give something for each other, that would be a really good outcome I think.
   
   Mona: Mmmm, awa (yes), and I can you know, if I want to do things, like go on to do (more study) you’re going to be there, you’re going to be helping me, I trust you.
Lisa: Yeah, so for other things.

Mona: Other things, awa (yes).

Lisa: Yeah that’s interesting you going back to study and me being able to help you with that, Linda applying for another job and me helping her with that... “reciprocity” so you helping me with my study, me helping you out with things that you need and I feel like there’s a kind of, you know, sharing there, that we can help each other out with things, which I like as well.

Mona: Yeah.

Lisa: You know just little things that I can do that make like easier for people, help them out when they need help, but you know there’s what I call that reciprocity, helping each other.

Mona: And that’s important, that’s very important.

But this concept of reciprocity went much deeper than a simple exchange of favours or assistance. In many ways what people were feeling was a sense of reciprocity with learning and sharing itself. Linda saw part of her participation in the work as a reciprocal obligation to ensure that Lisa learned things as well while they were working together. This in a way became a reciprocity of knowledge systems as enacted by people.

Linda: Yuwa (yes), and that’s what I like, you know, working and trusting and getting something from the learning process, yuwa (yeah).

Lisa: I feel really happy about the fact that during the times when I’ve been here at Papunya, you’ve taken me out to some places... so it hasn’t just been about us sitting and doing the research together, those times of recording and work.

Linda: Visiting country and meeting other people palya (good).

Lisa: Yeah, and so it’s not just about you and me but about this whole community that you’re part of and like those women that we went digging with yesterday and the kids and understanding, yeah I guess, you’re helping me to see the connections between all those things, which I’m really grateful for, that’s been really enjoyable for me too to get to know that part of...

Linda: Yuwa palya lingku (yeah, really good).

It also became clear that the act of telling a story provides a sense of wellbeing for the teller. A number of our conversations raised how good it felt to tell the story and how it brought about a feeling of pride and happiness to have told the story and had it recorded, valued and preserved. This exchange between Linda and Lisa is a good example of this feeling:

Linda: I’ve been learning so much and in that journey I’ve learned so much. I didn’t learn you know, enough at school but I’ve learned so much (since)... And there was good principals and bad principals, good staff and bad staff, but I hung in there and learned so much that and... I’m not telling someone’s story, it’s my story that’s from those experiences that I had, it has to be told and I’ve told that, yuwa (yeah).
Lisa: So you’re feeling good about…

Linda: Yuwa (yes)…having a chance to tell that…’cos sometimes (it) can be hidden and that’s when people are, you know, not ready to tell what they’ve experienced and it makes me feel palya (good) about it, that I’ve told my story.

Mona also expressed a similar feeling at the end of her narrative recording:

Mona: I think you know, I think this is the best part…yeah you know telling someone my story. I think I feel good ‘cos I don’t often tell people stories, yeah and I think this was a good way, a good way of telling my story, my journey, yeah and it makes me feel good…’cos often I don’t talk…you know…talking about your life in normal talk. You can’t go into that. But I think I feel good ‘cos I’ve talked to you and I’ve told this story of my journey. I really wanted…someone to come up with it and ask me…’cos I’ve been trying really hard to get this out…someone to come and tell me, ‘oh can you tell me about your journey?’ But it was really good I had the chance to do it.

Similarly when asked how she felt about having told her story Fiona said,

Fiona: I feel really proud of myself, like what I’ve experienced in my teaching days, yeah really good you know, from when I started first year of my study and when I started teaching under those tress you know, to the building, silver bullet and all that. And then teaching my own classes…and it’s good…when you’re doing that research with the others, you can tell them. Because we came from the bean tree, not from the building. Because what they’re gonna see from Yuendumu mob…they started in the building, but not us, we started under the bean trees. Next to the sand dunes. Yuwai (yes), see that’s different, unga (isn’t it)?

This feeling of wellbeing that came from telling these stories also extends to the feeling of doing something that will help future generations. In this sense reciprocity becomes about a relationship with the future and the obligational responsibility to pass knowledge on. Yamurna talked about this idea:

Yamurna: I think it’s good to talk about my things that we done long time (ago), you know, yuwayi (yes)...I just want you to keep this story so maybe when I pass away so my grandkids can see it, you know. And they (will) read it you know, so they can become teachers in the future…They don’t have to be teacher maybe they could be nurse or work in an office? Yeah, and they’ll be thinking of me…it’s really good to share my story…when I started young, now I’m getting older and older, and long time when people were in school…I didn’t used to teach, I was shy. But now I can teach.

Fiona also saw her story as something that she was doing to support future generations in her community. She also had ideas about ways to disseminate the research that would have currency and meaning for her community,

Fiona: That’s what we want to see yuwayi (yes), young people may be looking at our work what we did with you, they might think about it now you know. Maybe in the community or meeting you know we might tell them, “we did this research, helped nampijinpa (Lisa)”. I think there’s maybe something gonna come out, maybe DVD or something? You know, a book? So we can let the others know you know. Yeah, and I will be like talking about it, sharing if they ask me for ideas you know. Looking at mainly the young ones, young kids, young people if they want to do study, because we want more young teachers, more Yapa (Warlpiri) teachers in the community.
These final words from Fiona are especially important as it shows that she never lost sight of the original reason for doing the research in the first place. Although there were times in the research where we had to rethink things, cancel plans, find alternatives and realise that something we wanted to do was not going to happen, the flexibility built into the conversational approach (Kovach, 2010) meant that everyone continued on with the research for the entire process. Additionally we remained bound together in the work by our common concern (Addelson, 1994) over the low numbers of Aboriginal people from remote communities becoming qualified teachers, and our “philosophical orientation” (Kovach, 2010) to work together in such a way that we all felt good and our relationships were strengthened by the end of the work.

Conclusion

Coming together around a common concern was an important part of our relational and ethical research. It provided the reason for doing it and the motivation to stay the course. However, truly relational and ethical research required us to pay attention to our philosophical orientation and to respect and honour the ways that we worked together. It also required us to resist some of the ways that the western academic system tried to push us around. When the western system of research pushed us to hurry and get things done by a deadline, sometimes it was important to push back and slow things down. We needed to allow time for conversation, thinking, asking questions and finding the right time to proceed. When the western system required us to give consent to participating in the process we needed to discover, define and practice what consent looked like and felt like for us. This meant that we had to keep checking in with each other to make sure we were all still happy to keep going with the research. At times when things got hard for people we needed to find ways of being flexible and finding solutions that worked for everyone. Our relationships, which had been established over many years of working together, guided us. There were times when we had to defend these relationships against the criticism of the western academic system that tends to see relationships as a risk when it comes to research. But those relationships helped us to know how to work together, to trust each other and to be honest with each other. That trust also helped us to explore the research questions more deeply and honestly. It was also important to make sure that the outcomes for the university were not the only things that were given priority. We used the spirit of reciprocity to make sure that everyone’s needs were being met and that we were helping each other in a balanced way. It was our shared passion for education and concern for the future education of young people in our communities that motivated us to continue and persevere. But good communication, genuine consent, strong relationships and reciprocity helped us to navigate the research space so that in the end everyone was left with a feeling of pride and satisfaction in what we had achieved together.
References


Ngapartji ngapartji ninti and koorliny karnya quoppa katitjin (Respectful and ethical research in central Australia and the south west)

Jennie Buchanan, Len Collard and Dave Palmer

Keywords: marlpara (friend/colleague), ngapartji ngapartji (reciprocity), birniny (digging and inquiring), kulini (listening), dabakarn dabakarn (going slowly)

Abstract

This paper is set out as a conversation between three people, an Indigenous person and two non-Indigenous people, who have known and worked with each other for over 30 years. This work has involved them researching with communities in central Australia and the south west of Western Australia. The discussion concerns itself with ideas and practices that come from three conceptual traditions; English, Noongar and Pitjantjatjara to talk about how to build ngapartji ngapartji (“you give and I give in return”, in Pitjantjatjara), karnya birit gnarl (respectful and kind ways of sweating/working with people, in Noongar), between marlpara (“colleagues”, in Pitjantjatjara) and involving warlbirniny quop weirn (singing out to the old people, in Noongar).

Kura katitj (Introduction and background)

The history of outsiders carrying out research with Indigenous Australians is long and often vexed. To say that Indigenous communities do not often benefit from the work of researchers is perhaps an understatement. Although approved by the ethical protocols of universities, much research that is undertaken “on” Indigenous people, Indigenous lands and Indigenous knowledge maintains the longstanding model of “excavating” information, artifacts and insights.

This reflects a long and lasting history where the vested interests of outsiders (like government, business, universities, even non-government organisations) usurp the goals and aspirations of Indigenous communities. It also reflects the fact that there are fewer areas of research in Australia where outsiders have invested so poorly in the capability and ethical practices of those they “send” to work with Indigenous communities.

This chapter will provide a series of contemplations from a Noongar1 man and two non-Indigenous people whose research work with communities routinely sees them confronting

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1 We use the term Noongar to refer to those – living and who have passed away – with longstanding cultural affiliations and connections to the south-west corner of Western Australia.
tensions, paradoxes and ethical challenges. It takes the form of a dialogue where each draws together their experience as researchers. Moving between central Australia and the south west of Western Australia, this dialogue opens up a conversation across three knowledge domains: academic English, Noongar and Western Desert systems such as Pitjantjatjara. Using conceptual and cultural frameworks from across these systems we attempt to talk about how to build ngapartji ngapartji (“you give and I give in return”, in Pitjantjatjara), karnya birit gnarl (respectful and kind ways of sweating/working with people, in Noongar), between marlpara (“colleagues”, in Pitjantjatjara) and involving warlbirniny quop weirn (singing out to the old people, in Noongar). To support this discussion we also draw on work written by some of our Māori colleagues and friends.

The decision to write as a dialogue between three people may be seen as a little wam (strange) to some. We have chosen to do it in a conscious attempt to “unsettle” the convention of creating a “voice” that is singular, authoritative and self-assured (see Freire, 1986; Westoby & Dowling, 2013). In part, writing as a dialogue reflects the critical part that gnulla wangkiny in Noongar or nganana tjunguringkula waakaripai in Pitjantjatjara (“we go along talking and yarning together”) plays in Indigenous Australian communities. It also reflects our desire to more honestly demonstrate the value of “yarning” (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010; Barlo, 2017).

We will write this in a way that is closest to how the ideas came to be, as a series of observations and questions, forged through what we have read, tested and experienced. We will also write it in a way that pays respect to and rightfully tries to honour Indigenous ontological, epistemological and conceptual traditions. Although we write in English we will also draw upon Noongar and Pitjantjatjara language and conceptual ideas.

The piece also reflects the fact that the three authors have a long history of having yarns like this. We have known each other for more than thirty years, worked on research together, travelled often and learnt much from one another. In addition, in November of 2017 and specifically to help us prepare this paper, we sat down and recorded two yarns in Canberra and out at Boyagin Rock near Brookton in Western Australia.

Our style may be unsettling for some but as Muecke (2004) points out, Aboriginal frames have long had to endure an unfair distance from most recognized philosophy. This is despite the fact that they have long had much to offer (see Buchanan et al., 2016).

Ngearn noonook, nguntu palya (Introducing each other)

Dave: Len, can we start our discussion about research ethics by getting you to talk about first steps? We have this yarn on Noongar boodjar (Noongar country). As we begin the process of “travelling” from Noongar country to central Australia, what would you say about how we do this as “ethical researchers”?

Len: Well if wam (outsiders in Noongar) are yaarl koorliny gnulla boodjar (coming to our country in Noongar), one of the first things we would expect them to do is to “sing out” to the old people, those who have passed away and are now the spirit of the lands and sense of the place (Collard, 2007). You need to call out to ancestors, to moort (family in Noongar) about who you are and what your intentions are.

We do this out of respect to the people from that place. It also helps make us safe. Crucially it makes it clear to people from the area that whatever we might think about the ethical or right way to do things in our own area we also understand that the particular character and form of ethical behaviour shifts from place to place. This last point is important to make before we go too much further. Although we will make some observations, we don’t want readers to mistake
our main point, which is that ethical research is different from country to country and Indigenous group to Indigenous group.

So let’s do this to our Anangu² moort or waltja (family, in Pitjantjatjara).


(Hello to our Anangu bosses. Are you good? We write this while sitting in Noongar country. We believe it is worth remembering that Anangu have contributed much to cultural and economic life in central Australia as Noongar have in the south west of Australia. We recognise Anangu as bosses for their knowledge and language. We will go along picking our way through knowledge with a respectful feeling in our gut.)

Jen: Len, I am reminded of what your friend, colleague and Anangu maaman (father in Pitjantjatjara), Barry Judd, has said about the business of coming into central Australian communities as an ethical researcher. He talks about old Anangu practices offering us “the proper basis of ethical research practice”. Barry claims that our starting point should be “the practice of when, where, and how one camps”. In particular, asking where one needs to physically position oneself is critical.

Traditionally, visitors to the Country of another Anangu group would be required to approach from the direction of their homeland, set up camp within view of their hosts, but initiate no contact with them. Then they would wait. Wait for half a day, a full day, or two full days. Only when their hosts approached their camp did it indicate that the visitors were welcome. This is the protocol that our research project has used on field research visits to Papunya (Judd cited in Hawkes, Pollock, Judd, Phipps, & Assoulin, 2017, p. 26).

Dave: It is also important to explain a little about who we are and what this has to do with what we are writing about.

Len: Dave, you were born in Kaurna country or Adelaide but your moort is from the UK, heh? You and I have known each other since the mid 1980s and we studied youth work together before we each started teaching at university.

Jen: Professor Collard [Len], you describe yourself as Wadjuk Balardong Noongar and we have worked together in different ways since the early 1990s. You, Dave and I met at university during our undergraduate degree in youth work too.

Dave: Jen, you’d describe yourself as a Wedjela (non-Aboriginal) who grew up in Noongar boodjar?

Jen: Sometimes! When I’m in the Kimberley I turn into a Gardiya (a non-Aboriginal person) (Muecke, 2014).

Warlbirniny: birniny (In contrast to excavation)

Jen: Dave, you have had some things to say about the tendency by research organisations to insist on conducting themselves using an “excavation” approach. Can you talk about this?

² On this occasion we will refer to our relationships with work on Anangu and Yarnangu country. This reflects our personal experiences and the fact that our affiliations are more connected with people from Pitjantjatjara, Yankunytjatjara and Ngaanyatjarra communities.
Dave: I’ve come to notice amongst many colleagues and in the culture of universities what I describe as research through “excavation”. We come from long traditions of seeing research as an activity that is much the same as mining. We set out as researchers to do some exploration work, prospecting the knowledge terrain, trying to uncover what sits underneath the surface so we can pull it out, bring it back to the academy, carry out some extra on-site production work and then sell it (often in our teaching, research outputs and intellectual market-place). Since the Enlightenment, research has largely been seen as the business of scanning new intellectual territory to discover knowledge to be traded in the global scholarly economy.

Len: This language of “discovery” has made its way into our large research funding bodies. This language is not new for Indigenous people who have had to endure outsiders coming in and digging up stuff as part of colonisation.

Jen: I routinely find myself in meetings with colleagues talking about the importance of “capturing” things like the stories of the old people. I think this metaphor of “capturing” is highly instructive.

Dave: Yes, I remember hearing a talk given by a representative from Google. The presenter made the point that universities largely operate in an old, closed-knowledge economy where “data” is treated as a commodity to be excavated, up-processed and then sold for profit. On this occasion the presenter was trying to convince a bunch of academics that this kind of knowledge economy was outdated, unjust and unpopular with young people. He argued that a feature of many “open-sourced” systems was the need to see consumers (in our case, students) as those we must involve as co-producers through a process of agreement making.

Jen: So how can things be different?

Dave: Len, I wonder whether the Noongar practice of birniny has something to offer us here?

Len: Ah yes, although a simple translation would have it that birniny is “digging, scraping and revealing”, I think it is more than this and very much related to research. It has got something to do with the way we hold ourselves on country and the way we go about moving and conducting ourselves.

Birniny, or when you scratch, scrape and dig, you often produce lots of gnarl (sweat). When we birniny we are literally trying to uncover both what is on the surface and also what is underneath. But it is very different from the business of mining or excavating.

The word birniny comes from the word birn, which are particular kinds of plants that you find in the undergrowth in many parts of Noongar boodjar (Noongar country). You usually find birn off the main track and as part of the rich ecology of ground cover and botany that sits between the soil and up to the height of your knees.

Jen: Birn plants are particularly hardy and have prickles and tough foliage that can cut, graze and inflict sores on your legs if you are not careful. From when they were young, koorlangka (children, in Noongar) were taught to walk through country in a particular way to avoid hurting their legs (see Rose et al., 2002). This way of walking demands that you are attentive to both the areas ahead, in proximity to and below your feet. To walk in this way you needs to fine-tune your peripheral vision both vertically and horizontally.

Len: Unlike travelling on a well-worn path or road that is clearly mapped out, koorlangka (children) were taught that our djen (feet) needed be meeyol (eyes), dijianginy (looking), and our kaat katitjin (head is thinking), whether one was wortkoorliny or yarlkoorliny (coming or
going). Just like an waitj (emu) that is constantly picking, scratching and looking for what is available in the undergrowth, when we walk through the birn we have to move in and around what is offered up by boodjar (country) (Collard, 2007).

**Jen:** Yes, I love the way the waitj (emu) moves. I often marvel at their feet and the relationship these have to the beak and eyes. It is almost as if the emu has eyes in its toes so that when it walks it lifts its claws, momentarily pausing while the feet take the decision of where to land. Like many other birds the emu’s beak is constantly on the go, looking out for opportunities to feed. Of course the emu can’t walk backwards but it can turn very quickly.

**Dave:** How is this different from excavation?

**Len:** The most important element of birniny is the relationship we have with the place, the knowledge and the people. We were not only taught to birniny through places we were taught to birniny through our relationships with others, struggling and picking our way through the complex systems of community, constantly looking out for the prickly things and being ready to quickly adjust our movements to deal with those around us.

To put it another way, behind the practice of birniny is the importance of constant negotiation with those around you. You can’t just wander through country picking up what you like the look of. This is dangerous to you and dangerous for those from that place.

**Dave:** So the act of birniny is not something you can safely do unless you have knowledge of where you are going and, importantly, you are doing it in conjunction with the bosses for that place?

**Jen:** This is a nice metaphor for how we might work as researchers, always on the lookout, paying attention to what might lie just out of the corner of our eye and always being prepared to adjust what we are seeing and doing according to the bosses.

**Len:** What about Anangu practice? Are there ideas that are important for thinking about ethical research from Anangu wangka and ninti (language and knowledge) that could be helpful here?

**Kulini, ni (Being and listening)**

**Dave:** I am reminded of the Pitjantjatjara concept and practice of kuluni when you talk in this way, Len.

**Jen:** Kulini is often translated as something like “listening”. Is this adequate?

**Dave:** There is a bit of irony in that question. The English-language speaker and conventional researcher brings with them generations of training in trying to quickly replace complex Indigenous ideas and concepts with simple translations. We like to see something and quickly show that we know what it is. Then we are expected to translate this “piece of knowledge” into our way of conceptualizing. Here an idea is an “abstract entity, intact and transmissible from one person (and one culture) to another”. Educational philosopher Addelson points out that this way of thinking is premised upon what he calls the notion of “epistemic equality”, or the claim that anyone may “know” and quickly become the judging observer (Addelson cited in MacMahon, 2013, p. 22).

**Jen:** And what is wrong with this premise?

**Dave:** For a start it often leads to premature conclusions. We also misinterpret things unless we are deeply familiar with Anangu ontology and culture. For example, Liberman (1980, pp. 74–75)
points out that Anangu can adopt a conversational tool he terms “gratuitous concurrence”. This involves people saying “yes”, or accept[ing an] outsider’s interpretation as a way of “showing respect or avoiding conflict or confusion in conversation”.

_len_: And if you follow Noongar and Anangu ways of knowing much knowledge exchange is shaped by relationships between people and country (Kickett-Tucker, Bessarab, Coffin, & Wright, 2017).

For example, in Yolŋu knowledge systems from Arnhem Land the djirrikay (boss of knowledge) refuses to pass on knowledge in the absence of conditions that have milmarra (skin-based promise rules) practices in place. This means that one’s access to the passing on of knowledge is shaped by one’s place in the skin system, one’s age and one’s place in the arrangements of “promised” relationships. In other words, different people have different knowledge they have access to and a different experience of meaning depending on their relationships. A similar arrangement works in old Noongar katitjin (knowledge systems).

_jen_: So listening is an inadequate translation for kulini?

_len_: Technically, the English word listening means to use one’s ears to hear sounds. If we have been trained in the helping professions or as social researchers we might pick up some allied skills such as honesty, goodwill, empathy, trying to act on what we have heard. However, we also get lots of training in being disinterested or distant from what our ears hear so that we can claim objectivity. The practice kulini (Noongar use the word “ni”) asks us to have much more “skin in the game”, both in the English metaphoric sense and the Aboriginal sense as well.

_jen_: Kulini perhaps also demands that we get comfortable with disconcertment, celebrating the chance to experience moments of deep existential panic “where you are suddenly caused to doubt what you know” (Verran & Christie, 2013, p. 53).

_dave_: Kulini is way more complex and demanding that simply hearing something. According to the Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara to English Dictionary (Goddard, 1996, p. 31), the term “kulini” has nine meanings or elements:

1. Listen. To heed
2. Hear
3. Think about, consider
4. Decide
5. Know about
6. Understand
7. Remember
8. Feel
9. Have a premonition from a sensation in the body

You might say kulini demands an array of processes. It includes aural action, corporeal experience, engaging the intellect, drawing on experiences on country and with country, coming into relationships, using epistemologies, and cosmologies and conceptual language. Indeed, to be a master of kulini one would have to consider the possibility of building into our practice premonition, an ability to talk with those who have come before, maybe even listening to the wind (Osborne, 2017, p. 31).
Jen: This makes sense and this demands much time and discipline. In the sciences and social sciences we would not contemplate sending a researcher into a field like biomedicine, physics, biology, psychology or sociology without asking them to first spend 5 to 10 years “listening” to the language and knowledge of their discipline. Indeed, that is why so many first-year undergraduate students get lost in lectures, we expect them to listen without knowing the language, epistemology and relationships. In the absence of much preparation we cannot kulini. We may be able to hear the sounds but we cannot kulini.

Len: Kulini is also important for keeping us safe. Unlike the production of other research, Noongar research is closely tied to old and well established Noongar cultural frameworks and practices associated with picking your way safely through knowledge. For example, in (the past) if, for social, spiritual or economic reasons, a neighbouring Noongar group was to travel through to the Perth area, the onus was on them to comply with certain obligations and regulations. At the same time, local Noongar boordier were responsible for the health and safety of visitors (Collard & Palmer, 2006).

It has always been important to Noongar that visitors take instruction from locals on where to safely go and to not offend djennak (benevolent spirits), quop weirn (good spirits) or Waugal (the old snake spirits), nor move through country without proper introductions. Failure to do so could have devastating consequences on the health and wellbeing of visitors and custodians. Thus the “cultural safety” of visitors was tied up with obligations of both locals and visitors.

Jen: Presenting on behalf of the Combined Noongar native Title Claim, Kingsley Palmer explained it thus:

In Noongar thinking, an owner of country has the right to exclude or grant permission to non-owners to enter and use their land. But he or she also has a duty to share their land with others and a duty to ensure that no harm comes to visitors. The Aboriginal evidence amply demonstrates that Noongar people believe that unknown country is potentially dangerous, because Noongar land is possessed of spiritual potentialities which must either be avoided or knowledgably managed. Ignorance of country is therefore a matter of personal jeopardy. To venture into unknown country is to imperil both yourself and those who depend upon you. This means that, for the most part, Noongar people regard country that is not their own, and therefore which is unknown to them, as country to be avoided (Palmer quoted in Federal Court of Australia, 2006).

Dave: Local Noongar are the ones who are well acquainted with how to protect themselves and outsiders. This means researchers must, for their own safety, have Aboriginal bosses as co-researchers – chief investigators, if you like.

Len: Ni (listening, in Noongar) also involves shifting the kind of ways we listen to recognize the forms Noongar use to communicate. Take for example the way Noongar knowledge is “written”. In most of our research practice we have habit of only “listening” to certain kinds of text. Historians, most social scientists, and those involved in heritage and native title, prefer to rely on the archival record. Other researchers seek out work that has been written and published in academic journals. As my Palyku (language group from the Pilbara region) colleagues Kwaymullina, Kwaymullina, Terra Rosa Cultural Heritage Management, and Butterly (2013) point out, Indigenous knowledge agents often prefer other genres such as speaking, poetry, song, dance, film, narrative and creative writing, visual art, and performance. Kaurna, Narungga and Ngarrindjeri scholar Lester Rigney also point out that this work has recently shaped the way “Indigenist” research is being conducted (Rigney, 1999), so that Indigenous content, form and voices are more privileged and honoured (Rigney, 1999; Kuokkanen, 2000;
Moreton-Robinson & Walter, 2009). Sami academic Rauna Kuokkanen points out that “Indigenous epistememes have to be recognized as a gift to the academy” (Kuokkanen, 2000, p. 65). Therefore, it’s imperative that researchers seek out a range of Indigenous sources, set out in a range of styles and genres, perhaps even those that don’t appear heavily “analytical” (Kwaymullina et al., 2013, p. 9).

Ngapartji ngapartji, malparara and gnulla koorliny (Going along together)

Jen: Part of the tradition of an excavation approach to research is that people who possess knowledge are mostly treated as either objects of the gaze of social science or those who need to be subject to the directions of the investigators.

Dave: Yes, as researchers we are largely taught to deal with human beings using the approach to relationships that Martin Buber describes as “Ich-Es” or an “I-It” encounters. Here the researcher (the “I” in the relationship) confronts and qualifies an “It”, treating them as an object. In this kind of relationship we treat other things, people, data, as objects to be used and experienced. This form of objectifying the Other frames “them” in terms of how they can serve the interests of the research. In subtle ways, through referring to people as participants, subjects, interviewees, “the community”, a distance is created between Indigenous people as knowledge agents and the researcher as expert and knowledge producer (Buber, 1937).

Jen: How can we do otherwise?

Len: Well let’s look at some Noongar and Anangu concepts and practices for instruction.

Doing business with knowledge in Noongar ways has long involved an exchange where the parties gnulla koorliny (go along together). Part of this involves baranginy (bringing or carrying) something to exchange. You don’t just take away things you need to baranginy something with you. It might be yongka (kangaroo), mamang djerang (whale fat), boya (stones), or dowark (hitting stick). At the most fundamental, when our old people came together there was always sharing of food that went on. Barry Judd (in Hawkes et al., 2017, p. 26) confirms that this is still the way you do business with Anangu. Now, when we have meetings with family from that side and this side we always make sure we take things like kangaroo tail, plenty of steak, bread and other gifts for the bosses from that place.

Jen: Making sure that the old people are taken care of in other ways is important too. Being able to make a kapati (cup of tea) is way more important in my view than mastering SPSS or some other research tool. If you are not prepared to spend plenty of time signalling your respect for the old people by seeing that their needs are met then you fail your first test in ethical research (Ober, 2017).

Dave: The Anangu concept ngapartji ngapartji is instructive here. This idea and practice is variously translated: “in turn, in turn”, or “I give, you give in return” (Castejon et al., 2014; Edwards, 2014).

However, there appears little in the English language that adequately translates “ngapartji ngapartji”. Unfortunately, most tend to draw upon modernist ideals and mistakenly assume a kind of market-driven exchange in people’s social worlds where one needs to immediately return a favour for a favour, or immediately reciprocate a good turn. As Sennett (2002) points out, this kind of arrangement causes the termination of social connections. The symmetry of exchange (with its obsessions with equality and immediacy) results in people lacking any means of being socially bound to each other.
Len: Noongar would use the terms yoorl buranginy (bring it or take to) and woort buranginy (grab it and take off) to describe the interplay between bringing something to the table and taking something away.

Jen: Perhaps the English idea of the “gift” takes us a little closer to the Pitjantjatjara concept of “ngapartji ngapartji”. In contrast to market exchange, a gift economy obligates people to one another, producing conditions that see people reciprocating their debt. According to Mauss (1967), the gift creates an economy not of altruism but of debt so that gifts must be eventually returned and their value matched. However, the key here is that the gift may not return precisely to the original giver. Rather, a gift moves in a circle, with at least three people needed for the gift economy to work. In a classic gift economy the gift exchange moves in complex directions, moving “from one hand to another with no assurance of anything in return” (Hyde, 1983, p. 11). In this way, the gift draws us into a mutual dependence upon those involved in the exchange, a formal give-and-take that forces us to acknowledge our participation in and dependence upon each other. It also forces us to respond to those around us, those who are “other” but with whom we are bound, as part of ourselves, not as a wam (stranger or alien).

Len: Can you provide examples of how this can get put into practice in research?

Jen: I like the approach taken by Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Women’s Council called the malparara way of working (Woods et al., 2000, pp. 91–99). In the Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara context “malpa” means “friend”, and “malparara” means “a person going along with a friend or companion”. Malparara is used to describe the process of two people, one Indigenous and one non-Indigenous worker, working together, directly along side of each other.

If we applied this approach to research we would often have to rethink what we employ researchers to do. We may choose some Indigenous workers because of their research expertise in matters to do with culture, their seniority, knowledge of local language, relationship to local kids and skills in relation to keeping people culturally safe. These would be researchers who know the country, know the families, understand local politics, and are exceedingly qualified in terms of Indigenous law and culture. The non-Indigenous researcher may be recruited because they have specific professional skills that relate to western knowledge.

For example, they would normally have formal training in one area of western knowledge, such as nutrition, physiotherapy, anthropology, education, or social policy. These people are also competent at writing, dealing with funding, have knowledge of other “mainstream” services and the culture of government and university policy.

This approach to research is premised upon the idea that the skills, knowledge and community affiliations of one person or people from one cultural domain are inadequate for doing all of the research work and resolving challenges that are encountered in doing the research.

Len: This sounds to me a lot like how things work in Indigenous cultural domains. In my experience, a job taken on in a community setting would normally involve at least a couple of Indigenous people coming together to work on things. This happens because it is more efficient and there is often a need to negotiate across at least two different cultural or familial domains. Noongar could describe this as “gnulluk dabakarn koorliny” (two going along slowly together).

Quop karnya and kanyirninpa (Respectfully passing on knowledge)

Dave: Len and Jen, can I ask you to talk more about the place Indigenous manners has in ethical research with Indigenous Australians?


**Len:** The word karnya means good manners or good moral integrity and sensibilities. Koondarn is another word that implies sensibility and good ways of conducting yourself. If someone says that you got no koondarn then they are saying you have no manners, you are behaving in a manner that is out of order.

**Jen:** So how do these words contribute to our understanding about how we can be ethical in our research?

**Len:** As a kid when I was growing up koondarn was related to shame. Karnya is sensibility or having sense. Nowadays many young Noongar use the word karnya to mean shame but it was always more about having respect and seeing to it that knowledge gets passed along with integrity.

**Jen:** So reciprocal systems of obligation are at the heart of respect or karnya? This reminds me of the importance in Western Desert ontology of the obligations that come with age to nurture those who “come along after” (Myers, 1991, p. 211). Brian McCoy (2008, p. 22), who writes from a strong ethical position of involvement in community development with Kukatja (a southern Kimberley Aboriginal group), draws on the Western Desert concept of Kanyirninpa.

**Len:** Kanyirninpa sounds like a word that is similar to the Noongar word karnya. What does that mob mean by Kanyirninpa?

**Dave:** As I understand it, Kanyirninpa is expressed in a number of interconnected ways. It includes the practice of nurturing the young through law and life. It particularly gets used to describe older people taking responsibility and offering protection for those they hold. It involves relationships of teaching and learning where older people help young people “grow up the right way” (McCoy, 2008, p. 22). McCoy (2008, p. 28) also explains that Kanyirninpa or “holding” young people is an act of exercising respect towards others, creating conditions to reinforce social bonds and social obligations (see also Palmer, 2012 for a description of how this plays out in a remote-area community development project).

**Jen:** So how can this get put into research practice?

**Len:** Well, one critical thing we have to get much better at is finding a place for young people in our research work and using research projects as one means of encouraging work across the generations. Dave you have been involved in some work that is doing this well.

**Dave:** I really like some of the models that have been used by ranger teams across northern and central Australia where younger rangers and school kids are becoming involved in the collection of “data” with and from elders and middle-aged people, using dynamic and interesting digital platforms. Through the use of things like film and geospatial tablets young people are bringing their interest and expertise in new and state of the art information technology with senior people’s knowledge of old stories, songs, practice and language (Kral, 2010a, 2010b).

**Jen:** Here the use of new technology is important in a number of ways. Young people are now using multimedia appliances such as stills cameras, video cameras, IPods and MP3 players and other multi-functional devices. They are also operating “user-friendly” applications for post-production such as iMovie, iTunes, iPhoto, GarageBand and Animation Apps. Although not everyone has access, technology has become fast, accessible, highly portable and more publicly available (Kral, 2010a). This world is “symbolic-rich, language-saturated and technology-enhanced” (Hull, 2003, p. 232). Perhaps most importantly, new media also affords the renewal of old processes of intergenerational exchange with Indigenous young people finding spaces to take on leadership and critical roles in recording, learning and producing Indigenous knowledge (Berryman & Macfarlane, 2017). Increasingly, other generations are cherishing young people’s...
take-up of this role, particularly when they act in ways that help them negotiate the spaces between old knowledge and new technology (Buchanan et al., 2016).

**Wangkiny (Yarning and analysis)**

*Dave:* So to talk about ethics in research in the absence of talking about and using wangkiny (language) is unhelpful? Len, can you say some more about this?

*Len:* I often see words like “respect”, “reciprocity”, “equality”, “informed consent”, “responsibility”, and “integrity” used by those involved in research with Indigenous communities. These are important ideas but they can sometimes mean little or different things to community people. This is another reason we should look to Indigenous languages for concepts and ideas as the leading language if we are to understand how researchers need to conduct themselves with communities (see Ober, 2017 for an example of the use of the Aboriginal English concept of “Kapati Time”).

Of course, the words of the Indigenous communities we work with, the intent and meaning are absolutely essential (see Trudgen, 2000). They are what drive knowledge and knowledge sharing. That is how we hold our knowledge. Just as bio-medical science, economics, zoology and all the western sciences hold their knowledge in their strange and exotic languages, so do Aboriginal knowledge systems.

Other Indigenous groups have been making this point when they talk about research. For example, Māori scholars like Linda Tuhiwai Smith spend much time fleshing out how to carry out what she calls kaupapa Māori research, research that starts from a Māori philosophical base. This approach takes tikanga Māori (a Māori way of doing things) as its first order of analysis and method. Critical here is that researchers use te reo Māori (Māori language) as their means of communicating, research practice, ethical frame and means of analysis (Smith, 1999).

*Jen:* Using local language in your practice is an important way of recognizing many of the elements that are important to community. Words like boodjar (country), moort (family and relationships), kaitijin (Noongar knowledge), kura, yeye, boorda (the connection between the past, present and future) are all important ideas that better set out how to behave for those working with Noongar than do English concepts.

*Dave:* What do we do if we don’t have any language, Len?

*Len:* Two things: 1) work with language speakers as translators and co-researchers and 2) start to learn. And make sure you apply ngapartji ngapartji here. People acting in these roles as not just assistants, they are co-researchers, even chief investigators.

*Jen:* In a way, a first-order ethical obligation for researchers is to recognize where they don’t have language so that they can do something about this. Respectfully learning language can also be an important way for non-Aboriginal researchers to find an ethical place for themselves. When asked whether a non-Indigenous researcher should carry out kaupapa Māori, researchers Bishop and Glynn (1999) answer in the affirmative – particularly if the researchers position themselves as allies and invest in building their te reo Māori (Māori language).

*Len:* So for all researchers in Noongar boodjar (Noongar country), you need to learn Noongar as part of your moral, ethical and mutual respect.

*Jen:* Words have long, deep and secure foundations. In our case the language of the south west of Australia has come to exist over 60,000-plus years to articulate how to live and do
community in this part of the world. English is much younger, has not come from here and has emerged in a different set of communities to explain and achieve things in a completely different context. Most importantly, English is an introduced language for Noongar and not always the most comfortable language to carry knowledge, practice and insight.

Len: Yes, when I talk to other Noongar about research and try and explain the concepts others use to explain what they are trying to do and the ethical dimensions, I have always struggled to try and articulate clearly what these Wedjela (non-Aboriginal) words and terminologies mean. I have found it much more productive, useful – let’s call it empowering and convincing – when I talk to Noongar using Noongar words and concepts. At the same time this gives me a chance to affirm my relationship with those Noongar, whether it be a demmangur (grandparent), kongk (uncle) or maamyok (aunt) or other members of my moort (family).

Dave: Language is how we hold not just our knowledge but also our ways of being. We hold our ontologies, knowledge systems, behaviours, the cultural protocols. Indeed, the words probably shape the way we hold our bodies.

The history of colonization in places like Australia is the history of outsiders destroying local language and ways of speaking. As Eve Fesl says, one of the first acts of outsiders in Australia was to take away local people’s words and right to speak. The rich and deeply instructive languages of over 250 groups across the continent were replaced by words that usually had groups like Noongar being forced to identify themselves by generic terms such as “native”, “Aborigine”, “half-caste” and now “Indigenous” (Fesl & Mumewa, 1993).

Len: I would suggest that our language also holds deep clues about how we can go about our research business. The work of Māori scholars Angus and Sonja Macfarlane is one powerful example of this. In setting out what an ethical research process looks like, they draw from te reo Māori, positing that method should be shaped by the following six practices from tikanga Māori (Māori way of doing things):

1. Whanaungatanga – building and maintaining strong relationships grounded in mutual trust, protection of Māori knowledge and care between those involved.
2. Whaiwāhitanga – ensuring participation, co-design of the research and power and benefits are shared.
3. Tātaritanga – listening; thinking; shared meaning-making, careful analysis of the data, and checking of conclusions.
4. Manaakitanga – affection towards others and ensuring the welfare and mana (status and position) of people is maintained through respectful interaction and acknowledgement of the source of knowledge.
5. Rangatiratanga – supporting people to maintain autonomy and control over their involvement in the research.
6. Aroha – maintaining the connection to the kaupapa (knowledge system) and approaching work with an intention of love, kindness and respect (Macfarlane & Macfarlane, 2015; Macfarlane, 2012; Vaioleti, 2006).

Dabakarn dabakarn and wanyu (Steady, steady)

Jen: This is also why it is important for outsiders to come into their research work with Aboriginal communities gently and quietly. Here I really like the Noongar idea of dabakarn dabakarn. This means to go along gently, quietly and steady.
Unlike those of us trained in the Enlightenment traditions of research, Aboriginal knowledge systems recognize that we cannot “discover” knowledge, it can only be revealed and shared (Hall, 2017, p. 73). Time and patience is really important here.

Dave: This reminds me of the Agangu concept of wanyu. If I understand this idea, it means that people are being asked to “wait a while” or slow down so that a considered response can be offered. Lisa Hall elaborates:

(Wanyu) carries epistemologically complex understandings and can be interpreted in many ways including: waiting, giving space, waiting for the right time, not filling up all the space, being patient and waiting until the other person feels ready. While it might be perceived as a passive term where nothing is happening, it is often quite an active space of preparation and foreshadowing. (Hall, 2017, p. 76)

Dabakarn dabakarn or wanyu creates a space for a range of things to happen. It allows researchers to see that good communication can happen. It helps those involved in the work to feel involved, ready and prepared. It is a very practical way of allowing a respectful relationship to grow.

Len: To go along dabakarn dabakarn involves not only listening to what people say but also noticing what is happening with people’s bodies, what is happening outside and what is happening between people. This doesn’t mean that you ignore your training or your ideas but to go along dabakarn dabakarn demands that you shift your speed and the way you “walk”.

Part of going along dabakarn dabakarn involves “reading the play”, watching what is happening and being ready to respond. It doesn’t mean that you do not move quickly when you need to. In fact, dabakarn dabakarn is a way of preparing you to kert kert djakoorliny (jump quickly into action). Dave, you played Australian Rules Football so you recognize how you move like this.

Dave: Yes, a number of times I have been told by cultural bosses to play “half-back flank”. Many people think this is just a defensive position but when I was young I learnt that my job involved both being prepared to receive a handball (having the ball passed) from a key player by stepping into action from slightly behind the play. As one senior cultural boss from the Kimberley region has put it, “you have to sit behind us bosses in the circle and take directions. You cannot cut in front and jump into the circle but when we signal to you the handbrake has to come right off and you have to step up.”

**Noongarpedia: An example**

Dave: Jen, you and Len have been working on a project called Noongarpedia (see Buchanan et al., 2016). Can you talk about how some of these ideas have shaped this research project?

Jen: Noongarpedia³ is a research and development project that has been running for about four years. It has involved using Wikipedia as a platform to support the use and reinvigoration of Noongar knowledge and language. It has included academics, language teachers, children, young people and community groups to both create Noongarpedia entries as a way to learn, pass on, and make public Noongar knowledge, and create relationships across the generations (Collard et al., 2017).

Built into the fundamental elements of this project is the importance of using and passing on Noongar knowledge and language. In this way wangkiny is both the thing we are attempting to support and the tools we need to use to work with community.

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³ Visit the site at: https://incubator.wikimedia.org/wiki/Wp/nys/Main_Page
Len: Some Noongar and non-Noongar have been critical about Wedjela learning language, claiming that it is another act of cultural appropriation. As a Wedjela involved in this project can you say some things about learning Noongar?

Jen: I am very sensitive about this. I get nervous and language regeneration is complicated.

However, two of the three chief investigators are Noongar professors. Noongar language is central to the work. This means that an integral part of me showing my respect and doing my job is to build my Noongar language skills. On the other hand, I am very aware of the sensitivities and pain that many Noongar experience because their families were stripped of their access to language.

If I were to show off my language skills it would be very cruel and insensitive.

Dave: So perhaps rather than asking “should a Wedjela learn Noongar language?” we might ask “how should Wedjela learn and practice Noongar language”? Combining listening and being humble is important.

Len: Important here is what Noongar call ni (deep listening) and karnya (respect) or what Anangu call kulini and kanyirninpa. Sometimes the respectful thing to do is be quiet, sometimes it demands that we speak up.

One of the things we discovered is that setting up a pedia demands that you engage deeply with a knowledge system. The people at Wikimedia Australia\(^4\) who have taught us how to use the platform have also made it clear that a pedia is not simply a list of words; it involves the creation of a free, deep-knowledge platform. For example, we have had to build a framework around which people’s entries sit. The technical instructions that people are offered by the pedia were even shaped used Noongar words. This is something that has evolved as people add content to the Noongarpedia.

Dave: One of the striking features of this works is the way that is draws people into becoming both “consumers” and “producers” of Noongar knowledge. What is interesting is that the work points to the need to consider the part cultural production and performance plays in Noongar knowledge transmission and the possibilities that emerge for Web2.0 platforms to support Indigenous cultural maintenance, reformation and transmission. Noongarpedia not only provided the means to record Noongar knowledge, it simultaneously helped to activate Noongar and others in the performance of that culture (Buchanan et al., 2016).

Jen: In contrast to earlier Web1.0 or pre-Web production of knowledge (where the producers and holders of knowledge simply instruct and pass on knowledge and information to passive consumers), many of the new platforms encourage the creation of what has become known as “prosumers”, or those who consume and produce simultaneously (Kutay & Green, 2013).

Len: This has much more in common with old systems of knowledge transmission where young Noongar and Anangu are encouraged to learn by doing, at the same time having knowledge given to them by the old people while they perform it to others.

Dave: This reminds me of the term kanyirninpa (respectfully passing on knowledge across the generations). How did you do this?

Jen: We worked with many schools, inviting knowledge holders to visit and offer a workshop on some element of Noongar knowledge. Using iPads and laptops we would then have the

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\(^4\) Wikimedia Australia, Inc.® is an independent and charitable organisation, recognised by the Wikimedia Foundation as an official chapter of the global organisation. It seeks to promote involvement in Wikimedia projects and offers open access and participation by all in the collaborative creation of free cultural works in Australia.
kids learn how to become “wikimedians” (those who edit and produce content that then gets uploaded). Finally, as part of their classroom work, the kids were invited to post something they had learned from the earlier session. Often kids would check in with parents, uncles and aunties and grandparents, seeking their advice and input so that extra content could be produced that was specific to family history and knowledge.

**Len:** We also used this process with four different groups of tertiary students and a team of rangers.

One of the consequences of carrying out a research exercise in this way was that Noongarpedia became more than simply research, it also became what Dave you would call a “developmental” project, something that offered a legacy of ongoing benefit to Noongar. Even though technically the research project funding has finished, the work goes on.

**Dave:** How does this work?

**Jen:** It is because we have used a social media platform that has a life of its own after the research. Those that have been introduced to Wikipedia as a tool (and the Noongar version of it we have called “Noongarpedia”) can now continue to use it as a way of making public their knowledge of Noongar. For as long as Wikipedia exists the content that has been posted can stay available to anyone that wants to use it.

**Dave:** So this seems to be a wonderful example of ngapartji ngapartji at work. Built into the project is a system that helps research move away from the old excavation model where the researchers just take from the host community. It provides a great means of reciprocating the gifts that Noongar knowledge holders offer and make public. In a way, it is like a modern version of kanyirrinpa where a research project uses social media as a way to encourage the “holding” and passing of knowledge across the generations.

**Len:** Yes, the idea of gnulla koorliny (going along together) was essential. Without the involvement of older knowledge-holding Noongar, there would be no project. At the same time, young people took on the role of content producers, posting up on the pedia. There were lots of involvement from people in the middle generation who were teacher assistants, parents and of course the research team. These people helped act as interpreters and facilitators of the workshops. The research team was dependent on the involvement of community. We probably could have just posted all of the content that we had researched but that would have limited the amount of content posted, not supported ongoing community use of the pedia, meant that activity on the pedia would have finished when the project finished, and been inconsistent with old Noongar systems of knowledge transmission.

**Jen:** There were some features that are like the malpararra system. Those different groups involved in the project had different skills, different access to knowledge and, in some cases, different roles to play. Most of the older knowledge holders have little skill in using new digital platforms but they have great knowledge of moort (family), boodjar (country), wangkiny (language) and kattitjin (old stories). The kids had little old knowledge of these things but had great interest in and dexterity with social media. The middle group was often terrific at translating.

**Len:** One of the other wonderful things about the project is that the pedia platform allowed us to go along gently, posting a little bit at a time, testing out how things were travelling and giving people from different points of ability time to pick up their skills. For those of us who were nervous about suddenly making Noongar knowledge available publicly, Wikimedia allowed us to experiment with making the site available as an “incubator” so that we could see how it went without making it fully available. Much of the work in schools went along dabakarn dabakarn (steady and slowly), allowing us to wait awhile until those who were uncomfortable caught up and saw what it would look like.
Boordawan (Conclusion)

Jen: We have been asked to talk about ethical practice in research with Indigenous communities in Australia. I can imagine that some people would be expecting us to talk about the history of colonial history and the systematic marginalization of Indigenous communities in research, the importance of researchers decolonizing their minds and reflecting on their values and positions of advantage, or establishing good dialogue and processes of “engagement” that see them regularly consulting with leaders in the communities with whom they work. Others would be looking for a discussion of principals such as social justice, self-worth, self-determination, inclusion and equity (see Nakata, Nakata, Keech, & Bolt, 2012, for a useful discussion of the variety of approaches to thinking about Indigenous research).

Len: Yes, and we could talk about these ideas at some other point. However, the first observation I would make is that for as long as I have been involved in research I have found these ideas difficult to pin down, usually out of reach of many Noongar and Anangu (see Anderson, 1996, for a discussion of the limits of conventional research approaches with Indigenous communities).

What we have tried to do in this chapter is turn to some Noongar and Anangu discourse and concepts that are associated with the business of knowledge exchange. We have started to talk about the place of the following practices: wangkiny boordier (talking and yarning to the bosses), birniny (digging and scratching), kulini (being and listening), ngapartji ngapartji, malpararra, gnulla koorliny (going along together and reciprocating), quop karnya, kanyirninpa (respectfully passing on knowledge) and dabakarn dabakarn, wanyu (steady, steady).

Dave and Jen: Kaya boordawan (yep, that’s right, talk later).

Len: Kaya boordawan.

Biographies

Jennie Buchanan grew up in Noongar boodjar. She trained and practiced as a youth and community worker and has since worked for many Aboriginal community-controlled organisations and a range of universities. She has recently been involved in a project that involves the creation of a Noongarpedia to support Indigenous knowledge and language transmission.

Len Collard is a Wadjuk Balardong Noongar from the south west of Western Australia. He is a Professor of Indigenous Studies at the University of Western Australia and has served on the university human ethics committee. He has carried out research work on Noongar language, place names, culture and knowledge systems. He is presently working on research concerned with Aboriginal men and fathering practice.

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Researching together: Reflections on ethical research in remote Aboriginal communities

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Abstract

Ethical research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is a complex and delicate space. It often juxtaposes Western views of ethical practice with Indigenous worldviews and values. The lead author’s doctoral research project has focused on the expectations, experiences and outcomes of boarding school for remote Aboriginal students, families and communities. This paper presents a thematic analysis of the reflections of the authors on working together on this research as a non-Indigenous researcher and an Aboriginal Community Researcher. Strategies to implement what the authors and literature describe as ethical practice in remote Aboriginal communities are discussed. Implications for future research and lessons learned through this experience are identified.

Introduction

This paper focuses on the ethical implications of working on a research project with remote Aboriginal families and communities. In particular, it explores the key elements believed to have contributed to ethical practice in addressing the past, developing cultural and contextual knowledge and working together as non-Indigenous and Indigenous researchers. The term “Indigenous” will be used interchangeably with “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples” throughout this paper, with no intent to disrespect the diversity and individual identities of the many different peoples and groups across Australia and overseas. Within Australia alone, for example, there are more than 300 distinct Aboriginal “countries” (Jackson-Barrett et al., 2015); however, where previous research has not identified the distinct group, or refers to Indigenous peoples across the world, we have used the term Indigenous. Whenever possible we refer more specifically to Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples or their individual language or cultural groups.

One of the major tensions that occur when approaching research in Indigenous communities is the history of research in the field. As the literature highlights, past research has been a tool of colonisation, and has often been used largely to benefit the researcher and their institution rather than the communities themselves (Gower, 2012; Wilson, 2008). Since colonisation, research surrounding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and contexts has also been marred by practices that researched “on” rather than “with” communities, often excluding their voices or ways of doing and knowing (Martin, 2008; Smith, 1999). Such research has not always necessarily been ill-intended, often arising as a result of concern regarding reducing inequalities between Indigenous peoples and the (predominantly white) non-Indigenous population (Liampittong, 2010). Yet, it is important to consider Indigenous
knowledge in relation to academic research, which continues to colonise, appropriate and marginalise Indigenous knowledge traditions (Christie, 2006). Research most often evolves from funding bodies (government and non-government), universities, or research centres that are dominated by Anglo-Celtic cultural values (Gorman & Toombs, 2009). Universities in particular subscribe to institutional practices of Western and scientific knowledge traditions (Nakata, 2007). An example of these Euro-Western knowledge traditions is that they largely focus on comparing and contrasting, whilst Indigenous knowledge systems tend to look for connection and the relationships between things (Hall, 2014). Translation of knowledge, such as through storytelling, also reflects oral traditions and an epistemological “way of doing things” for many Indigenous cultures (Jackson-Barrett, Price, Stomski, & Walker, 2015). Finding a way to acknowledge and privilege these knowledges and traditions within a research framework is imperative to preventing the perpetuation of damaging research practices with Indigenous people and communities.

Reviewing the above history may cause a non-Indigenous researcher to take pause or reconsider researching with Indigenous peoples, with feelings of guilt or trepidation. However, while one should consider the space and its history very carefully, it is not necessarily useful to simply avoid the uncomfortable, as this leaves space for perpetuating the past. As Herring, Spangaro, Lauw, and McNamara (2013) suggest, “reading the work of Aboriginal writers, attending cultural events, responding to racism, and taking the initiative to engage with Aboriginal colleagues and acquaintances” may be a more productive way forward (p. 112). Furthermore, Indigenous peoples worldwide from Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States (among others) are now pushing back against this history, moving forward and advocating for ownership, control and possession of research in their communities and on or with their peoples (Gower, 2012). As Hall (2014) explains, many Indigenous researchers and academics have also been speaking back to the Academy, rethinking research processes through an Indigenous lens, and strongly acknowledging the consequences of past research practices. Furthermore, while academic research questions traditionally emerge from specific disciplines (Wilson, 2008), recent research explores questions that arise from needs perceived and identified by governing bodies, or from the community themselves (Christie, 2006). Indigenous Australian academics have also proposed decolonising research methodologies such as Indigenist research (research conducted by Indigenous people) (Rigney, 1999), detailing what they believe to be appropriate methods of data collection in Indigenous contexts (Fredericks et al., 2011; Nakata, 2007), and advocating privileging Indigenous peoples, narratives and epistemologies in research (Jackson-Barrett et al., 2015; Smith, 1999).

Methods

Positioning as researchers

The authors of this paper acknowledge that researchers have multiple and varied positions, roles, and identities that are intricately and inextricably embedded in the process and outcomes of their research (Ladson-Billings & Donnor, 2005). Therefore we will briefly identify our positioning as researchers. Tessa is a doctoral research student in the field of Social Psychology, and is of European-Scottish descent. She grew up and lives in Adelaide, on Kaurna country. Lorraine is a Senior Aboriginal Community Researcher, born and raised in Papunya community 240 kilometres north-west of Alice Springs. She identifies as a Pintupi-Luritja Warlpiri woman, and was raised by her grandmother, spending most of her childhood between Papunya and her grandfather’s homeland (Central Mount Wedge), on Warlpiri country. She is a qualified interpreter in Pitjantjatjara, Luritja-Pintupi, and Warlpiri languages. Both authors view education and sharing of knowledge as a positive space that will allow Aboriginal communities and non-Aboriginal peoples to work together with common goals.
The broader research project

The broad aims of the 4-year research project were to explore the expectations, experiences and outcomes of boarding school for remote Aboriginal students, families and communities. In order to investigate these aims, the project employed a qualitative research design, from a Grounded Theory perspective. The flexibility and fluidity of qualitative research provides scope for understanding the meanings, interpretations and subjective experiences of individuals (Liamputtong, 2010). It is deemed a particularly useful approach to allow space for the voices of those who are often silenced, othered or marginalised to be heard, and to present counter-narratives (as described in Critical Race Theory) (Ladson-Billings, 1999; Milner, 2007). The research also used a case study approach of a residential program in South Australia, which is accessed mainly by Anangu (people) from communities across the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) lands. Findings are discussed in several prior and upcoming publications (Benveniste, Dawson, Guenther, Rainbird, & King, 2016; Benveniste, Dawson, & Rainbird, 2015; Benveniste, Guenther, Rainbird, & Dawson, 2016).

The current paper

The current paper explores the reflections of the two authors on working together on the lead author’s doctoral research project. Thematic analysis on the oral and written reflections was conducted to identify the key themes and ethical considerations that arose in the project. These themes are integrated with the literature on ethical practices with Indigenous peoples in an attempt to provide a useful analysis of our individual experiences and how they relate and may be useful to other researchers working with and in remote Aboriginal communities across Australia.

Results

Looking back as the project drew to a close, we (Tessa and Lorraine) reflected on what ethical practice meant to us, and how we approached ethical conduct in the communities that were part of the study. Tessa’s reflections were in written form, and Lorraine provided oral reflections, which were transcribed and integrated with Tessa’s reflections below. Thematic analysis of both of our reflections identified five overarching themes; (1) Addressing the past, (2) Translating formal ethical requirements into practice, (3) Developing cultural and contextual knowledge, (4) Approaching communities, and (5) Working together.

Addressing the past

There is consensus among Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars alike that Indigenous peoples have become the “most researched people in the world” (Gorman & Toombs, 2009; Jackson-Barrett et al., 2015; Martin & Mirraboopa, 2003; Wilson, 2008). Yet, despite countless research papers, academic accolades, interventions, and policy decisions, few tangible benefits of research appear to have been seen in the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Hall, 2014). Over-research in these communities has arguably caused a great deal of mistrust in the research process, and often brings animosity and resistance from many Aboriginal people (Martin, 2008). Fear of exploitation and misrepresentation are also effects of research that have resulted in mistreatment and marginalization from structures and governance or misguided policies (Christie, 2006). The not-so-distant history of research without permission, consultation or involvement of Aboriginal people also plays a large role in this fear (Martin & Mirraboopa, 2003).
As a post-graduate researcher, for me (Tessa), facing the history of research in indigenous contexts has been one of the most difficult parts of the research process. Other than following the guidelines set by the formal ethics committees, I was challenged with the question of how, in a practical sense, can research be turned around and used positively in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island communities? Having come into my studies with the view that research may provide a tool for reflection, a vehicle for communities and families to be heard, a platform for evidence-based practice, and a possibility for new approaches to the boarding space, it has been an ongoing challenge to try to ensure past practice and approaches to research are not perpetuated (knowingly or not) in my own work. While in theory, non-Indigenous researchers may value diversity and acknowledge the importance of social, cultural, economic, geographical and historical contexts, in practice we are still required to navigate “unfamiliar experiences and settings, alternate worldviews, unarticulated assumptions, deeply held values, and the strong but often invisible forces of power and privilege” (Bond & Harrell, 2006, p. 157). While it can be intimidating to read the literature on ethics and research with Indigenous communities in Australia and around the world, it is our belief (as a non-Aboriginal and an Aboriginal researcher working together), that this should not cause non-Indigenous researchers to turn away from the field, but rather should inspire us to work harder to develop new methods and approaches to ensure research is used ethically and with every attempt to provide positive outcomes for communities.

When I (Lorraine) first got into research, I thought it was a fun thing to do. Now, research is different to me; it is about helping Aboriginal people, whether it is in education, health, housing - research is important for those things. I think someone like me having cultural understanding and language helps people in communities to trust research again, because they can see that there are people who do have good intentions to make them count so they can get support. For example, if there isn’t education like a secondary school in community, then they can get that done. If they have a bit of education then they can have a better understanding of those things, in order to advocate for what they want. I owe it to my grandmother because I have the language and the culture for free, I’m forever indebted to her for that, and by getting me to have an education she has given me the ability to be able to work with people like you (non-Aboriginal people) and explain my Aboriginal culture.

When research is dominated or controlled by non-Indigenous researchers, inappropriate research methodologies, which have been invasive and ignorant of the rights of Indigenous people, have abounded (Fredericks et al., 2011; Gower, 2012). Further, when such research is undertaken based on the decision of the researcher or their institution, rather than based on community-driven request or need, it can be disconnected from or irrelevant to the community, excluding them and their agency from the research process. As a consequence, the ownership, interpretation and dissemination of findings are also often controlled by academics, stored in universities and not shared with Indigenous communities (Gower, 2012). Communities are quite used to seeing researchers arrive, do what they feel they need to, and then leave (Wilson, 2008). Thus, it is understandable that research is not always embraced or viewed positively by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island communities.

I (Lorraine) think researchers should also be extremely clear about their intentions with the research. Being clear about what you are doing, why you are there to do the research is very important. With the past histories, research can still be a scary thing in Aboriginal communities. What happened with the Northern Territory Intervention (see Calma, 2007) is still very much in people’s minds. Research in the past has been used to “show” things, or been used to justify policies such as the Intervention. So while communities may be willing to give to you and the research, they are still hesitant to say exactly what they want. Milner (2007) echoes this concern, warning of the dangers that can emerge from research should misinterpretations, misinformation or misrepresentation of individuals, communities and systems occur.
Translating formal ethical requirements into practice

All research involving humans or animals requires approval from research ethics committees prior to the commencement of research activity. Additional to the guidelines provided by the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), individual university ethics committees assess and monitor proposed research activities. In response to past practices, and as the research community move toward working with Indigenous knowledges and worldviews, ethics committees have worked to create guidelines for research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Specific values that the NHMRC identify in particular regarding research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people include spirit and integrity, reciprocity, respect, equality, survival and protection, and responsibility (NHMRC, 2003). Increasingly, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have also become involved in the ethics process (Gower, 2012), establishing local and tailored ethics committees such as Aboriginal Health Research Ethics Committee (AHREC) and the Central Australian Human Research Ethics Committee (CAHREC). As Christie (2006) notes, however, addressing these ethics committees and meeting these requirements can be considered a “necessary evil” in research. Timelines, addressing multiple committees, and working with educational ethics requirements was at times overwhelming, particularly at the early stages of a research degree. However, as I (Tessa) conducted the research and addressed the questions and guidelines provided by these committees, I found a much better appreciation of how “necessary” they are. For example, the questions that the ethics committee posed forced me to dig deeper into my consideration of methodology and the processes which I would follow to mitigate any unforeseen harm to participants.

For me (Lorraine), I am always seeing two types of ethics, Aboriginal ethics, and non-Aboriginal (Western) ethics. Aboriginal ethics involves approaching communities appropriately, making sure I talk to the right people, being clear, understanding that every community is different to your own but still respecting them. Regardless of your work responsibilities, there are other respects you need to show as an Aboriginal person. It is important to let people know who I am and what my background is, to introduce myself properly. Sometimes I have conducted research in communities where I knew people previously (I had worked in those communities before), but when I do research in new communities it is even more important to let them know where I come from and that I speak their local language. When not working on your own country, as an Indigenous researcher you need to connect with any Aboriginal organisations, Land or Sea Councils to establish who the elders are in the country you intend to work. These elders will then guide you in appropriate protocols, approaches and methodologies in which to conduct the research. I also make sure to explain carefully what the researcher wants me to do, and what the Western ethical codes are, like confidentiality, integrity, and respect. I talk to people with respect, and to me speaking language itself is a sign of respect.

While the above institutional procedures for ethical approval are required, and a necessary part of the research process, they could be considered insufficient in guiding ethical research practice in physically remote contexts (Osborne, 2016a). One needs to consider what different worldviews or knowledge systems see as ethical, and how to meet what may be competing requirements. Therefore, as Hall (2014) explains, ethics is not something to be approached on the surface, but something to consider in the way you operate as a researcher, how you value and respect the relationships built through your research, and how to honour these upon completion of the formal research process. Through personal observations over the years of colleagues and other non-Indigenous researchers in this space, it seems there is a common theme of researchers entering the space after years of engagement and experience working in or with remote communities. Not having previously worked in remote communities, I (Tessa) had no prior experience in this field, nor did I have any established relationships. Despite valuing them greatly, it therefore seemed an uphill battle to develop genuine relationships and research that was based on what the community wanted.
Developing cultural and contextual knowledge

Cultural competence is defined by Universities Australia, as cited in Gower (2012, p. 10) as:

The awareness, knowledge, understanding and sensitivity to other cultures combined with a proficiency to interact appropriately with people from those cultures in a way that is congruent with the behaviour and expectations that members of a distinctive culture recognise as appropriate among themselves.

Cultural sensitivity is considered one part of cultural competence. Demonstrating cultural sensitivity (an important aspect of engaging in cross-cultural research) is about gaining an understanding of another person’s culture, beliefs and values and applying these understandings in practical situations (Liamputtong, 2010). The ability to gain and improve cultural sensitivity is made difficult due to the pragmatic considerations of working in very remote Australian communities, particularly the cost of travelling such vast distances to meet with participants (Osborne, 2016b). Much of the process and approach to ethical practice in this research project occurred from Adelaide, rather than being able to spend extensive time in the APY lands. What is often missed in the deeper discussions of ethical practice in remote communities is the practical steps that researchers must take before they can truly understand the concept of ethics. For me (Tessa), living in Adelaide, one of the biggest challenges was to develop relationships, cultural and contextual knowledge of the families and communities in the APY lands. This process occurred well before conducting the semi-structured and narrative interviews across Adelaide and the APY lands communities that formed the data for my research. To gain an understanding of the practical context from afar, I first spent time volunteering at the boarding residence in Adelaide over a period of eighteen months. This time allowed me to familiarise myself with the boarding residence, and to build relationships with staff, students, and some families. It was also my way of following the principle of Ngapartji ngapartji – a Pitjantjatjara term that encompasses the practice of reciprocity and giving back. Concurrently, I was also fortunate enough to attend a Pitjantjatjara language summer school, run by the University of South Australia. During this two-week course, I was not only introduced to the Pitjantjatjara language, but also to several Anangu tutors, who provided guidance on culture and community life. Although this is a language course, rather than specifically a “cultural competency” course, I consider the experience to have been a part of my cultural competence training. Through the initial two-week course, followed by a year of weekly Pitjantjatjara language classes, I was also able to make contact and develop a network with others who had previously or were currently living and working in the communities where I would be carrying out research. Over this time, the research directions became clearer, through conversations with community members, families, past boarding students, and current boarding staff, leading to refining of the broad research questions and allowing me to gain confirmation of their desire for the research to be conducted.

Due to the practical realities of working in very remote Australia, and with limited research resources, finding these ways to connect with community members and learn about Anangu culture from afar was invaluable. It is extremely fortunate that Pitjantjatjara is still a strong language and that Anangu are willing and able to share their language with others – particularly with so many Aboriginal languages having been lost through colonisation. For those who don’t have the opportunity to learn local language, I would suggest that other strategies could be found, relevant to each context, (for example, speaking with local elders or community members in the region within which you research or attending and celebrating local events) to gain an understanding of what is important to the communities you work with, their values, their expectations of research, and their expectations of your interactions.
Approaching communities

Recent discussions have argued against the deficit discourse that often surrounds narratives around Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Much of the deficit narrative stems from government priorities around Closing the Gap – which refers to the reported gaps in health and education measures between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and other Australians (Australian Government, 2017). Part of the issue with this rhetoric is that it sets Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders up as different or “other” in comparison to the rest of the Australian population, or positions them as a “problem” to be fixed. Research has been perpetuating “othering” since colonisation – setting Euro-Western knowledge systems as the norm, or what should be aspired to, and Indigenous knowledge systems as inferior (Wilson, 2008).

I (Lorraine) think that when they are approaching research in Aboriginal communities, researchers should consider a number of things. First, acknowledging that there are cultural differences that may exist. Being open-minded about different cultures, and understanding that language, cultural beliefs, and the place that they live in – their community – is their world. Having said that, you should still approach people as normal – don’t see them as “different” or a “problem” or a “subject”; they are still just people.

Even with a team that included an Indigenous academic, Jackson-Barrett et al. (2015) noted that it can be easy to underestimate the complex navigation between Western research and Indigenous community protocols. However, as Milner (2007) states, actively engaged, thoughtful researchers who are upfront about issues or tensions that can surface around race and culture should not necessarily be excluded from conducting research outside of their own racial or cultural community.

When I (Lorraine) am working with communities I might not know or be familiar with their protocols, being respectful when approaching communities means making sure that what you are doing is culturally appropriate, so you aren’t breaking rules. Some researchers just go in there and do it – they might have an Aboriginal person with them, but that person may not know about culture, how things work or the protocols in that community. You first need to know who the right people are to approach, and go to them to break the ice, otherwise it is upsetting if they don’t know who you are. Sending notices to schools, health clinics, or shops isn’t enough either, you need to visit the community without the research first (so without thinking about or talking about the research), and see how people are with you. If you can, going with someone else who is already researching in the community to see how they are working and conducting their research can help you get an introduction and start to build trust. Approaching communities with respect can be done in two ways: (1) contacting and working through community councils or chairpersons, or (2) working with another Indigenous person who is familiar with the community rules and protocols who can act as a cultural broker. Visiting communities at least twice in one week also allows people to become aware that you are there, and have some time to decide if they would like to participate.

Working together

When I (Tessa) commenced data collection, despite having gained some language skills, and having developed a small network of relationships with APY community members (non-Anangu and Anangu), something was still missing. I was still not confident that this alone would equip me to navigate the local and contextual ethical and practical requirements necessary for this research. I was introduced to Lorraine when she was working with a colleague in one of the communities involved with the research. I observed the enormous value in her language
skills, cultural knowledge, and experience working with communities, and it became clear that working with Lorraine in her capacity as an interpreter and an Aboriginal Community Researcher could greatly enhance the quality and ethical management of this project. It was not a relationship that was established in order to have a “token Indigenous researcher” or to attract funding as Christie (2006) suggests is the case in some research, but a genuine attempt to support participants, the research, and my approach as a researcher in a positive way. Working together allowed me to better understand the cultural considerations I needed to take into account, helped facilitate relationships with participants, and made it easier to develop trust and understanding about the research aims.

Trusting the person you are working with (like me, Lorraine) is important. Clear communication with them, valuing them as a part of the team, and acknowledging their role in your research makes a huge difference. I have always felt that I’ve been included as a part of the research Tessa has done, not just by her including me in presentations, but maintaining an ongoing relationship, asking for my advice, and keeping in touch about where it is up to. It isn’t always possible to include your Aboriginal Community Researcher in presenting or writing, but whenever possible you should. Keeping in mind that what you want to do might have to change when you get to the community, a willingness to learn from and listening carefully to the Aboriginal Community Researcher and allowing for flexibility will improve your chances of achieving a better overall outcome. This trust flows on to being able to maintain an open mind as to how the research evolves. I (Lorraine) have noticed that respectful researchers often have particular personal characteristics. For example, open mindedness, being able to listen, and not being judgemental is really important. Being flexible in your approach to the research and how it should be done helps a lot, but you have to be able to trust that you will still get the result; it just may take a different approach.

The research itself was also improved by working together, with Lorraine guiding me (Tessa) in making the interview questions accessible and easier to interpret for participants. At no stage did this change the meaning of what we were asking, but it allowed questions to be relatable, understood, and more closely aligned to what was being interpreted in Pitjantjatjara. By having Lorraine interpret many of the interviews, participants who were more hesitant or less confident with speaking English (for some, English is their second, third, or fourth language) were able to express themselves and tell their stories in their own language. This allowed the conversation to open up more, and also allowed the participants’ own narrative to be heard.

When you are working with an Aboriginal person who is interpreting (like me, Lorraine), or an Aboriginal Community Researcher, there are some tricks to being able to work smoothly together. With an interpreter, it is important to find a rhythm with each other and to have signals or a system to indicate when to pause for interpretation. For example, certain phrases or sentences will take longer when spoken in Pitjantjatjara than in English, so you need to have a briefing to work out the timing before you conduct interviews or engage with community members. Secondly, being really clear about the role the interpreter or researcher is playing; are they interpreting only, or are they conducting the research? Be extremely clear about what you would like them to do, what you want to do with the research, what outcomes you are looking for, and then talk together to work out how best to deliver that.

In addition to enhancing my experience and knowledge of respectful behaviour in Agangu culture, working with Lorraine also gave me (Tessa) strength and confidence as a researcher. This was particularly important when visiting their country, homes and communities in the APY lands, thus Lorraine’s encouragement, teaching and guidance was a huge support. Furthermore, her local knowledge of the terrain and logistical considerations such as travel on roads in poor weather, or finding accommodation within the communities, allowed the
research to run more smoothly. Knowing when and where cultural events were occurring, such as funerals or men’s ceremonies (which can make certain roads impassable) also prevented us from inappropriately entering communities or areas where we would be imposing upon or at risk of violating cultural protocols. Jackson-Barrett and colleagues (2015) suggest that negotiating appropriate timelines, and remaining aware that communities are not static entities (other situations may arise, taking priority over your research agenda), and being as flexible as possible can help make the research goals and community needs be prioritised accordingly. As Osborne (2016b, p. 70) explains,

*Other cultural events and factors such as funerals, high levels of mobility and reciprocal obligations to family mean that a researcher’s time schedule may not be suitable, even if things have been pre-arranged and confirmed prior to making the trip to the community. Flexibility in this regard is crucial.*

I (Tessa) think what helped Lorraine and I work particularly well together was a joint willingness to learn, feeling that we both had ownership over the process, and patience with the research.

I (Lorraine) am still learning as a researcher, but I don’t think I would have done anything differently. You never really know what will happen in communities, they can surprise you, so I never go in with an expectation of “this is what we will get” or “we won’t be able to get this”. Patience is something I definitely take with me. Being an Aboriginal Community Researcher has made me look at Aboriginal culture differently as well. By doing work and research in those communities, and working with non-Aboriginal researchers, it has added value in the research itself, because it’s not only your research, it is ours, and being a part of a research project, as well, I’m proud of that, the research that I’ve done with you (Tessa), you’ve never said it is “your” research, even though you have done a lot of it, I’ve never felt like I wasn’t a part of it.

Summary and future directions

The negative ramifications of past practices of research in Aboriginal, Torres Strait Island, and Indigenous communities across the world, are widespread. However, contemporary researchers can move forward by developing research that is cognisant of the past, respects Indigenous knowledges and worldviews, and meets the ethical requirements not only of institutions but of the communities involved in their research. While the NHMRC and Aboriginal ethics committees outline key considerations and requirements for ethical practice in remote communities, stories of how to implement these in practice are scarce. This paper contributes to the discussions of ethical practice (forming this special issue) by presenting the reflections of two researchers who worked together on the lead author’s doctoral research project on the role of boarding schools for remote Aboriginal students, families and communities.

Different approaches for different stages of the research were adopted in order to meet what I (Tessa) believed to be ethical practice. Prior to data collection, challenges were presented as to how to gain cultural awareness and build relationships and understanding of the community contexts, when these contexts were more than 1500 kilometres from my research base. To mitigate this challenge I found that attending language classes and volunteering at the boarding residence for an extended period of time built these competencies and developed a network of relationships. When I commenced data collection, however, working with Lorraine as an interpreter and a cultural advisor improved my ability to connect with participants, and allowed me to understand the practical and ethical requirements of working within communities.

Lorraine provided her perspective on ethics as an Aboriginal Community Researcher, suggesting that ethical practice in communities involves approaching the right councils or chairpersons.
before conducting the research, and working with someone who is from the community or knows the appropriate cultural protocols and can act as a cultural broker. She also noted that respecting the person working with you as an integral part of the team is necessary, as well as finding ways to include them at various stages such as when reporting findings at conferences (not just when you are in communities).

In summary, despite limitations as an outsider living at great distance from and with no prior experience working with Anangu communities, efforts were made to counteract these challenges. Others are encouraged to do so, as appropriate to their context. Challenges still exist; however, this paper provides a story of working together and is one example of a contemporary approach to research with remote communities. By no means is it a perfect approach, nor does it consider all aspects of what it means to conduct ethical research. Therefore, as researchers, we need to continue these discussions and be open about how to keep improving our practice and use research to genuinely benefit the communities with whom we work. As my doctoral research is drawing to a close, one of my major focuses has shifted to reporting back to the community on research findings. It is of course important to establish a reporting process with communities prior and during the research, and to make this contextual and relate to the community and their needs, but it is rarely clear how other researchers have achieved this. Future research could therefore identify examples of how this has been done. Furthermore, workshops, symposiums (such as the Knowledge Intersections symposium) and spaces to share ideas and support each other regarding ethical practice in remote research would be beneficial for experienced and inexperienced researchers alike. A national register for Aboriginal Community Researchers (similar to the National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters), training of more Aboriginal Community Researchers, and similar spaces for support and sharing of experiences and resources are also recommendations for the future.
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The dancing trope of cross-cultural language education policy

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Abstract

The language education policy research based on the views of remote Indigenous communities that is the subject of this paper involved a complex metaphoric dance but one centred on the lead of Aboriginal collaborative research participants. The researchers in this dance, fortunately, had enough experience in traditional Aboriginal decision-making processes and so knew the tilts and sways that ensured the emergence of a reliable picture of remote Indigenous knowledge authority. However, as with most Indigenous research, the de-colonisation process and the use of Indigenous research methods hit a misstep when it came to the academy’s ethical procedures and institutional gatekeeping. This almost led to a position from which the research would not recover and from which a contentious but important Indigenous topic on Indigenous language education remained unvoiced.

Introduction

The introduction of the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) in 2007 resulted in a set of sweeping changes to remote communities such as the suspension of their human rights; forced acquisition and management of their assets, land and housing; and income management (Altman & Russell, 2012). This ensured a dramatic reduction in self-determination, school attendance, employment and employment prospects but an increase in violence, suicides and social dysfunction (Altman, 2009; Oldfield, 2016). Soon after, in 2008, the Northern Territory Government introduced a draconian language education policy, Compulsory Teaching in English for the First Four Hours of Each School Day policy (FFHP). This effectively extinguished Indigenous bilingual education in the Northern Territory for a considerable number of years and undermined community–school interactions in remote communities, including the employment of hundreds of Indigenous teachers and assistant teachers (Oldfield, 2016).

It was as a consequence of these developments that we decided to embark on a study that would be qualitative and ethnographic and uncover the views and perspectives of those affected by the FFHP. We also wanted to examine the policy using critical discourse analysis and thereby divulge the operation of power and ideology (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001). What we found was policy text and policy discourse\(^1\) that comprised of metaphors of war, signifying

\(^{1}\) Discourse surrounding the policy: in this case, this comprised 1. a newspaper opinion piece by Marion Scrymgour – the NT Education Minister who introduced the FFHP; 2. a letter from the Office of Julia Gillard, then Federal Minister for Education, in response to a petition to overturn the FFHP; and 3. transcript of the ABC Television Four Corners program interview with Gary Barnes, the Minister who succeeded Marion Scrymgour.
a ‘governing through crime’ approach; language and cultural hierarchy which reflected the cultural capital of the state’s official language, Standard Australian English (Bourdieu, 1991); Indigenous deficit discourse; ‘normalisation’ of the Indigenous population so that they conform to national standards; as well as a neoliberal construal of Indigenous ‘poor choice’ to account for remote Indigenous destitution and academic failure – as opposed to structural inequalities that exist (Oldfield, 2016). Upon analysing 29 community interviews on two communities, we uncovered responses framed in terms of White hegemony, injustice, victimisation, inequality and danger to the well-being, social function of youth and their academic and language outcomes as a consequence of such a policy – all supported by national and international academic evidence (Oldfield, 2016).

Profound as the implication of these results are for Indigenous policy formation and implementation in the Australian landscape, we had considerable obstacles to overcome in order to commence their research at all – ethics approval from western academic institutions. This paper outlines the ‘decolonising’ methodologies instituted in the research process between researchers and research participants and the challenges to protocols, values and ethics that were posed when this was applied to a western academic framework.

The Decolonising Waltz

Historically, Indigenous people in Australia, as elsewhere, have been the subject of disempowering, dehumanising and highly negative research discourse (Shay, 2016). Indeed, Tuck (2009, p. 409) argues that these flawed research approaches have inflicted considerable damage by ensuring Indigenous subjects and communities undergo a subjectivity that “reinforces and re-inscribes a one-dimensional notion of these people as depleted, ruined, and hopeless.” In contrast, and in line with an emerging field of Indigenous methodology, this research project attempted to positively and ethically present the views of community members, their perspectives and priorities. This meant that we had to engage with participants on their own terms and recognise the impact of imperialism. In agreement with Martin and Mirrapoopa (2003), however, both researchers believed that particular western modes of research have their place in Indigenous research, particularly given the context where Indigenous research often occurs – within an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary or ‘both ways’ space. Both Ways research comprises the intersection of western and Indigenous knowledge systems whose practices, although they may echo the academy or Indigenous knowledge systems, in fact go beyond them and are “validated with participants outside the university” (Christie, 2006, p. 81). As such, the research complied with elements of both western and Indigenous research.

The main western strategy of inquiry followed in the field was that of qualitative methodology. The principal methodology employed in this was that of critical ethnography – an interpretivist inquiry that aims to understand human cognition and behaviour from the participants’ perspectives using a social, cultural and historical contextual lens (May, 1997). Underpinning this inquiry is the view that reality is a social and cultural construction (May, 1997). This also includes the researcher(s) as participant(s) (May, 1997). Indeed, the Indigenous researcher consistently wove between the two roles of researcher and participant to produce some of the most insightful data and analysis. In addition, this type of ethnography, being critical, entails the premise that dominant ideology has a major role in “sustaining and perpetuating inequality” as well as hegemonic practices in particular contexts. However, this approach needs to be tempered by an understanding of how the dialectic relationship between human agency and institutional structure determines the degree of individual (or rather, in Indigenous contexts, collective) autonomy or “choice and constraint” (May, 1997, pp. 197, 199).
This understanding occurred with the application of critique that emanated from the use of decolonising methodology (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999) – an Indigenous theory of research that, as with all Indigenous research, has emerged from feminist and critical theory and participatory methodology (Tur, Blanch, & Wilson, 2010). In league with critical theory, decolonising methodology seeks to deconstruct power structures, hegemony and relations in society as well as to seek liberation from these formations (Merriam, 2014). It also seeks to unfold the symbolic violence (the naturalness of existing social order that is reproduced in the “everyday interactions, social practices, institutional processes and dispositions”) that impact on Indigenous communities (Thapar-Björkert, Samelius, & Sanghera, 2016, p. 144). What sets it apart from other critical methodologies is the pre-eminence of the relational and collective Indigenous-centric position, Indigenous voices and epistemologies. This contrasts with research conducted using nation-state ‘norms’ and ‘values’ that invariably lead to a ‘forgetfulness’ and ‘invisibility’ of Indigenous cultures, languages and people as well as a contemporaneous neoliberal rendering of a dysfunctional Indigenous experience devoid of racial inequalities, colonisation and hegemony (Bhabha, 1990; Davis, 2007; Mutua & Swadener, 2004; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). In settler–colonial contexts such as Australia, decolonising methodologies necessarily entails a process of inquiry that uses critical race theory to uncover white hegemony and non-dominant exclusion in knowledge production (Dunbar, 2008). Decolonisation methodologies also incorporates postcolonialism, the perpetuation of colonial structures, ideologies and practices (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999).

Decolonising and Indigenous methodologies, however, also seek emancipation from such practices of domination through a process that includes self-determination. As Tuhiwai Smith (1999) noted, decolonising methodology is concerned with usurping dominant western notions of deficient Indigenous ‘others’ and replacing this with self-determination agendas and Indigenous perspectives. She writes:

> **Self-determination in a research agenda becomes something more than a political goal. It becomes a goal of social justice which is expressed through and across a wide range of psychological, social, cultural and economic terrains. It necessarily involves the processes of transformation, of decolonization, of healing and of mobilization as peoples. The processes, approaches and methodologies – while dynamic and open to different influences and possibilities – are critical elements of a strategic research agenda** (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999, p. 116).

This self-determination aspect of decolonisation in research has formed an important foundation in a decolonisation research progeny – culturally responsive research (CRR) – whose primary principle is the inclusion of community participants “at all stages of research” (Trainer & Ball, 2014, p. 205). This entails the inclusion of culture and community views as well as their needs and interests in principle research standards. Such standards include formulating a research problem, relevancy of research, literature review, theoretical framework, data collection strategies, presentation of findings, analysis and interpretation of findings in addition to the dissemination of findings (Trainer & Ball, 2014).

Tuhiwai Smith (1999) and Foley (2006, p. 25) suggest that this responsiveness must have an emancipation agenda where “research [is] undertaken for the researched” and “Knowledge is retained by and of value to the community being researched.” This necessarily entails Indigenous knowledge acquisition processes and interpretation. Foley (2006) maintains these processes and interpretation are facilitated by the use of Indigenous standpoint theory. Indigenous standpoint theory, he claims, is:
... in the philosophy of the writer's ancestors, which informs the methodology in a science that is possibly tens of thousands of years old. This then provides a context in a logic process that is the multi-dimensioned. (Foley, 2006, p. 29)

In the case of this research, the research from the outset was guided by community members themselves. It was ground-up, arising from “collective public problem” (Hall, 2016, p. 106), and, as a consequence, responsive to Indigenous concerns. It was also responsive to Indigenous protocols and collectivism. Given the fact that one researcher was born and bred in the centre with family and ceremonial ties to the two communities, this researcher was steeped in traditional knowledge, philosophy, ethics, values and Indigenous methodologies that mirrored those of participants. The other researcher had been married to the first for nearly 20 years and had lived in central Australia most of that time so had a relatively strong understanding of Indigenous contexts, belief systems and social collective justice. As such, the researchers could be regarded as ‘insider’ ‘outsider’ researchers, where their western and Indigenous perspectives complemented each other and the western researcher was happy for the Indigenous one to take the lead. In terms of the research process itself, however, while the Indigenous researcher at times became the subject of research, for the non-Indigenous researcher the research position taken reflected that of Glynn (2013, p. 38) – of seeking “a position that is unknowing rather than expert, a position that is responsive to cultural differences, rather than one that marginalises these differences” and recognising white hegemony and the domination of white culture as the primary problem being examined.

The direct link to the research participants also meant that both researchers were known in terms of ancestors, land and relationships to the researched (important factors outlined by Glynn, 2013) either directly or through marriage. This ‘opened doors’ and ensured a rapid data collection phase since little time had to be devoted to developing relationships as they had already been developed or were known (see for instance, Jackson-Barrett, Price, Stomsks & Walker, 2015). This relationship to participants not only guaranteed the researchers had an innate understanding of the “lived experiences and world views” of those involved in the research project (Glynn, 2013, p. 37), it resulted in, as a consequence of cultural obligations, a clear case of what Glynn (2013, p. 36) has described as the decolonising researcher position – a position which aims to engender “collaborative, caring, trusting and close relationships with Indigenous people” to effect the best research outcomes.

In response to cultural and social protocols and obligations, there was also a heavy dependence on the expertise of participants in data gathering and analysis. For instance, only those with the collective authority to speak, and with experience, on issues of education were sought. This meant the identification of important elders (which was done courtesy of the Shire office and key staff working at the school) in one community who were informed of the project, its parameters and goals and asked to participate. The initial participants were then asked for the names of others in the community (snowball interviews). In the other community, the status of the Indigenous researcher meant that they could identify and select known key prominent spokespeople (known intimately by the Indigenous researcher). These participants were also asked to refer the researchers onto others (to reinforce the collective authority of participants).

The qualitative semi-structured interviews also followed Indigenous ‘ways of doing things’ since they were conducted orally (with no pen and paper – items that constitute an anathema to Indigenous ways of information exchange), were ‘on country’, did not conform to rigid western timeframes (no appointments and conducted over a period of many months) and entailed deep ‘listening’ – a “deeply respectful protocol to sit and listen” where, rather than question asking, you watch and wait and “begin to get a sense of awareness of connecting
to the ‘country’ on which you stand and also to the people you have come to ‘yarn’ with” (Jackson-Barrett et al., 2015, p. 41). The interviews also entailed cultural relevance in terms of themes and topics. These factors enhanced reliability and validity since they opened the way for Indigenous participants to take the lead and determine the data collected (Trainer & Ball, 2014). It also led to the inclusion of a number of key Indigenous methodological elements identified by Kovach (2005) such as:

- Experience as a legitimate knowledge base
- Indigenous methodologies of knowledge transmission, such as storytelling, as legitimate research methods
- Relationships as a normal part of the research ‘methodology’
- Collectivity and reciprocity in knowledge sharing and ownership (that is, the research project was equally shared by the researchers and participants).

It was, as noted above, recognised from the outset that participants were participant researchers and had a collective ownership of the material, so the researchers were obligated to the researched to use the project for the collective good as well as ensure participants could check data accuracy and interpretation. The researchers achieved this through a number of site visits to ensure the accuracy of data collection and interpretation which led to a number of important corrections (related to the ‘normativity’ of remote Indigenous life). The researchers also, in consultation with the community, sent and discussed the completed thesis with key Indigenous, legal and government community organisations and people to effect change. Given the fact that the researchers had familial or ceremonial ties to the participants, there was also an obligation to achieve much higher social justice research outcomes since this was linked to the cultural relationship of Ngapartji ngapartji (reciprocal obligations or ‘you give, I give’).

As a consequence of the background of the researchers and their relationship to participants, the processes at this stage of research went relatively smoothly.

A Changed Stage

However, given the “highly problematic” relationships between western colonial powers and Indigenous people as a consequence of the ideologies of social Darwinism and racial and cultural hierarchies, our decolonising waltz hit a misstep when we changed to a western institutional context (Hawkes, Pollock, Judd, Phipps, & Assoulin, 2017, p. 17). As noted above, historically Indigenous people have been heavily researched using western ideologies and frames that reinforce colonial hierarchies and underpinned the moral justification for Indigenous disempowerment and persecution. Although there has been an attempt to address this through ethical guidelines such as the Guidelines on Ethical Matters in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research by the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC, 2003), the rigid implementation of these guidelines using western frames and the “tightly regulated bureaucracies to enforce” these guidelines has resulted in unethical outcomes for Indigenous research (Hawkes et al., 2017, p. 22). Hawkes et al. (2017), have noted the endemic neo-paternalism in the NHMRC and similar frameworks, particularly as it is applied to Indigenous people who are characterised as “vulnerable”. They (2017) also note the conventions of informed consent and reference groups are highly problematic. Hawkes et al. (2017) also argue that institutional management of such ethical frameworks can in fact marginalise Indigenous voices in research.

The NHMRC guidelines (2003) outline six areas of concern for the Indigenous researcher – equality, respect, responsibility, reciprocity, survival and protection. It is mandatory for
research in central Australia to go through the central Australian office for the NHMRC Human Research Ethics Committee and use these guidelines. The following outlines the problems associated with aspects of the western ethical approval process that negatively impacted on this research. These include the NHMRC research approval process (discussed first) and community/institutional organisational approval for research.

Implications of a changed stage

As noted above, it is a requirement for Indigenous research in central Australia to get ethics approval from the NHMRC ethics committee in that region. At the time research was being undertaken for the PhD, this involved the submission of an application form, the National Ethics Application Form, that outlined such things as research aims and objectives, research design (including data analysis and data gathering techniques and instruments, as well as explicit consent and information forms), background and significance of the research and how it conforms to the NHMRC guidelines. The first ethics application we made was rejected by an NHMRC ethics committee due to data gathering instruments – the semi-structured questions asked of participants which the committee regarded as ‘leading’ for Indigenous participants. Given the fact that these questions comprised part of a semi-structured interview and so would not reflect word by word the actual questions asked, both researchers and supervisors were perplexed. The researchers were also perplexed by the failure of the ethics committee to acknowledge Indigenous agency and intellectualism. The rejection of the ethics application as a consequence of ‘leading’ questions appeared to indicate an appraisal of remote people as deficient, easily swayed and with ‘childlike’ comprehension of the importance of Indigenous language and culture. This is to a degree in line with Hawkes et al. (2017), who noted that reference groups formed to monitor research actually undermine the autonomy of Indigenous people by “questioning their ability to make such a decision”. The questions were also written from an understanding of the English language barrier that remote people would experience and so attempted to reduce grammatical and syntactical complexity to enable participants to understand what was being asked (a discourse analysis of these changed and unchanged questions are beyond the scope of this paper). To ensure the research received ethics approval, we restructured the questions so that they conformed to the grammatical and syntactical complexity required by the ethics committee but this in turn made them unusable. That is, we followed what the vast majority of what social researchers do when faced with the NHMRC limitations and effectively “just lie[d]” (Hawkes et al., 2017, p. 28).

Another issue associated with the NHMRC application was the requirement to gather informed consent through written documentation for a context where English literacy was low and agreement is reached verbally. That is, although the NHMRC guidelines stipulate that informed consent should be sensitive to context, culture, laws and codes where data is being gathered, this is not possible given the strictures applied to NHMRC ethics approval processes (Hawkes et al., 2017). Rather, a rigid adherence to neoliberal surveillance and regulation transpires so that the researcher and the participants drown in paper work and convoluted text that fail to ensure either the ethical conduct of research or the establishment of “a base measure of [a] ... consensual relationship” since meaningful agreement in such a context is usually dependent on relationships and “oral consent” (Hawkes et al., 2017; Jackson-Barrett et al., 2015, p. 44). The vast majority of participants in this project could not read the plain language statement in its entirety (despite rigorous attempts to tone down and eradicate the academic discourse). This was due to the Standard Australian language and literacy barriers common in remote Indigenous communities where English is a fourth or fifth language and participants have been highly marginalised from the western education system (see Jackson-Barrett et al., 2015, for a similar vignette). Fortunately, given the status of the researchers in the two
communities, all participants unproblematically signed the consent forms and took the plain language statements after being debriefed by researchers. That is, there was an automatic trust because of the existing relationship of researchers to participants and an acknowledgement that there was a reciprocity of responsibility for the welfare of participants operating in the exchange. As such, the researchers did not experience any of the problems outlined by Judd of outright rejection of consent forms (Hawkes et al., 2017). However, this does not detract from the inappropriateness of this form of consent seeking in such contexts (Jackson-Barrett et al., 2015).

The research ethics approval process also required permission from the NT Department of Education to work in schools in order to interview teachers, students and parents. This required a formal application process that outlined the category of research, conflict of interest, benefit of study, research problem, hypothesis, methodology and instruments and any alignment with NT Department of Education priorities and goals. This application could be submitted concurrently with an NHMRC ethics application or after NHMRC ethics approval. This request was not unexpectedly rejected given the status of the Department of Education as a colonial institution. Its rationale for rejection was on the basis of poor research value (stipulating that its qualitative rather than quantitative nature was the key discrepancy, despite qualitative research being touted as the best method to explore complex issues, which this research attempted to do). It also stated that the research project had no experienced researchers attached, even though the principal supervisor was a United Nations research fellow and research leader and consultant of international renown. It was also the requirement of the research submission process to contact the principals of schools involved. One principal was uninterested in the project which meant that it could not occur at her school while the other was enthusiastic. However, this latter principal was later reprimanded for discussing the project with the researchers despite this being normal protocol.

Given the rejection by the NT Department of Education, to ensure we had approval for the NHMRC ethics process we then had to seek community approval through the Shire Council offices. This presented a dilemma given the status of Shires as disempowering council bodies. In the Northern Territory, local communities had been managed by local councils, which were run and staffed by locals. Many of these councils, apart from fulfilling more than 100 council roles, also had government contracts serviced by independent and community-owned businesses that were staffed and co-owned by local Indigenous community members. In 2008, community councils were merged into much larger Shire Councils and their assets and governance seized by Shires. Shire offices in communities are largely run by non-locals and staffed mainly by non-Indigenous personnel. They also have a much reduced staffing level with no independent, collectively owned businesses. They thus do not represent the local community but rather a colonial power that has undermined both self-determination and the local community socio-economic base in remote areas. Even so, we were fortunate to find one relative working in one office while a sympathetic non-Indigenous manager (who had grown up in the community under the bilingual education system) approved our application in another. That is, we were incredibly lucky.

Reflections on the missteps

Reflecting on the research process led us to examine the major western elements that can hinder Indigenous research – the NHMRC, its guidelines and ethics committees and approval from outside institutions to satisfy the NHMRC approval process. While the NHMRC guidelines attempt to subvert the worst excesses of colonisation, in many respects they appear to reinforce them. Shay (2016) notes that the guidelines themselves are written from a non-
Indigenous perspective. The ‘othering’ that is apparent in the text and the vague allusions to Indigenous research methodologies as a consequence of the guidelines being framed in a non-Indigenous framework means these guidelines are problematically applied to contexts where Indigenous researchers are conducting research or those who have positionalities within a transdisciplinary or cross-cultural space (Shay, 2016). Although this aspect of the ethics process was not explored in this paper, it was noted during the ethics application process. Issues associated with gatekeeping in terms of racial hierarchy, paternalism and lack of cultural intelligence, however, represented the most impactful in terms of our research ethics approval. The gatekeeping function of the NHMRC can be highly paternalistic, geared to the protection of ‘vulnerable’ and, by inference, the hierarchical construction of the colonial ‘child-like’ and primitive Indigenous subject (Bhabha, 2004). In this research, this construction became evident with critiques of data gathering instruments (semi-structured questions) and the implication of potential Indigenous participants as deficient. It was also apparent with the use of informed consent and research explanation guides for research participants that were not appropriate for the literacy and cultural context of the research and could have jeopardised the research process altogether. The rejection of the research by organisations outside of the NHMRC, such as the NT Department of Education refusing our research on the basis of poor research quality, was perhaps more disturbing since it indicated colonial and paternalistic subterfuge of research issues considered important by remote communities.

These rejections, in fact, seem related to the phenomenon noted by Aboriginal researcher Marnee Shay (2016) of the consistent construction of Indigenous subjects as deficient and inferior that transfer to potential research participants, the Indigenous researcher, and, in this case, the Indigenous research project itself, particularly given its overt relationship to Indigenous interests and the threat it posed to colonial ones. The rejection could also have been a manifestation of formal high-level gatekeepers steering research away from sensitive topics (Wanat, 2008). Shay (2016, p. 290), however, describes this rejection of research that “serve(s)... the interests of Indigenous people” as a consequence of the inappropriate and even unsound judgments of gatekeepers who, in a display of a lack of cultural intelligence, have “limited knowledge themselves about Indigenous peoples, cultures, communities and issues” but who are making decision on research conducted by those researchers with specific skills and training in the area of Indigenous research. Shay (2016, p. 289) maintains, in fact, these developments represent a demonstration of “how Whiteness discursively operates to keep Indigenous peoples subordinate thus maintaining the power and privileges that continue to benefit white people and systems”.

Further reflection on the research and the gatekeeping functions of white institutions also led us to consider that the research only achieved ethics clearance because of existing ceremonial and familial relationships as well as the work experience of one researcher on remote communities who had previously dealt extensively with remote community institutions. Our existing relationships with people in these communities meant an automatic entrée but the luck of having an established relationship with one person in the Shire office in one community and the bilingual and remote community experience of the Shire officer in the other community was a major coup and a condition that does not currently exist. Both Shires could easily have rejected our approach, as did the Department of Education, without giving substantiated reasons. This led us to surmise that Indigenous research must be replete with project approval failures as a consequence of the vagarious regulation of institutional gatekeepers and the colonial context in which they operate.

2 Cultural intelligence refers to the metacognitive (reflective) and cognitive (knowledge of norms, protocols, cultural differences) motivational (desire to understand and work in another culture) and behavioural (exhibiting appropriate verbal and non-verbal cues and actions) (Ang, Van Dyne & Tan, 2011).
In relation to this state of play, Shay (2016, p. 280) asks, “how are Aboriginal researchers able to conduct research that is motivated by our agendas, ideas and aspirations in a discipline and context that perpetuates imperialism, racism and exclusion?” Given the role of educational institutions in the creation of a unified national polity with policies and practices that echo current Indigenous policy agendas of ‘normalising’ and mainstreaming Indigenous groups (Howard-Wagner, 2007), Shay (2016) argues their hegemony in terms of gatekeeping makes Indigenous self-determination and the application of Indigenous methodologies near impossible. It would seem that while ethical frameworks and processes associated with organisations such as the NHMRC and government departments were designed to ensure research is ethical and proceeds ethically, the failure to achieve this would suggest that far more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander involvement is required in the creation of ethical frameworks and their implementation through ethics committees, particularly from those communities in which the research is situated.

The gatekeeping function of western institutions was not the only problem of colonial dominance in an Indigenous research space that we faced in the project. The research we embarked upon, to investigate the experiences of remote Indigenous community members in relation to language education policy, while well-executed and conforming to local traditions, had a number of key elements that made it problematically placed in terms of cross-cultural ethics and values. Although the research used a non-positivist research paradigm (and so did not conflict with Indigenous philosophies) and the field work went smoothly and adhered closely to local Indigenous methodological protocols,\(^3\) the Indigenous methodology and the detail of this process was not as fully explored in the eventual thesis as perhaps was warranted. This was due to the constraints of western academic institutions and the need to account for research in terms of western methods. In addition, while the themes generated from content analysis largely arose from grounded theory\(^4\) and so reflected the philosophy of Indigenous participants in addition to the impact of western institutions, the atomistic western mode of analysis (in terms of content analysis and the generation of themes in discourse) necessitated that conversations and stories had to be broken down into separate units. As such, the research was conflicted with contradictory values and analysis, since the atomistic separation of discourse elements created conditions where “the relationship among the pieces of the story are lost” as opposed to learning from the whole story as is the convention in Indigenous contexts (Simonds & Christopher, 2013, p. 2188). This also results in a process of “destroying all the relationships around” the story and extinguishing the identity of those who told their story in the first place (Wilson in Simonds & Christopher, 2013, p. 2189). As more Indigenous research evolves and occurs, and western academic boundaries become more diffuse, this emphasis on western academic research instruments and analysis should evolve to create new instruments and analysis that best serve Indigenous community knowledge and experiences. The fact that this appears to be occurring more rapidly in less dominant tertiary institutions such as Batchelor Institute and Charles Darwin University seems to indicate that the high tier universities require stronger Indigenous research bodies.

**The finale**

This paper outlined the application of Indigenous methodologies in remote Indigenous community field work by one Indigenous and one non-Indigenous researcher – both of whom had extensive cultural and familial ties to participants in two remote Indigenous communities

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3 Similar to those outlined by Simonds and Christopher (2013) in their health research in North American Indigenous communities

4 Grounded theory is generated from data that has a theoretical base of the concept of self being created through symbolic social interaction (Annells, 1996).
involved in the project. The knowledge and experience of both researchers in central Australia meant that Indigenous methodologies were well-known and applied. However, the application of these methodologies in this research project on a language education policy was fraught with a number of difficulties that appeared to relate directly to the dominance of western research practice. Despite the promise of culturally responsive research embedded in notions of decolonising methodologies that was used in this research – that of ground-up research; community participatory research; adhering to the social norms, protocols, values and ethics of the Indigenous communities – there is continued western institutional dominance in research and ethics processes. Even with guidelines such as those of the NHMRC, that specifically address issues of importance to Indigenous research participants, the administration of these guidelines can result in unethical outcomes for research and the marginalisation of Indigenous voices. In terms of this particular project, this manifested most heavily in the institutional gatekeeping by both the ethics body (whose responses to the research suggested colonial neo-paternalist forces at work) and educational institutions (whose rejection of the research indicated colonial oppressive factors at play). As such, the administration of ethical guidelines almost resulted in the project – despite the high interest in it in from Indigenous circles – not occurring at all. In addition, western research methodology and data analysis also appeared to dominate in the reportage of the research. This led the researchers to question whether the elements of narratives and descriptions had been too atomised to sufficiently garner valuable learnings from the “whole story”. These findings would suggest that Australian Indigenous research does have some development milestones to hurdle and that formalised and institutional processes require an overhaul to ensure missteps of colonial domination do not comprise the norm for Australian Indigenous research dance.
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**Different Monsters: Traversing the uneasy dialectic of institutional and relational ethics**

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**Abstract**

This paper presents a comic-strip to tell the story of an experience where we, the researchers, struggled to reconcile our institution’s ethical requirements with the need to build respectful and reciprocal relationships with research participants, the essence of ethical practice. The core images of our comic-strip derive from Wallace and Lovell’s monoprint, “Monstrous Breaches” (Lovell & Wallace, in press). We respond to the artists’ invitation to re-work their monoprint in order to better understand the “monsters” or dangers of our research world. We contend that traversing the spaces between institutional and relational ethics is itself a process that is often fraught with ethical dangers, “monsters” that researchers and institutions often overlook at our peril.

Critical interpretation and analysis of the comic-strip elicits three “monsters” that can be encountered in this space: 1) the deficit model that assigns “vulnerability” to all Aboriginal research participants and the implications of this; 2) the neo-paternalist assumption that participants share the institution’s values and goals, resulting in measures that impinge on rather than protect participants’ needs, and; 3) the friction between an institutional discourse that is built on certainty, replicability, and legalistic concepts of safety in contrast to a relational discourse that recognises uncertainly, responsiveness and interpersonal concepts of safety.
Figure 1. Al and Lisa’s collaged comic strip, ‘Different Monsters’, 2017.

**WE KNEW THERE WOULD BE MONSTERS. DANGEROUS THINGS WE HAD TO LOOK OUT FOR, SO WE COULD TAKE A PATH TO KEEP ALL OF US SAFE.**

**SO WE LISTENED**

**TO THE PEOPLE**

**WE WERE WORKING WITH.**

**THEY HELPED US SEE THE MONSTERS AND SEE THE PATH WE ALL MIGHT TAKE.**

**IT SAW. DIFFERENT MONSTERS**

**AND IT ALSO SAW A DIFFERENT WAY TO KEEP US SAFE.**

**A READY-MADE CHAIN WE HAD TO PUT IN PLACE, TO KEEP THE MONSTERS UNDER CONTROL.**

**BUT THE INSTITUTION...**
WE HAD BEEN BUILDING A DIFFERENT CHAIN. WE WERE BUILDING IT A LINK AT A TIME WITH THE PEOPLE WE WERE WORKING WITH... AS OUR LEARNING TOGETHER DEVELOPED... AS OUR RELATIONSHIPS DEVELOPED.

WE WOULDN'T KNOW WHAT IT WOULD LOOK LIKE. UNTIL IT WAS FINISHED.

WE TRIED TO TALK TO THE INSTITUTION ABOUT THE DIFFERENT MONSTERS WE SAW AND THE DIFFERENT CHAIN WE WERE MAKING. WE TRIED TO TALK TO THE PEOPLE WE WERE WORKING WITH ABOUT THE MONSTERS THE INSTITUTION SAW... AND THE CHAIN IT WANTED US TO MAKE.

IT WAS A DIFFICULT TIME. THINGS BECAME HARD TO SEE. SOMETHING HAPPENED TO THE CHAIN WE HAD BEEN MAKING.

THERE WERE OTHER MONSTERS NOW, ONES WE HADN'T SEEN BEFORE. AND SOMETHING DIED.
Context and Rationale

“Different Monsters” depicts the institutional boundaries and constraints that we experienced during the early stages of an Australian research project, entitled “Different Places, Different Faces: Understanding diverse students’ resilience when moving between home and school cultures”. The project aimed to build an understanding of resilience among culturally diverse students in Australia, identifying the challenges that they encountered, and the resources that they used while negotiating their everyday lives, both at home and at school. Three groups of young people participated in the research: 1) students from a remote Indigenous (Arrernte) school in central Australia, 2) students from a South Australian school with a significant cohort of refugee students, and 3) students from a South Australian school with a high proportion of international students who were living away from their families. To explore concepts of resilience, and how these young people consolidated their educational aspirations at the ‘cultural interface’, we employed visual, arts-based approaches in order to elicit culturally relevant accounts of participants’ home and school lives, creating an authentic and nuanced understanding of their experiences which was respectful of their cultural context, and which could be used to foster the resilience and capacity of these students, and of their families and schools.

We developed the project through ongoing discussion with each of the schools, who had voiced their concerns over the individual and environmental resilience of their students. They wished to understand the challenges that these students faced, as well as provide better support that allowed them to more effectively manage the often-incongruent cultures of school and home. Two of the three schools provided dedicated funding to support the project, with the outcomes being used to develop a range of activities and materials including picture books and teacher-learning resources. We worked collaboratively with school leaders and teachers from each of the schools to create a series of arts-based workshops which offered an engaging and safe environment in which students could explore their resilience by identifying the challenges that they encountered, and the resources that they had used to overcome them. The workshops were co-delivered by a teacher and a member of the research team, with workshops being modified over time according to teacher and researcher insights, as well as the needs of the students.

In designing the project, careful consideration was given to the safeguarding of participants. While the project was intended to provide a collaborative and emancipatory account of resilience among diverse young people, from an ethical perspective, this group of participants possessed a range of potential vulnerabilities, which included their age, gender, cultural background, and experiences as minority groups, immigrants, refugees or asylum seekers (Liebenberg & Ungar, 2009). It is often the case, as Groundwater-Smith, Docket and Bottrell (2015) explain, “The dynamics of gatekeeping may be more intense when children and young people belong to particularly marginalised groups” (p. 80). While this may be the case, our discussions with the school leaders focused on the emancipatory opportunities this research offered, with how it offered their students the opportunity to shape the support and services relevant for them, responding to the work of Theron and Malindi (2010) who note that many vulnerable groups have limited opportunities for input for services directly related to them.

The focus of our research raised additional ethical concerns, as studies on resilience often entail asking participants to explore experiences which some may find challenging or upsetting. Considering these potential risks, we implemented specific safeguarding measures in both the design and implementation of the project that we believed would negate or minimise the risk to participants. After presenting the project to schools and to the university Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC), school leaders were satisfied with the project design and were
keen to proceed, but initial ethical approval was denied by the HREC, which requested further information on the project’s ethical protocols in the Arrernte school setting. In particular, the HREC was concerned with why the project had not established an Aboriginal reference group to ensure that the research would be conducted appropriately in the Arrernte school setting. No such additional information was sought for the other participating schools.

To address this concern, we drafted a solution which minimised any impingement on participants without damaging the integrity of the research design, satisfying the demands of the HREC, and ensuring the project received institutional ethical approval. While a satisfactory outcome was achieved, the administrative ethics process in itself gave rise to feelings of frustration and disillusionment. When we shared this with colleagues who were working in similar contexts, it became evident that such experiences were not uncommon. Researchers who had worked with Indigenous participants on a variety of projects shared stories of how they had often felt hampered or compromised by the demands of administrative ethics, which did not seem to be responsive, relevant or compatible with ethical practices being used in the field.

We were also concerned about our temptation to adopt the measures which had been recommended by the HREC, even though these went against our better judgement, because this would expedite the process of gaining ethical approval, allow us to proceed with the field work, and ensure the schedule that had been negotiated with partnering schools was not delayed. We adapted the research design in line with the HREC request, rather than simply adopting their suggested measures, but the temptation to ignore or dismiss the tensions between the institutional and relational discourses in favour of expediency led the research team to question the ethics of our engagement with the administrative process. How often had research within similar contexts been compromised by the well-intentioned, yet ill-suited, administrative processes that such research had to follow? Reflecting on these experiences, this paper explores the uneasy dialectic between institutional and relational ethics, using the aforementioned project as an example to explore new ways of thinking, and inform future traverses between these two ethical landscapes and discourses.

Methodology

In this paper, we present a collaged comic-strip (Figure 1) as a means of representing and analysing the data produced through our experiences. This format has been selected because of the effectiveness of arts-based methods in addressing complexities such as those of the relationships between institutional and relational discourses. The original artwork from which the collage pieces were drawn itself represents a complex mediation between two discourses, as it is the product of collaboration between an Arrernte artist and elder and her non-Indigenous colleague. Arts-based approaches offer opportunities to see “phenomena in new ways, and to entertain questions about them that might otherwise have been left unsaid” (Barone & Eisner, 1997, p. 96). The use of collage and the associated metaphors direct the viewer in generating meaning by interacting with the work, but ensure that these meanings “are not closed off, but rather open, multiple, suggested and implied” (Leavy, 2015, p. 241). In this embracing of uncertainty, an arts-based approach allows us to step away from dualistic and hierarchical structures when exploring the interfaces between different discourses and cultural practices: instead of looking for solutions to problems of the often-difficult landscape in which institutional and relational ethics can sometimes collide, the arts-based approach we use allows us to envisage the terrain and explore alternate pathways across it.

The comic-strip combines visual and narrative modes of representation, both of which foreground the embodiment of a lived experience and the affective-emotional component of that experience. In juxtaposing words and images, the comic strip creates an intertextual
surface which extends to the relationship between the images in the strip and the text of the analytical writing accompanying it. As Sava and Nuutinen (2003) suggest, images and text co-operate in illustrating one another, uniting to form a hybrid, dialogic state or “third space” that is “strongly experiential, sensory, multi-interpretive, like a fleeting shadow, intuitive and ever changing ... the meeting place as a mixed stream of fluids, as something multi-layered, not known, always to be created anew, as the field of many understandings” (Sava & Nuutinen, 2003, p. 532). The comic-strip presented here operates both as a research product, through which the readers’ analytical and the narrative modes of thinking can be engaged (Bruner, 1986), and as a research process, illustrating the path through which we, as researchers, came to understand this experience, and realise the implications that it has for future practice by researchers and institutions.

Findings and Discussion: Different monsters

We present our findings through interpretation and analysis of the comic-strip. Considering groups of cells portrayed within the comic-strip, this paper draws out the details of our experience, explores the background and implications of this experience with relation to the extant literature, and suggests what future steps could be taken by institutions and researchers to manage the monsters that threaten ethical research practice in diverse settings.

1: Different monsters and the deficit model of “vulnerability”

The monsters in the first cell take many forms: there are bat-like airborne things as well as sea and earth-bound creatures. They are all different sizes, locate themselves in different places and some are quite hard to see against the dark background. The textual “pathways” that navigate between the monsters are not clearly laid out, but rather map as the text progresses from its huddled position to the left of the cell into the space where the monsters are. The second cell presents a marked contrast in its light and space. The wrens here are often seen in central Australia as figures who share information and help people find their way to resources such as water or food and enable survival in a difficult landscape. Their diminutive size obscures the power and importance of what they have to offer. The spaces between them suggest the periods of our quiet listening and the pale background suggests our developing capacity to “see” or further understand the sensitive areas in which we were working as a result of this listening.

It was clear from the outset of the project that we would be entering a landscape of monsters. We wanted to discover and document the ways through which the resilience of culturally diverse young people could be understood and supported and knew our understanding of the monsters, or the ethical dilemmas facing us, was far from complete. In designing our research, we were keen to move beyond a deficit view of resilience, considering the challenges and resources used by young people as ones that were unique to their personal contexts, and not brought about through perceived vulnerability. A central feature of our research design and practice was to “listen deeply” (Wallace & Lovell, 2009, p. 177) to the individuals with whom we were working. This approach is in the spirit and guidelines of the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (NHMRC, 2015) which serve to guard against research practices that impinge on the rights and safety of the people participating, with particular attention to people who, because of their social status, are potentially more vulnerable than others.

Deficit models have justified using these differences or vulnerabilities as a way of explaining resilience, but in doing so often neglect the fact that there are key elements of resilience
Different monsters: Traversing the uneasy dialectic of institutional and relational ethics  | Al Strangeways and Lisa Papatraianou

which are common across all groups and populations. No one group is seen as being more vulnerable than the other; rather, resilience occurs through the same mechanisms in all groups, but is uniquely tied to participants’ individual contexts. As Liebenberg and Ungar (2009) argue, all forms of research need to ensure that the approach used is contextually attuned to the population being studied. In Australia, as well as in Canada, research which involves Aboriginal people must follow specific ethical protocols, which need to be met in addition to the standard institutional ethics required for all research. When working with diverse groups of people, issues of power invariably arise, and these ethical protocols have been established to prevent exploitation or the abuse of power, among both participants and researchers. Our proposed research study included young participants, who in themselves require additional ethical consideration, so we were acutely aware of the need for robust ethical procedures to safeguard participants on the grounds of both their age and their cultural background.

The suitability of existing ethical procedures in this area appears to have been overlooked to date. A review of ethical conduct in research across international settings and ethical bodies found that no distinction was made between young people within diverse settings (Boothroyd, Stiles, & Best, 2009). Furthermore, there are concerns that working with young people from diverse backgrounds can enhance the power differential between participant and researcher. As Liebenberg and Ungar (2009) suggest, “the very nature of the gap between adult researcher and youth participant is accentuated when issues of diversity (class, ability, gender, sexual orientation, race, etc.) are added” (p. 9). In considering these ethical concerns, our emancipatory-generative research design endeavoured to explicitly uphold, enact and embrace the six core values recognised as meaningful to Aboriginal and Islander peoples in all our contexts, those of “reciprocity, respect, equality, responsibility, survival and protection, and spirit and integrity” (National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research, 2007, p. 62). By adhering to these values, symbolised in the acts of listening and learning to see of cell two, we hoped to alleviate ethical concerns, and ensure the research was participatory and contextually attuned to the young people who participated.

The tightly framed image of the institution in cell three consists of straight lines, geometric angles and only a limited number of doorways or windows to connect it to the more fluid shapes of the world around it. Environmental water and wind-like forms butt up against this complex but monolithic structure with little evidence of impact. The monster the institution sees in cell four is very different to those monsters depicted in the opening cell. It seems to be either one monster, or a connected group with a strong family resemblance. Its snake-like scales form regular patterns on its sinuous loops in a continuous and organised design. The regularity of both surface texture and overall shape correspond with the regularity of the shapes that form the institution in the previous cell. This monster, like the institution before, sits firmly in the foreground, dominating the space – even overflowing the cell boundaries, obscuring anything else that might otherwise be seen.

We did not expect there to be such a difference between the monsters we saw and the monster the institution saw. Having ensured our research aligned with the core values set out in the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research, we were somewhat surprised by the HREC’s request that we modify our application to further demonstrate recognition of and response to the heightened vulnerability of participants from the Arrernte school. All three groups of participants seemed to have potential vulnerabilities which were particular to their individual contexts. To position one group as being more vulnerable than another would immediately regress our research to a deficit model of resilience. Responding in this way to the particular damage done by an ugly history of colonising research practices in...
Aboriginal contexts seemed to be a form of colonisation in itself. While we acknowledged that this automatic positioning, or recognition of only a “single monster”, with the National Statement (2007) was likely done in good faith, adopting a deficit model that would define all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as vulnerable immediately dismissed their agency, decision making and choice. As Hawkes, Pollock, Judd, Phipps, and Assoulin (2017, p. 31) note, the classification of all Aboriginal people involved in research as vulnerable ignores intra-cultural diversity and leads to the kind of “misrecognition” that, ironically enough, is warned about in an earlier iteration of the National Health and Medical Research Councils’ Values and Ethics Guidelines itself. As the document states, “to misrecognise or fail to recognise (cultural difference) can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone [or a group] in a false, distorted and reduced model of being” (NHMRC, 2003, p. 3). Hawkes et al. (2017), argue that this form of misrecognition by HRECs can “discourage researchers and communities seeking to challenge an outdated research paradigm that has historically focused on ‘Aboriginal problems’ and could frustrate them in their efforts to contribute to the development of one that promotes Aboriginal-led solutions” (Hawkes et al., 2017, p. 32).

This process of othering, whereby research assigns particular vulnerabilities to an individual or group, is ingrained with outdated, deficit views of resilience, and hampers any prospect of providing authentic, contextually attuned accounts of resilience among diverse people. By removing this predetermination of monolithic vulnerability from our research, we hoped to offer a more accurate representation of the experiences of young people across diverse groups and settings, and in doing so, meet Liebenberg and Ungar’s (2009) criteria for quality research, which need to “…reach across this us-them divide [...] and can no longer be just objectivity, but must also consider authenticity” (p. 9). As part of the emerging strengths-based literature on resilience among diverse groups and populations, our project endeavoured to contribute to this body of research and its capacity to give power back to what were once considered “vulnerable” groups, examining resilience as a function of their context, rather than in relation to a set of deficits and adaptations rooted in white-middle class values.

2: Different chains and neo-paternalist assumptions

The chain in cell five has already been glimpsed in the previous images of the institution and the monster the institution saw. It is very clearly an institutionally owned and crafted chain, one that is intimately bound up in the institution’s idea of the monster, as suggested by the flow between cells four and five. While there is part of a similar chain-like structure in cell 6, this is only one element of the image, which is dominated by the two human figures, who seem to be floating or dancing together amidst a stream of different sized link-like objects. They seem almost to be building the figure that encloses or protects them, perhaps using the chain to keep the monsters away rather than binding the monsters up.

The generative way in which we built the chain, or developed relational ethical safeguards, contrasted starkly with those the institution expected us to develop. The National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (NHMRC, 2015) describes the purpose of HREC’s regulatory roles as ensuring that researchers operate in the “right spirit out of an abiding respect and concern for one’s fellow creatures” (p. 2). In practice, however, it has been argued that these processes act as a way of over-determining the relationships between researchers and Indigenous communities, “forcing a highly bureaucratic procedure onto the research design” (Hawkes et al., 2007, p. 24). There is a distinct mismatch between the intentions of HRECs and the safeguarding processes that they put in place. Despite espousing the need for reciprocity, respect and equality when working with Indigenous communities, the rigidity of
the ethical processes expected by HRECs often transgress such values as respect for other conceptions of consent. As Smith (2012) explains:

*Asking directly for consent to interview can also be interpreted as quite rude behaviour in some cultures. Consent is not so much given for a project or specific set of questions, but for a person, for their credibility. Consent indicates trust and the assumption is that the trust will not only be reciprocated but constantly negotiated – a dynamic relationship rather than a static decision.* (p. 137)

These institutional processes thus risk disempowering the people they intend to protect by “denying them their right to determine for themselves how consent should be given and consultation undertaken” (Hawkes et al., 2017, p. 38).

Although we had described the intercultural collaborative research design process as one that incorporated contributions from teachers, families and students to ensure all parties had a valued, authentic voice, we were asked to include an additional reference group into the research design, or failing that, specify why one was not required. Having already sought the participation and trust of participants, we were acutely aware that we needed to employ processes that did not attempt to speak for the participants. Implementing an Aboriginal reference group in the design would unearth additional concerns around participants’ privacy and confidentially, whereby the reference group would be provided with potentially intimate knowledge of the participant group and community with whom we were working. The ethical processes, or chain, that we had built into our research were designed to respect and actively listen to participants’ needs, and through these, to address the power differentials between the roles and relationships of researchers and participants (Canella & Lincoln, 2011, p. 82). As Denzin and Giardina (2007) argue, listening to participants’ authentic voice acts as a way of decolonizing, honouring and reclaiming indigenous cultural practices (p. 35).

Our approach towards achieving a more participatory research design was to use critical radical ethics, a process that moves away from universal and generalised ethics, towards one that is relational and collaborative (Canella & Lincoln, 2011). Our focus was on process rather than administration, and we built on previous professional relationships between the researchers and the Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff and students that had developed over several years in activities including professional learning workshops, classroom visits and a portraiture exhibition project. Conversations that were significant to the design and conduct of the project occurred in informal and unplanned contexts. In the planning stages of the project, the overall design, as well as the aims and challenges of the research, were determined during ‘Friday after-work drinks’ when the classroom teacher was spending a weekend in Alice Springs. In another example, after an early workshop, one member of the research team had given the class’s Assistant Teacher a lift into town, during which they had discussed how comfortable students were in working with the arts materials, and how Arrernte language could be better integrated into their learning about colour. Discussions about students’ challenges and successes in expressing abstract ideas through non-symbolic shapes were also undertaken with a community elder and a retired teacher during a shared studio session one weekend. Feedback from students before and during the workshops about their interest in the project and the arts processes occurred during recess breaks and before and after school when individuals or groups would approach one of the researchers and ask about “doing more art together”.

While these strategies diverged from the formal group meetings recommended by the HREC, they were used because they specifically aligned with the six core values and principles which are central to research among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities outlined
earlier. Our chain and the chain-making process might not have been as recognisably chain-like as the institution expected, but we were confident in its effectiveness. We used these strategies because they offered us a way to capture the authentic voice of diverse young people from the perspective of their context, actively listening to participants rather than forcing their involvement. Reflecting on research from an Indigenous standpoint, Glesne (2007, in Smith, 2012) summarises “If you want to research us, you can go home. If you have come to accompany us, if you think our struggle is also your struggle, we have plenty of things to talk about” (p. 171).

The intention of our research design was to avoid the neo-paternalist assumption that tends to dominate cultural research and which suggests that participants understand and share the same values and goals as the institution. Working from this assumption, HRECs are free to implement any ethical measures that they see fit, without considering how they may impinge on participants’ needs, as the needs of the institution and the participants are one. Employing dominant neo-paternalist approaches silences diverse and alternate discourses (Liebenberg & Ungar, 2009, pp. 12–13) so we employed strategies to counter such approaches, by actively listening to the needs of participants, and avoiding any measures which artificially spoke for them. By taking a collaborative approach, which involved input from teachers, families and students, we sought to mitigate the inherent power differences between ourselves as researchers, and young people as participants, ensuring that everyone involved in the research had the opportunity to decide on key criteria used within the discussions of resilience. Furthermore, by contextually positioning our research, we intentionally avoided implementing any oppressive methodologies, such as othering, imposing externally determined perceptions of participants’ deficits and vulnerabilities in explaining their resilience. Through this, we hoped to go against the tide of dominant Western research models which “very often attempt to enforce their best fit practices within contexts that they believe they understand” (Liebenberg & Ungar, 2009, p. 11). As Smith maintains, “Indigenous people and other groups in society have frequently been portrayed as the powerless victims of research, which has attributed a variety of deficits or problems to just about everything they do,” with much of such research failing to subsequently improve the conditions of the people being researched (2012, p. 178). Therefore, above all, we wanted our research to use ethical processes that treated participants as active subjects in the construction of their world and ensured that their voices were heard specifically in relation to their historically located context (Liebenberg & Ungar, 2009, p. 13). By creating a “different chain” over the course of the project, we actively worked to promote the values of respect, reciprocity, equality, responsibility, protection and integrity by presenting an exploration of resilience among a contextually specific group of Indigenous young people, rather than a culturally homogenous series of results which could be generalised to reflect the resilience of youth globally or young Indigenous Australians.

3: Other monsters and inter-discourse friction

The grimaces and contortions on the faces in cell eight represent our struggle to communicate authentically and in ways that would be understood by the very different groups. The geometric speech lines emerging from the mouth of the left-hand face reflects the angular rigidities of the institutional discourse; the river-like flow and the small bird emerging from the right-hand face recall the nature of relational discourse: the fluidity and uncertainty of the “different chain” and the importance of listening and learning to see. The rising “tide” of anxious faces seems almost to be swamping these speech lines, however, suggesting that the attempts to talk to the different groups were not completely successful. This image of watery destruction is replaced by one of fire and smoke in the next cell: clarity
and focus are lost in the smoke and the fire seems all consuming, reaching up into
the text, suggestive more of destruction than of regeneration. In contrast is the
quiet poignancy of the final image, starkly positioned against the black background
shared by all the monsters in this strip. The bird at the bottom of the cell is more
dove-like than wren-like, suggestive of hope perhaps or peace between dissonant
groups. The “other monster” we see here is massive, but only marginally glimpsed,
enhancing the reader’s sense of disquiet.

Attempting to address the incongruence between institutional and relational ethics was
a complex challenge and one that we felt we did not successfully meet. In responding to
the HREC’s request to incorporate an Aboriginal reference group into the project, our
counterproposal offered the creation of an “informal reference group”, which would be
comprised of the elders, teachers and family members that we had already been talking to
about the project. While this offered an easier route than arguing against the HREC’s decision
and attempting to convince them that a “reference group” was not an appropriate overlay
onto the research design, it posed a dilemma for the research team of whether to stick with
what they believed was right, or to adopt the HREC’s measures for the sake of expediency.
In seeking opinions from the research participant community, we asked three individuals who
had been working with us on the project for permission to name them as members of the
informal reference group. Reassurances were made that this would not involve any additional
layers of administration, and that their participation would continue on as before. The three
individuals were bemused by this request; as one responded, “We wouldn’t be doing this if I
thought it was a bad idea.” All three appeared to be resigned to the situation that the institution
would, with good intentions, impose its own named protocols onto the research, and that both
they and the researchers would inevitably be required to work around them. While this was a
workable solution, as researchers we felt as if we’d betrayed a certain level of trust that had
been generated during the collaborative generation of the project. We had let “our” institution
impose itself on our research relationships in a way that was clumsy and incomprehensible,
fail to protect the participants from the administrative processes they did not value, and
demonstrating a lack of understanding between us and our institution, and a lack of agency or
power on our part in our dealings with the institution.

This experience of “trying to talk” in good faith but in different ways to different groups
demonstrates the friction that results when an institutional discourse – which is built upon
certainty, replicability, and legalistic concepts of safety – interacts with a relational discourse
– which values uncertainty, responsiveness and relational concepts of safety. While HREC
restrictions are well-intentioned and designed to safeguard the wellbeing of all participants,
there must be protocols for deviating from such restrictions where research works towards
supporting the needs of local cultures and actively attempts to minimise the burden on
participants. One such protocol might, as Boothroyd et al. (2009) suggest determine the
reason for deviation:

As a general rule, a strategy’s being more convenient, cheaper, or easier is
typically not a good enough reason to deviate from the recommended guidelines.
In contrast, adapting procedures to better conform to local cultural norms or to
minimize participant burden provides a more compelling rationale for departing
from preferred standards is working to support the needs. (p. 28)

Where research is cognisant and contextually attuned to local cultural norms, ethical procedures
should be modifiable in order to return strength and power to the community being studied.
These practices need to be built around a backdrop of collaboration and reciprocity between
researchers and participants. As researchers, we need to adhere to ethical obligations at all
times, and we need to do this in a way that is sensitive and flexible to the considerations of the participants (Liebenberg & Ungar, 2009). Such obligations also extend to an increased accountability for our research, translating our findings into appropriate programs and policies which can benefit the local community. One difficulty this poses is retaining “objectivity” within the research, balancing the moral obligation to ensure that the research is both appropriate and ethically sound with adherence to standards of authenticity, reliability and validity. Reflective process can be used to achieve this, by continually reviewing outcome data, and assessing the direction and authenticity of the research throughout the duration of the project (Liebenberg & Ungar, 2009, p. 18). Imposing procedures that are incongruent with participants’ individual context serves both to erode relational trust and to undermine the authenticity of the research. We need to engage in ethical processes that are designed to honour the strengths of the community being studied. Writing about resilience research, Liebenberg and Ungar (2009) argue that future research must seek “innovation in methodology and creating dialogue across research paradigms in order to find new ways of answering difficult questions. In this process we will transform what we define as ethical research when studying resilience” (p. 18).

Something happened to the relational ethics we were building when we overlayed the “informal focus group,” and something died, for the researchers, if not for the participants, as a result of this experience. Just as we felt the participants lost a measure of trust in us as co-inquirers, so we too lost trust in the capacity of the administrative process to offer a path that respected both the institutional need for clear, replicable and legally sound protections and the needs for such protections to be respectful of participants’ differing values and goals. While we observed the HREC’s measures, we found ourselves shifted into the “…perpetuation or maintenance of inquirer-orientated power (as savior, decolonizer, or one that would empower)” (Canella & Lincoln, 2011, p. 82). This paper is, however, an endeavour to engage in what Boothroyd et al. (2009) describe as “moral progress [our italics] by acknowledging our ethical obligations and adhering to sensitive and flexible protocols that take into consideration the nation, tribe, culture and values of the targeted group” (p. 67). While we felt we were not successful in meeting the challenge of “moral progress” when traversing the dialectic between institutional and relational ethics during the project, we have used this paper to maintain our reflective processes, not only during but after our work with the projects’ participants, as part of the broader imperative to continually review, adjust and assess our research approaches with diverse youth to ensure they are ethically sound and culturally appropriate (Boothroyd et al., 2009).

Conclusion: Keeping us all safe from the other monsters

We as researchers need to position ourselves to guard against our potentially deficit view of administrative ethics. We need to recognise the friction between administrative and relational ethics, while potentially destructive, can generate ethical practices that are more robust and authentic. The chain can be tempered or strengthened from its exposure to the fire. Researchers need to keep “talking to the institution” and extend our practice of ethical relational practices to them by building relationships with HRECs. As Smith (2012) asserts, “… researchers who choose to research in the margins are at risk of being marginalized themselves in their careers and workplaces. One strategy for overcoming this predicament is to ‘embrace’ the work and commit to building a career from that place” (p. 213). In order to embrace our work at the margins, we need to create a parallel practice that reflects the relational ethics of our interaction with research participants, and continually engage in discourses that nurture the spirit of resilience, critical engagement, and cultural sensitivity. As Smith (2012) maintains;

*Cultures are created and reshaped; people who are often seen by the mainstream as dangerous, unruly, disrespectful of the status quo and distrustful of established*
institutions are also innovative in such conditions; they are able to design their own solutions, they challenge research and society to find the right solutions. Researchers who work in the margins need research strategies that enable them to survive, to do good research, to be active in building community capacities, to maintain their integrity, manage community expectations of them and mediate their different relationships (p. 213).

Researchers need to increasingly grasp their own agency in their relationships with the institutions to create the necessary dialectic to respectfully challenge HREC’s assumptions and ossified practices. As Liebenberg and Ungar (2009) assert, we need to create “…dialogue across research paradigms in order to find new ways of answering difficult questions” (p. 19).

While HREC’s ethical processes are largely concerned with unequal power relationships between the researchers and participants, little attention has been given to the unequal power relationship between HRECs and researchers, and its potential dangers. HRECs need to consider modifying their legalistic and inflexible processes to better recognise and value the social and cultural practices of diverse groups, and the individual agency of researchers and research participants. By developing the capacity to “listen deeply” (Wallace & Lovell, 2009, p. 177) to researchers, participants and communities, HRECs could more genuinely address unequal power relationships by incorporating the voices of researchers and participants to inform ethical process. Just as researchers need to “listen deeply” to participants, so too do institutions need to “listen deeply” to researchers.

Extending the six core values of the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (NHMRC, 2015) to guide the relationships between researchers and HRECs, just as they guide those between participants and researchers, will allow us to progress from dominant western models of thought that enforce oppressive research methods to embrace inclusion. There is no on-size-fits all approach to navigating the complex landscape of ethical processes that suits the purposes and goals of researchers, participants and institutions. This complex space reflects what Spiro, Coulson, Feltovich and Anderson (1989, p. 1) describe as an “ill-structured domain”, a difficult space in which to operate when there are no consistent patterns of application to follow. There are risks to applying a rules-based approach that neglects the value of context dependent-knowledge to inform decision making (Flyvbjerg, 2004). Overreliance on a rules-based approach risks neglecting to build the kinds of context-dependent knowledge that are central to responsive decision making in ever different contexts.

Navigating this complex landscape requires a new lens through which to recognise and address its challenges. A resilience perspective would offer researchers and HRECs opportunities for the building of resources to address the ethical relational challenges discussed in this paper. Through our research, we retain that “the study of resilience has the potential to do things differently” (Liebenberg & Ungar, 2009, p. 9) in this space. Ungar (2012) describes the potential for growth in resilience as “morphogenesis” (p. 13), moving forward to a new state of practice, rather than simply recovering from challenging experiences. Such an approach aligns with Rutter (2012) who maintains, “Good physical health is not fostered by avoiding all contact with infectious agents. Rather it is fostered by encountering such agents and dealing with them successfully” (p. 36). Therefore, in order to focus on addressing challenges in this space, we must recognise the value of difficult experiences, such as those described in this paper, in order to develop resilience and therefore growth in our ethical processes. This perspective offers researchers, institutions and participants an optimistic direction in which we can proceed, and a vision of collaboratively identified pathways and resources that will enable us to all successfully traverse the ill-structured domain of ethical practice.
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Research for social impact and the contra-ethic of national frameworks

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Keywords: ethics, procedure, iteration, remoteness, social impact, Arrernte

Abstract

Iteration is a factor of the human research ethical clearance through which research and evaluation with humans is undertaken in Australia. In remote community research contexts, iteration has helped us to redress some features of the cultural dissonance that occurs between western and Aboriginal research paradigms and between remote and urban contexts. Without a commensurate ethic of feedback between national programs and remote research settings, the uptake or non-uptake of findings from short-term or rapid-contract research often remain a mystery. The proposition this paper puts forward is for a post-research process whereby research commissioners and administrators provide feedback as to the uptake or not of research findings. This would produce a meta-data, as well as make accessible the rationale for research findings being accepted or rejected. The meta-data would provide baselines for further research, an ongoing record of areas of research and neglect, and assist in the uptake of research knowledge useful at a community level. However, this proposition would require non-partisan support which is highly unlikely to be realised in the current political climate.

Human Research Ethics: Protocols, procedures and practices

Despite being intensely researched, remote Aboriginal community residents’ outcomes for health, education, employment, wellbeing and safety fall below the set targets of Australian governments (Australian Government, 2016; Limerick et al., 2014). Evidently, research and evaluation contribute knowledge for the governance and provision of public services, but what knowledge, and how and why, is unclear. There is no formal requirement or system of feedback from research commissioners to research institutions, researchers or community research partners. With so much information and knowledge being produced, what else can human research ethical protocols contribute towards improving remote Aboriginal community outcomes?

All research undertaken in Australia that includes people requires an ethical clearance, which is managed through a university or a government department. A human research ethics committee (HREC) grants a research project clearance when adequate ethical processes and oversight for the research are accepted by the committee. Procedural ethics and ethical practice together describe the process of ethical research and the terms are commonly understood as iteratively linked (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). A principal of human research ethics is that research contribute to knowledge that achieves a greater social good. Producing findings through remote Aboriginal community research and evaluation is not enough, despite community-level priorities and the direct benefits of employment, participation and income from community research contract work. The social context of the current policy era has
been described as “governance by program” (Sulkunen, 2008, p. 75). An era in which policy increasingly frames public services such as welfare as programs, such as active welfare, shaping the relationship between the participant and the state as a contract (Whiteford, 2015). In such an era, if the ethic of social good is to be retained as an ethical principle then recommendations from Aboriginal community research about remote services must inform policy and program designs, and the rationale of such evidence-based policy determination made transparent.

Australian Aboriginal people have been the most researched group on the continent to date (Martin & Mirraboopa, 2003) and human research ethical protocols have been further adapted from those developed alongside medical advances that used western and medical scientific models. Since the 1990s several reviews have sought to strengthen Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ethical research protocols (Dunbar & Scrimgeour, 2017). The result is that all research which includes Aboriginal participation requires a high-level, formal, ethical clearance in a process which is reviewed by an Indigenous HREC sub-committee, to ensure that Indigenous ethical concerns reflected in the national framework are addressed within the research design (Dunbar & Scrimgeour, 2017). The national ethical protocols seek to redress cultural dissonance in relation to the Aboriginal health sector (Dunbar & Scrimgeour, 2017; Martin & Mirraboopa, 2003), educational sector (Nakata, 2007; Nakata, Nakata, Keech, & Bolt, 2012), and in the legal interpretation of cultural and intellectual property (Janke, Pitt, & Herborn, 2013; Orr et al., 2009).

The process of Aboriginal community research in remote settings relies on navigating intersectional power structures and cultural dissonances to undertake practicable and ethical studies. As Kelly et al. (2012) have also observed, research embedded in Aboriginal community participation faces an additional disjunction between what local ethical research entails and the requirements of the contracting clients or other stakeholders that manage, commission or fund the research within the relevant national frameworks for ethics and policy. Considering the diversity between remote settings, there is scope for ethical protocols that further redress cultural dissonance through research partnerships at the community level. At this level research is likely to encounter culturally distinct and fine-grained diversity within community settings as well as between them. The national ethical protocols are intended to maintain the rights of Aboriginal people to self-determine and to project their community and cultural values; but within them, the distinctions of language, culture and geography and the politics of identity are often indiscernible within settings or between them. This reduces the likelihood of the intended values, such as self-determination, being preserved through the national framework. Unless time and money is available for the necessary discussion towards a better understanding of how the research will include and represent a community’s value of, and priorities for, self-determination, community level data is unlikely to result in community priority outcomes for local services.

One benefit of Indigenous research knowledge and ethical protocols for non-Indigenous co-researchers is as a process through which the researcher comes to better understand her own involvement with research among collaborators who have an Aboriginal cultural knowledge base, and how this intersects with the espoused and practical human ethical research values.¹ Field research of remote public service provision with remote community participation is a conduit of information and knowledge about intersectionality, and it highlights the cultural and geographic dissonance that is implicit within the implementation of national frameworks in contemporary remote Aboriginal societies (Austin-Broos, 2001).

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¹ For more detail about the Indigenous values and ethics requirements for ethical research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people see Dunbar and Scrimgeour (2017, pp. 64–65); the National Statement (2003, pp. 69–71); and AIATIS Guidelines, (2012, pp. 4–18).
At the national level, the ethical academic research process is designed so that practice and procedure will ideally inform one another (Guillemin et al., 2016). This iteration of practice, method and procedure is inherent in the design of the human research ethical clearance process. For some research participants, discussing the core values specific to Aboriginal ethical research protocols in the process of obtaining their informed consent was found to be extremely important. In a longitudinal study those conversations shaped the Informed Consent instruments over time and increased the participation rate in health research described (Dunbar & Scrimgeour, 2017; Guillemin et al., 2016). But does the imposition of the national framework also reduce the ways that local communities can become engaged in shaping their own ethical research? In another setting and a different research context, the point at which informed consent occurs between Aboriginal participants and co-researchers is less methodically and procedurally reached; in fact the recommended use of the protocol for informed consent can disrupt the research. Paperwork, signatures and formalised records of meetings between outsiders and community elders seldom foster trust, collaboration or participation in remote contexts unless there is a significantly well established relationship (Judd, 2017). There is a point along the trajectory of participation when inter-personal and inter-cultural understandings of one another’s roles and of the potential and intent of the work is established, through which the local priorities for the research are determined and “owned” (Lovell, Armstrong, Inkamala, Lechleitner, & Fisher, 2012).

Participatory Action Research (PAR) (Wadsworth, 2011) is a method of community- and action-driven research which theoretically seeks to broker mechanisms that result in community-level engagement and change. In two cases of remote Aboriginal community research (Lovell, 2017; Lovell et al., 2012) conversational dialogue formed a core function of the research team. With iterative processes embedded into the methodology, the research findings and recommendations could identify and disclose local priorities for safety and wellbeing. The uptake of findings is a mystery: a service provider will have a different rationale than a community member for wanting outcomes; a stakeholder will have a different timeframe and impulse for investing or not in recommendations. Those differences should not be enough to prevent disclosure back to the researchers and community involved.

Not all research undertaken in remote Aboriginal communities occurs with timelines or budgets that can support discussion and dialogue, and much of what has been undertaken in relation to public service program implementation is undertaken in short-term consulting and contract research, or through equally short-term and post-hoc evaluation contracts. Governments’ research agendas most directly influence the funding and delivery of services in many central Australian Aboriginal communities. In those scenarios, the timelines for formal ethical clearance are difficult to navigate (6–8 weeks) and certainly can’t afford to foster an iterative process at the community level. Yet, contract research is one of the primary conduits of information between remote communities and far distant policy makers. In other words, research that has the least claims to be ethically sound and legitimate (it is short-term, lacks capacity to achieve community engagement or social good outcomes, is poorly funded) has the most significant capacity to impact on and help determine territory, state and federal policy agendas.

The first principle of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) guidelines speaks to “recognition of the diversity and uniquenness of peoples, as well as of

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2 It is in the spirit of the AIATSIS guidelines that, where research includes Aboriginal people, by extension it includes their communities, custodial lands, belief systems, intellectual property, material and intangible heritage and expression – artefacts, activities and languages – and, in addition, the structures through which people engage their cultures, customs and traditions, and other cultures. The National Statement requires researchers to consider 6 core values regarding engaging Aboriginal people in research. These are: reciprocity, respect, equality, responsibility, survival and protection, and spirit and integrity, and their consideration must be described in a human research ethics application.
individuals” (AIATSIS, 2012, p. 4). The guidelines are quite specific that, when research findings are extrapolated from one located or cultural group, they are not generalised to apply to all other Aboriginal peoples or communities. Yet, the program framework of social governance disregards the community-level preference or priority, applying the national guidelines only to the act of research, not to the ethical uptake of the knowledge or outcomes of the research process. This is a strong rationale for undertaking co-research with Aboriginal researchers at the community level as well as in institutional academic contexts. It is not evident at which point in the framework of social governance by program that ethical guidelines are replaced with policy guidelines, but it remains evident that policy guidelines retain cultural dissonance within their implementation pathways.

At an institutional level, the aim of redressing cultural dissonance in ethical research and evaluation has been approached by developing specific national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ethical protocols. Aboriginal community research of remote public service delivery is a conduit of information and knowledge about cultural intersections as they operate in remote settings. This conduit highlights the cultural and geographic dissonance that is implicit within the governance by program frameworks that regulate the delivery of those services in those settings. It is implicit in the process of ethical Aboriginal community research that intersectional power structures, their cultural dissonances, and their influence on service delivery will emerge. Two research case studies follow which underline how structural aspects of such dissonance play out in such settings, meanwhile overwhelming local priorities and capacity.

**Arrernte community research cases**

Ntaria (Hermannsburg) has attracted government funding for programs, program evaluation and research through consecutive Closing the Gap (CTG) policies since 2008. Ltyentye Apurte (Santa Teresa) was largely without extra Closing the Gap program initiatives until 2015. Ntaria was a nominated Growth Town (Northern Territory Government, 2009–2012) and a Remote Operational Centre (Australian Government, 2009–2012). Ltyentye Apurte was given neither status. Changes to the Local Government Act in 2008 saw both communities’ transition from local Aboriginal Community Government Authorities into operational centres of the MacDonnell Shire Council. The 2016 Australian Bureau of Statistics Census recorded that Ntaria had a population of approximately 533 people (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016a), who reside in the community and at 20 homelands in the five Arrernte estates that make up the land trust. Ltyentye Apurte had a population of 502 people (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016b), with two homelands; one inside and one outside the Santa Teresa Land Trust. Ntaria is located along a highly promoted and sealed tourist route between Uluru and Alice Springs; Ltyentye Apurte is located along the Binns track, a lesser travelled tourist four-wheel drive track networking from Western Australia through to Queensland. Both communities are within 1.5 hours drive of Alice Springs.

The average educational attainment and the percentage of people employed full or part time as recorded by the 2016 census are slightly higher at Ltyentye Apurte than at Ntaria, and the median age at Ltyentye Apurte (23) is younger than at Ntaria (28). Household median weekly income at Ltyentye Apurte was $878, with an average household of 4.9 people; at Ntaria the household median weekly income was $778, with an average household of 4.6 people. The high-level census data do not reveal any gains in employment or education in the community in which the major government policy and funding investment has occurred (Ntaria). It may be that retrospectively Ntaria was further behind with services and participation than Ltyentye Apurte and has since caught up through the higher levels of CTG programming. Yet the same high-level statistics from the 2006 census, a pre CTG era census, does not support that
Conclusion. In 2006 the median age at Ntaria was slightly younger (19) than at Ltyentye Apurte (21). Household median income at Ntaria was $900, with an average household of 7.1 people; at Ltyentye Apurte the median income was $559 in a household of 5.3 people. The equivalence of income per person in household is slightly higher for Ntaria ($127) than for Ltyentye Apurte ($113). Levels of educational participation in those 15 to 19 years is close to the same in both places. Income in both communities has increased between 2006 and 2016 to within $10 of one another (per person/per household) with the increase having just kept up with inflation at Ntaria, while returning a slight real increase in Ltyentye Apurte. The primary difference over the ten years of CTG program governance in these communities was the reduced overcrowding at Ntaria, where new houses were built. Some houses at Ltyentye Apurte were renovated in that same period.

Ntaria

From 2010 to 2012 the Australian Government, through the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FHCSIA) commissioned participatory action research to evaluate local community governance of remote service delivery in several remote communities, including Ntaria (Hermannsburg). Through the Remote Operational Centre (ROC) and Growth Town policies of Australian and Northern Territory governments, Ntaria received focused investment in programs. Through the Closing the Gap policy (Australian Government, 2016), funds were targeted to transform Ntaria into a “town” and to accelerate the provision of services in its wider region. Under this ROC model, a Local Implementation Plan (LIP) listed the community service delivery priorities, the actions, and the service provider responsibilities for each outcome. The LIP required a Local Advisory Board (Wurla Nyinta) through which the community was to contribute to improve service coordination and delivery, and in some cases to represent themselves (the community) as the lead agency in actions.

Unlike the service agencies, Wurla Nyinta was without a service agreement or any resources to drive its actions. It was without constituted powers to negotiate beyond its community and advisory capacity, and had no access to participate in decision-making beyond the community level. Despite this, Wurla Nyinta retained local elders, youth representatives and others in a voluntary capacity (FHCSIA, 2011). Wurla Nyinta was named as lead organisation for getting children to go to school and pregnant mothers to attend clinics, to reduce smoking across the community, increase adult work attendance and improve community safety (FHCSIA, 2011).

In 2010 the local community research project, Strengthening Community Research for Remote Service Delivery, was commissioned to research the implementation of LIP priorities and service delivery at Ntaria. The aims of the research contract were threefold: to focus on what and how the priorities of the community could be served through the Ntaria Local Implementation Plan (FHCSIA, 2011); to employ and train Arrernte in a participatory action research method; and to evaluate the Remote Service Delivery implementation in Ntaria. The third aim, the local evaluation of coordinated service delivery, was rescinded by the Federal department almost before signatures dried on the contract. The work required for the first two outcomes was undertaken with a research ethical clearance from the Central Australian Human Research Ethics Committee (Flinders University in Adelaide).

The community research team identified that safe/unsafe use of vehicles, driver disqualification, drink driving and driver training at Ntaria was the most important and relevant priority to inquire about. Their rationale was that too many of their family members were in jail for preventable vehicle-related offences. A number of those offences appeared to be unavoidable given no local mechanical and repair services, despite two provisioned garage facilities in the community. In addition, members of the community had lost their lives through driving accidents related
to speed and alcohol. The idea of a safe-driving survey tested positively with services such as health, education, police and employment brokers. The topic was relevant to CTG targets for health, economic participation, safe communities, governance, leadership and increasing the life expectancy of Aboriginal people. In other words, the research priority aligned to the Closing the Gap social governance by program framework. The Local Implementation Plan (Lovell et al., p.33, 2011) included safe driving actions as a community-led outcome:

- Less people die on the roads. In-community road safety driver training programs are provided. Ntaria community members learn safe driving practices, access driver training and acquire drivers’ licences.

The research found lack of opportunity to improve, repair or maintain vehicles contributed to many preventable vehicle-related charges as the nearest service was 130 kilometres away from community. The report recommended a strategic planning process to outline how many CTG targets a local garage facility would contribute to, and to assess where the means to develop it would come from. The garage proposal linked with LIP priorities to support adult training outcomes, employment, local business development, youth diversion and community service orders, men’s programs, Job Service Providers services and support, driver licence training, tourism, and preventative driver training programs for young people. At the time of writing in 2018, a visiting mechanic provides some maintenance of vehicles at one of the garage facilities every couple of weeks.

As a point of procedural ethics, some feedback back from the research commissioners (the Federal Government) with a rationale for why such a core infrastructure was or was not a priority was expected. In the face of ongoing and preventable incarceration of members of the community, and the investment of public funds in a burgeoning tourist trail running past the community, a mechanical service which was publicly accessible in a region with no competition from other such services seems like an economically viable proposition. Certainly, the impact of the situation on community health, wellbeing and safety should prompt questions of governmental process about the lack of equity, and possibly unethical disregard.

**Ltyentye Apurte**

Questions for research about social enterprise and community bush-medicine making came to attention at Ltyentye Apurte in 2017. A process for Participatory Action Research (PAR) co-research was devised to map ways that customary values and the everyday use of native plant traditions intersected with aspirations of social enterprise. Women particularly were interested in community health and wellbeing outcomes, and some wanted to explore the relationship of the customary activities of bush medicine to a contemporary business activity. The research was undertaken with an ethical clearance from Charles Darwin University Human Research Ethics Committee. The researchers assessed the infrastructures available in the community – possible sales points, vehicles to access plants for harvesting, and a place to produce pots of bush balm which entrepreneurs would require if developing a business model. In the process of investigating whether a supply chain could be established, and what resources were needed or available, different views of purpose, intent and value began to emerge.

Finding a common ground between the remote customary health ecology, community employment and active welfare programs, the economic flow-on from social enterprise, and determining a market’s value chain is not straightforward. While the academy’s ethics protocol operates as a guiding proposition, the practical activity and potential commercial outcomes from this project are being determined under ethical propositions that are driven and explored at the community/family level; at the enterprise/community level; and in some ways, at the level
Research for social impact and the contra-ethic of national frameworks

of active welfare and governance by program. Without being a defined community program, but being open to the economics of a supply chain, social enterprises outcomes meet some, but not all, of the aims that wild harvesters of native plants seek.

The relationship between customary assets – including the knowledge and plant materials used in bush-balm making – and access to niche cosmetics markets provide examples of the complexity of contemporary tradition. An initial poll found a range of different views about local production, knowledge sharing and dissemination of commercial products. These included how such products are given value and how they are exchanged. Research into regional social enterprise found that beyond these local value systems, the knowledge associated with the plants, their part in a remote inland social ecology, and the products themselves were realising a modest but significant value in the cosmetics sector.

The cosmetic market for bush balms contributes to two Aboriginal health-related agencies in Alice Springs (Akeyulerre and Purple House). Each runs specialised social enterprise programs through which they produce a range of strategically marketed commercial cosmetic products. Utilising different social enterprise models, these Aboriginal agencies returned benefit to those involved in production, which included through direct employment and in the supply of bush balms back into local communities. From the wider commercial market place their products generate a collective income for these agencies as well. The Aboriginal bush balm “niche” in the cosmetics markets capitalises on a customer base who will choose to support sustainable (native plants, locally made) and ethical (Aboriginal customary land management) products.

The impetus between Arrernte Elders and the eventual cosmetics customers is the financial flow from commerce to maintain customary priorities as well as to procure economic benefits. The process of making bush balms involves healing people and land, teaching younger generations, maintaining country. These things ensure contemporary traditions are the root of the use of customary knowledge in Aboriginal-owned commercial businesses while producing a market product with broad appeal. To work through the equivalences between these customary values and the opportunities of a niche market is essential for the wild harvesting of native plants, and for the transmission of knowledge of the plants and customs to the next generations, whose initiatives will ensure the sustainability of these customs and plants.

Access to unfettered resources are necessary for community entrepreneurs to produce and supply a wider market, and these are extremely limited within the social governance by program framework. Active welfare programs are mandatory and involve regulation of any employment or community development activity which involves a recipient of active welfare, by the agency delivering the service agreement. There is an argument here for remote communities to have access to some forms of resource that enable remote community entrepreneurs to gain economic ground with or without the auspice of an organisation. Acknowledgement from the research commissioners about findings which describe a different economic development pathway would contribute to a highly portable and useful meta-data about remote economic participation, and would acknowledge that conversations about contemporary cultural agency need to occur at sub-national and national levels.

An ethical proposition

The outcomes of Australian Government policy intervention in central Australia have been monitored against Closing the Gap targets for more than a decade (Australian Government, 2016), and they underscore a substantial level of policy failure in this region. Poor relationships with Aboriginal communities over years and generations has created a harsh backdrop against which social and cultural capital and agency are often invisible. On the other hand, there
is a demonstrated approach to knowledge and practice that redresses cultural dissonance in research, for example through the ethic of “practical wisdom” (Bainbridge, Whiteside, & McCalman, 2013; Flyvbjerg, 2001), and through the establishment of co-research and local priorities in remote Aboriginal communities (Judd, 2017; Lovell et al., 2012). Yet it is unclear in what circumstances the research and evaluation of positive interventions or opportunities is enough to influence a return of benefit (and therefore resource allocation) through the high-level systems of national Indigenous program design in ways that are meaningful and timely at the community level. Cultural dissonance is more than procedural and more than relational; it is structurally enmeshed in the highest levels of Australian governments’ policy and program design, and shapes the Indigenous and non-Indigenous organisations and authorities that are funded accordingly.

As a useful mediation of the unintended or negative impacts of national frameworks, feedback to researchers about the use and portability of their findings could provide a literal understanding at a community level about how to increase the impact of the research and evaluation undertaken. That feedback could also be a unit of data and a body of meta-data which, if administered via human research ethics committees, would provision research institutions to be better able to track the impacts of research and evaluation over time, and to identify short-, mid- and longer-term trends in policy making. Ideally, insight of what program interventions can contribute to which forms of social benefit and for which communities would improve a range of service delivery outcomes and redress some of the inherent cultural dissonance and bias which contributes to the current levels of service failure in certain settings.

The protocols that underpinned the work of the HREC were conceived in western-based knowledge, language and concepts, and framed at the national level (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). To counter the cultural dissonance between them in the indigenous–western knowledge binary, new protocols were necessary. The aim was to ensure that researchers negotiate Indigenous Knowledge in ways that address the concerns of Aboriginal people (Dunbar & Scrimgeour, 2017). Indigenous researchers have eloquently described the Aboriginal values that drive ethical research practices by, with and among Aboriginal populations in Australia. Recent literature reflects on Indigenous and multidisciplinary practices across the disciplines of the academy (Nakata, 2007; Nakata et al., 2012), and structural resources have been developed that inform researchers engaging Aboriginal participants and collaborators on the protocols required for ethical research (Dunbar & Scrimgeour, 2017). In addition to health and medical research guidelines, the Aboriginal Knowledge and Intellectual Property Protocol: Community Guide (Orr et al., 2009) provides an Aboriginal community guide about the rights of communities to choose their participation (or not) in research and their rights to participate in and undertake such work.

This paper proposes that reporting back to community-level research also become an extension of the current human research ethical protocols: the aim being to regulate the current cultural dissonance that national protocols cannot discern, in a research and evaluation environment in which research commissioners are not required to explain any rationale about their uptake or not of community research findings. It is hoped a wider conversation might take place about ways to redress both cultural and geographic dissonance between urban and remote societies in Australia.

Discussion

In most social research, some form of dilemma will arise that will require refinement of research methods or instruments, or an amendment to the original ethical clearance. An iterative process of design and ethics in the Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children in Australia
(LSIC) identified iteration as a successful indicator of ongoing participation and of continued Informed Consent (Dunbar & Scrimgeour, 2017). Judd (2018), on the other hand, describes the process of engaging the HREC protocol as a more emergent and relational process of discussion.

The intention of the human research ethical clearance is for a continuity between procedure and practice, to enable researchers to be ethical and on their feet in practical and responsible ways, and for committees to be satisfied that research procedures are in place, which ensure ethical public-good outcomes are achieved with transparent institutional oversight (Guillemin et al., 2012). There is a high stake in university ethics committees in providing transparent and non-partisan ethical administration of research processes. It is an issue that affects how researchers and participants, as well as other stakeholders, perceive the role of researchers, the university, and the commissioners funding research (Dunbar & Scrimgeour, 2017; Guillemin et al., 2016; Judd, 2017).

Where Indigenous ethical research processes are most likely to be undertaken with a conversational discourse the research extends over a timeframe which allows for that. The process can include adaptations to research design to address issues of ethical concern which might arise throughout the duration of longitudinal or phased programs. These timelines are more likely for research projects that are large scale, nationally significant and produce statistically quantifiable levels of data, and/or data useful for secondary analysis (Dunbar & Scrimgeour, 2017; Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). Currently, much research that occurs within post-graduate, early-career and commercial research domains is short term, designed to produce findings or recommendations that report against one set of factors or one level of implementation, or are specific to one setting.

Remote Aboriginal community research is most likely to be sporadic and undertaken through short-term contracts. More value could be derived from these endeavours were the findings and decisions on uptake also contributing to a meta-level of analysis that was accessible to researchers, their institutions and the communities involved. In Ntaria, the research project’s capacity to effectively feedback to government through establishing a system of local community evaluation to run as part of the local implementation of services was initially a contracted aim of the Aboriginal Community Research team. However, this was rapidly blocked at a higher level of program administration, and when evaluation did eventually come, it was without the community research teams’ input and the community level of evaluation was subsumed by an evaluation of the entire program of the National Partnership Agreement.

An overview of relevant literature adds further perspective about the scope of human research undertaken with Aboriginal people in remote (and non-remote) settings. Human research requires a significant social capital investment by participants and often by researchers; this appears to be offset in part with the expectation that social good outcomes are achieved at a community or sub-group level (Dunbar & Scrimgeour, 2017; Lovell et al., 2012). Guillemin et al. (2016) found that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants’ understanding of human research ethics enhanced their commitment to participate in longitudinal research in which their personal investment counted towards a better community-level outcome. In contrast to the application of national frameworks, intersectionality describes the interaction of social structures such as race, gender, and class with the agency of a social group, and the impact of those structures on social groups and their settings (Bourdieu, 1989; Butler, 1990; Byrne & Callaghan, 2013). Applying intersectional theory contributes to an interpretation of the cultural and geographic dissonance that is evident in research undertaken in some remote settings under the current social governance by program framework of Closing the Gap policy. The national human research ethical process in designed as iterative; yet the current national policy framework does not have transparent mechanisms for researchers and communities
to better understand how to influence program design and delivery through research and evaluation undertaken at the community level. A system of feedback would contribute to lessening the homogeneity that drives dissonances at the national, sub-national or remote community interface.

In getting to where we now are as a nation-state, the Land Rights and Native Title Acts from the 1970s and 1980s were epitomised by discourses of hope and opportunity for a new era of Aboriginal empowerment, especially, some felt, through collaboration with industry and government to enable the extractive resource sector (mining) and other large-scale land-use developments (Rowse, 1993). Just as politicians described the benefits of assimilating, Aboriginal leaders spoke with much certainty, conviction and hope about the empowering impact that access to customary land provided through connection to spirituality, language and tradition (Dodson, 1997). The current guidelines of ethical research principles for human research can be understood similarly to the judiciaries’ Land Rights and Native Title legislations (Attorney-General’s Prime Minister and Cabinet, 1976; Australian Parliament, 1993). Both aim to protect and promote the equal rights of Aboriginal peoples; their cultures, traditions, languages, and lands, seas and waterways; and to guide the ways that researchers, via the academy, acknowledge Aboriginal agency in research. Neither can ensure that the nation–state addresses the roots of colonial systems which continue to shape the social governance of Aboriginal people in remote Australia, and which have little capacity to engage contemporary community cultures as knowing, authoritative and self-determining (Austin-Broos, 2001; Judd, 2018).

Locating self-determination within ethical research practice is at the heart of the academy’s guidelines for ethical research with Aboriginal people (National Health and Medical Research Council [NHMRC], 2015; AIATSIS, 2012). What appears to have been missed in national guidelines for ethics is an imperative that funding commissioners are also answerable for the impact of their programs, and should share accountability under the ethical protocols by which research is governed. Austin-Broos (2001) describes such an investment in conversational discourse as crucial to local traditions and self-determination, and to ethical research and evaluation.

There would be real negotiation if Western Arrernte people could speak effectively about why community support in education and regional economic partnerships are crucial to their local traditions for reasons that go beyond concerns even of other rural Australians. Making the moves to realise this would test the mettle of any political party. It would also involve a defensible ethic. (2001, p. 198)

Conclusion

An arms-length meta-analysis of research findings, policy uptake and program implementation could ensure feedback to researchers and communities that promotes a better understanding of the rational and priorities of the current social governance by program. Such a function could operate through the existing human research ethics committee process, which is in place to ensure research is equitable and ethical. Acknowledging the intersectionality and politics of power that are entailed, an evaluation of how cultural and geographic dissonance is amplified between national and community-levels of programming seems an unlikely grant winner. The greatest vulnerability in the proposition for feedback and meta-data is whether the institutions, in their current form and with the levels of reliance on political opinion for access to funds, would be able to sustain the high degree of impartiality required to insulate the researchers’ pursuit of knowledge from the more partisan priorities of research-funding commissioners.
If resources were allowed, then remote Aboriginal community research would leverage significant social benefits through one or more factors: training and engagement of local researchers; informed change based on ethical research knowledge in a local setting; being a process in place to collect, analyse and disseminate local information; providing high quality local information for use in wider inter- or intracultural negotiations; and identifying priority issues, challenges and outcomes at the community level. Understanding why research knowledge or recommendations were or were not taken up over time could help to inform Aboriginal community research, providing information that researchers and stakeholders could use to best position their work for local outcomes.

Such feedback should, ethically speaking, strengthen the insight of the commissioners of research too, creating a public record of the return of benefits from public funds invested. As meta-data, this would help researchers to identify successful local outcomes and their causal mechanisms; better evaluate and align support to programs with sound local governance; and ensure that research knowledge was being produced and utilised with a level of transparency at all levels. This more equitable accountability of the public investment in research would shift power from the government bureaucracy and invest it in the academic institutions through which it was produced. That is a highly unlikely outcome in the current Australian social and political climate. It would require an ethic and purpose that is not apparent in our nation–state. The veil between remote communities and their contribution to knowledge that is a commoditised and marketable resource could be lifted, and the capacity to access and utilise community-level research according to our own priorities and principles enacted. What kind of local governance and national political will would it take to realise that?
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Altyerre NOW: Arrernte dreams for national reconstruction in the 21st century

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Introduction

In the period since the end of the white Australia policy in the early 1970s, Aboriginal peoples across Australia have worked tirelessly to revive and strengthen their identities through an active engagement with culture. In the context of systematic colonial-settler attempts to eliminate Aboriginal peoples and their cultural practices in the period 1788–1972, cultural revival has often required Aboriginal community leaders, activists and intellectuals to build relationships with non-Aboriginal institutions who hold knowledge about ‘traditional’ Aboriginal cultures and societies. While institutions such as museums, art galleries and universities were historically very prominent in the colonial dispossession of Aboriginal peoples – by confirming their status as ‘primitives’, ‘savages’ and a ‘child-like’ race unworthy of freedoms and rights associated with ‘citizenship’ (Haebich, 2008; Chesterman & Galligan, 1997) – today these same institutions provide for the possibility that Aboriginal identity, culture and knowledge might be revived, regenerated and reconstituted in ways that sustain tradition and facilitate continuity into the future.

This paper provides a case study of research interactions between an Arrernte researcher and non-Aboriginal institutional repositories that hold significant collections of Arrernte material culture and cultural knowledge. This paper, although exploratory in nature, is designed to both document and give voice to Aboriginal people who are compelled to engage in research as a means to rediscovering their Aboriginal identities through private efforts to gain knowledge of their kin relationships, language, cultural practice and protocols, and rights to place. This paper does so by outlining how the research engagement with non-Aboriginal repositories is experienced by an Aboriginal researcher. In drawing attention to the experience of Aboriginal researchers, this paper is particularly concerned with questions of power and authority that implicitly raises larger questions about the moral and ethical legitimacy of competing claims to ownership. It is perhaps unsurprising that significant differentials exist between Aboriginal people seeking to conduct research that focuses on their family, people, country and the non-

1 This article is primarily authored by Joel Liddle Perrurle as an Arrernte man involved in personal and extended family and kin-based research activity. Significant editorial assistance has been provided by Barry Judd whose expertise in Australian Indigenous Studies is used to place the research experience described in relation to broader issues and theoretical frameworks that are useful to understand how power and authority operate in respect to Aboriginal-focused research activity that involves Aboriginal people and is impacted by the history of British colonialism and Australian race relations.

2 Readers should note that the White Australia Policy was not a single policy but a complex web of legislation, regulation and administrative practices. The period of the White Australia Policy commenced in 1901 with the passing of the Commonwealth Immigration Restriction Act (1901) and ended in 1973 with the Federal Labor government of Prime Minister Gough Whitlam removing racist clauses from the Immigration Act. The 1967 Referendum on Aborigines is considered an important moment in dismantling the White Australia Policy.
Aboriginal institutional repositories whose power and authority determines who has the right to access ‘their’ collections. In central Australia, Arrernte researchers possess relatively little power to effectively negotiate access to non-Aboriginal institutional repositories of which they are effectively not custodians or managers, nor anthropologists or curators. Instead these researchers are forced to rely on the goodwill of individual administrators in order to gain access, but there are never any guarantees. In the apparent absence of guidelines and procedures that set out protocols of access for Arrernte research engagements, this situation often leaves Aboriginal researchers with feelings of frustration and anger as they perceive decisions regarding access to be governed by the administrative whim and caprice of individual ‘gate keepers’. Feelings of deliberate exclusion also become manifest in respect to the history of Australian race relations. It is a widely held perception among many in central Australia that the politics of identity conspires in ways that make it far easier for non-Aboriginal researchers from faraway places to gain institutional access to institutional collections of Arrernte knowledge and cultural materials than it is for Arrernte people themselves. Indeed, the perception among Aboriginal peoples in central Australia is that non-Aboriginal institutional repositories direct much of their power and authority to block, stall and restrict the ability of researchers who claim an Aboriginal identity access to the cultural knowledge and materials generated by their own ancestors – be they kin or direct blood relatives.

The case study contained in this paper draws on the personal experience of an Arrernte man, Joel Liddle. It should therefore be noted that his experience makes no claim to be representative of all research interactions by researchers who claim an Aboriginal identity. The specificity of this case study recognises both the diversity of Aboriginal cultures that exist across the continent now known as Australia, and the differing degrees to which Australian repositories of Aboriginal cultural material are accessible to the Aboriginal peoples from whom their collections originate. This case study about Arrernte people in central Australia is written to act as a vehicle to chart and initiate what we, the authors, believe to be a very important, necessary and long-overdue conversation. Structures of power and authority continue to impede Aboriginal research efforts and the reconstruction of Aboriginal culture, and a significant outcome of this research activity is to highlight access by Aboriginal researchers to cultural materials as a necessary pathway to improved future health and well-being for Aboriginal peoples in central Australia and elsewhere.

Theoretical Framing

As a case study of power and authority the description and analysis of the relationship that operates between Aboriginal researcher and non-Aboriginal institutional frameworks might be understood in reference to the writings of several key authors whose conceptualisation of power relations in society provide useful frames for the case study contained in this paper. First, the concept of cultural hegemony developed by the Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci is useful for understanding how elites manipulate national cultural beliefs, understandings, explanations, perceptions, values, and mores in ways that position their world view as the culturally dominant norm. According to Gramsci, the power relationships of society that are structured in ways that work to the benefit and financial and cultural enrichment of the elite are read as ‘natural’, ‘normal’, ‘inevitable’ and ‘unchangeable’ (McNally, Schwarzmantel, & Ebooks Corporation, 2009; Adamson, 1980). Reading the relationship between Aboriginal researcher and non-Aboriginal institutional repository of Aboriginal culture and knowledge in reference to the concept of hegemonic power suggests that Aboriginal researchers present a threat to the elites who control the institutions in question. In this situation maintaining the status quo requires the perceived threat associated with Aboriginal researchers (i.e. cultural revival and, in central Australia for example, Arrernte national reconstruction) to be managed and mitigated.
via the imposition of access restrictions. Second, the concept of hegemony reminds us that the functionaries of institutional archives and museums have much to lose. The significant financial rewards associated with paid employment and long-term careers as anthropologists, curators and archivists and their claims to expertise, control and ownership over Aboriginal cultural materials and knowledge is at stake. Given this, resistance to Aboriginal access and suppression of community-driven research activity is unsurprising as this socially and economically entrenched ‘class and race based’ interest group seeks to protect its own power and authority against the threat of disempowerment and irrelevance posed by Aboriginal people committed to the principle of cultural autonomy. As contemporary Australia is governed by a settler–colonial state shaped by the historic processes of British imperialism and colonialism and, since 1901, by its own form of internal colonialism, the concept of cultural hegemony needs to be understood in respect to the particular power relations that exist between ‘settler’ and ‘native’ and that are rendered ‘normal’, ‘natural’ and ‘inevitable’ by the political, economic and social systems that have emerged in the colonial system.

While the ideological impact of the colonial system in social and psychological terms was detailed by Franz Fanon in the context of French North Africa (Fanon & Philcox, 2004; Fanon & Markmann, 2008), the work of the historian Patrick Wolfe is most relevant for gaining insight into how the cultural hegemony of Anglo-Australian colonialism operates in shaping power relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. According to Wolfe, colonialism in Australia is characterised by the political and economic requirements of 19th century pastoralism that is structured as a zero-sum logic whereby the economic success of ‘settlers’ demands the elimination of the ‘Aborigine’ from the country which the settler also claimed and occupied (Wolfe, 1999). When the insights that Wolfe provides are considered in combination with Gramsci’s concept of cultural hegemony, it might be said that the ideology of Anglo-Australian society holds that Aboriginal peoples, issues, cultures and perspectives continue to be regarded as ‘problems’, a situation that directs the power and authority of elites to efforts, practices, actions, attitudes and responses that seek their elimination. In the 18th and 19th centuries efforts to eliminate the ‘Aborigine’ included shootings, poisoning, rape and murder. Later, legislative forms of elimination such as the infamous Aborigines Protection Acts were used. In the late 20th century the Land Rights Acts and Native Title has been applied as a way to legally eliminate Aboriginal peoples from claims to their Country. The history of Australia since 1788 suggests that the colonial imperative to eliminate the native has developed through ever more complex, subtle and invisible mechanisms from the blunt instrument of massacre, to legal elimination through the imposition of colonial definition of Aboriginality, to the institutional practices of the archive and museum to eliminate Aboriginal researchers by subtle and discreet denials of access.

In the case study outlined in this paper, we argue that non-Aboriginal institutional repositories of Arrernte and other Aboriginal knowledge and cultural materials seek to eliminate the Aborigine by stifling their research activities through a denial or delay in authorising access to their collections. Such elimination is a direct response to the assertions and motivations of Arrernte and other Aboriginal researchers who seek institutional access in order to engage in the revival and or strengthening of cultural knowledges, concepts, practices and outputs in ways that underpin the reconstruction of their Aboriginal nation. In our view such efforts that aim at a renaissance in Aboriginal thought, culture, identity and nation constitute a direct threat to the moral and ethical legitimacy of the settler–colonial state in Australia and the elites who benefit most from the status quo. The micro everyday impact for Aboriginal researchers is to experience relationships with non-Aboriginal institutional repositories as problematic, tense, frustrating and often shaped by an underlying degree of hostility. In central Australia, this situation of underlying hostility means that Arrernte researchers are made to feel that they have ‘no business’ accessing cultural materials and knowledge held by institutional repositories or indeed engaging in research activity at all.
The case study: Joel Liddle Perrurle and Arrernte research realities

Ethnographic and anthropological research presents significant challenges to the Arrernte researcher, learner and broader community. Historically, research has been conducted by non-Indigenous academics and intellectuals employed during the frontier period to record ancient rituals of a race and culture expected to become extinct. The effects of displacement and loss of identity, language, political autonomy, agency and power presents very real issues for many Arrernte people today. Generally speaking, much of the research conducted today is designed to support either Land Rights or Native Title claims, determine the impact of developments on land like mining, or for sacred site protection, natural resource management and royalty distributions. Research conducted today is held within land councils, registered native title body corporations or museums and, once collected, is utilised by these institutions to inform their consultative work. This case study details the complexities Arrernte researchers face when trying to engage with representative bodies that hold extensive archives of the one of the most studied, well known, celebrated and reified Aboriginal tribes (now generally called language groups) in Australia. The processes of colonisation, assimilation, removal from traditional estates and on-going Government policy has bought enormous strains to bear upon Arrernte culture, which remained mostly unaffected during the first years of white arrival in central Australia (C. Strehlow, 1908; T. Strehlow, 1947). The loss of cultural knowledge through on-going targeted Government policies and practices that reward assimilation – including the NT Intervention and roll-back of bilingual education programs (Watson, 2009; Baehr & Schmidt-Habarkep, 2017; Judd, 2017) – has meant some people of Arrernte descent have had no access to traditional cultural processes of learning. This paper draws on my personal experience as a researcher and discusses the impacts a lack of access to archival records and potential cultural curriculum have on the broader Arrernte community and how this has a direct bearing on social, emotional and cultural health and wellbeing.

Traditionally, the methods of learning key elements of culture were engrained in Arrernte people from the earliest age, and the strict adherence to Altyerre (law) meant that each individual had key roles determined by complex and strictly adhered-to kinship arrangements that positioned them within our social, cultural and economic framework. For Arrernte children and youths, the relationship between absolute knowledge of country and landscape was not only key to their survival, but paramount to their understanding of Arrernte governance, religious practice, mythology and strictly defined areas of exclusion. From birth, every individual had a personal totem through their conception site, belonged to a totemic clan (through patrilocal marriage) and inherited their skin name within our kinship system Anpernirrentye through patrilineal descent. Conception and associated totemic relationship to that conception country fixed the future religious duties of each individual and the social relationships they maintained within their community.

The earliest European recording of this knowledge in central Australia in various Arrernte language-speaking areas was conducted by (but not limited to) Carl Strehlow (C. Strehlow, 1908), Baldwin Spencer and Frank Gillen (Spencer & Gillen, 1904), TGH Strehlow (T. Strehlow, 1947) and later by historians, linguists, anthropologists and archaeologists who ultimately claimed that their knowledge and expertise encompassed Arrernte culture (Austin-Broos, 2009). Compared to pre-white incursions of the region, Arrernte today learn from surviving Elders and family structures, and by conducting further family research in an effort to relearn and rediscover our identities. Inevitably though, the ability to learn at the absolute level of our early generations has passed. We are influenced by the need to hold down full-time employment to support families (immediate, extended and kin), access to land is limited as many traditional estates are now occupied by pastoral stations, and the current-day Land Rights and Native Title systems often result in the sociocultural environment often times being contested and unfriendly and including unsupportive interactions. The effects of colonisation, social and
political encapsulation within a settler-colonial state, and the impacts of assimilation policies enacted for more than 100 years have meant our culture (specifically Eastern/Central Arrernte, to which I belong) has been deeply and sometimes irreversibly suppressed. Sadly, some traditions and practices, ancient songs and dances, are now irrevocably lost. Relearning culture is paramount to Arrernte people who, like me, may not have had the privilege of learning within the family home or in the context of living in a remote community ‘on Country’. Many Arrernte are descendants of Stolen Generations, were schooled in convents and religious institutions, or have mixed lineage that saw many in our parents’ and grandparents’ generations harshly disciplined for speaking our language and strongly discouraged from partaking in cultural practices that reaffirmed our Altyerre (Green, 2012).

My interest in research stems from a need to understand the Arrernte worldview to the best of my ability. The understanding of complex land, social and spiritual governance systems that exist and define our identity is integral to being Arrernte. It is only with knowledge of these highly intricate systems that you can really understand the Arrernte worldview and gain relevance from terms like ‘connection to country’. Prior to moving to Alice Springs, I had spent yearly trips through my childhood, teens and early twenties travelling to central Australia with my family, which exposed me to language and the significantly more visible presence of Aboriginal people in Alice Springs compared to where we lived in Canberra and Melbourne. Inevitably I had many questions about who I was, what my Aperle (Nanna) was saying when she spoke language and why (in Canberra and Melbourne) I was targeted in school or weekend sport for my racial difference. The questions about identity nagged me, but during these formative years I had no agency to find answers to those questions with any insight or coherence. Unfortunately for many Aboriginal people, these are the same questions that they live with and – while they go unanswered – the health of individuals and communities is seriously and adversely impacted. Unequivocally, if, through cultural re-engagement and learning, we are able to instil pride into many of our people who have experienced loss of culture, language and identity, we would address issues that see Aboriginal people suffer with all manner of socioeconomic disadvantage. This disengagement, particularly among Aboriginal men, leads to incarceration at rates higher than ever, ill health, and lack of engagement in meaningful employment or education, and results in our children experiencing one of the highest rates of suicide anywhere in the world.

In 2007 I became aware of a series of ethnographic works completed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in and around Alice Springs by Baldwin Spencer and Frank Gillen called The native tribes of Central Australia (Spencer & Gillen, 1899). This book revealed cultural practices, kinship and family terms, language, and ceremonial performances and spoke of sites of significance. This particular focus of the book was the extravagant traditional Angwerre festival, held at the Alice Springs Telegraph Station in 1896–1897 that spanned several months through that summer. When I first scanned the book I saw phonetic Arrernte terms that I couldn’t understand and places I had never heard of. I was in awe of the absolute devotion to performance of elaborate ceremonies Arrernte people had. These people were distinguished, healthy and of great stature. Most impressive were the photos of the ceremonial leaders that immediately identified them as men of high degree. As I read It quickly became apparent that learning about my heritage would help deal with struggles I had with identity, racism and questions of belonging, as well as allowing me to reconnect with my Arrernte heritage, language, Country and traditions that I have, since youth, desperately yearned to know and understand.

Often, I would write to various institutions about accessing public materials like genealogies, photographs, diaries and letters. Sometimes I’d encounter suspicion regarding my unofficial status as a hobby researcher undertaking the activity to relearn my cultural identity in my unpaid private time. My lack of an official affiliation with a research institute or university certainly did not help. Frustratingly, I’d see non-Arrernte researchers affiliated with universities
in Melbourne, Sydney and Canberra attending these same institutions with seemingly free access to the same records and materials I wanted to learn from but was denied access to. Obvious cultural assumptions were made to what exactly my intentions were, and it’s always challenged me to communicate my actual intentions while being met with suspicion. I have a sense of responsibility to the materials that I research, and this is the responsibility to my immediate community and Aboriginal Australia more broadly, and the role I hope to play into the future. Without doubt, the strictest of processes need to be in place to protect restricted secret and sacred materials; however, many other archives exist like oral history interviews, photographs, diary entries, publications, genealogies, day-to-day artefacts or placenames that could be extracted and made accessible and which would re-enrich Arrernte people today. Often problematic is the stalemate that develops between collections and the cultural interests of Aboriginal people who possess familial relationships to the ancestors whose cultural knowledge and artefacts are documented in the archive. Many Aboriginal people are desperate to reconnect with their more ancient heritage. Without the ability to learn traditional rules and processes as children, teens, or even adults, some unwittingly have a careless approach to these very important collections. While we know that archives of information exist ‘about land’ there is currently no collated, formulated, research based, culturally appropriate curriculum developed by Arrernte researchers in collaboration with these materials that could be utilised to re-engage frustrated members of our community, reteach those disengaged through systematic assimilation, and heal those currently living socially dysfunctional lives. The production of such courses and the materials to support them would, of course, require the guidance of those with cultural authority. We should not underestimate the positive outcomes in terms of strengthening identity, improving health and well-being, and a general re-skilling and re-intellectualising of the Arrernte nation as the basis of future economic self-sufficiency through interactive crash courses with culture and a relearning of ‘proper way’. In the current era, how Arrernte and other Aboriginal culture and knowledge is represented in academia and the way Aboriginal people are moulded to suit western political systems and legislation continues to raise important issues about their representation in mainstream Australian media and the role repositories of cultural materials and knowledges play in replication of colonial stereotypes of Aboriginal people as deficient, inferior or ‘other’ (Said, 1978; Attwood & Arnold, 1992). We must ask who it is who really benefits from the research archives and vast Aboriginal collections of material culture or from the numerous and varied restrictions placed on community access of the materials. Is it the institution? Is it the professionals who use the materials to claim intellectual ownership and expertise based on Arrernte culture, history, language, and people? Is it the traditional owners in the model of ‘ownership’ that has become corporatised and monetarised in the period since the 1975 NT Land Rights Act became law? Is it a malignant alliance of all these things that works to stifle independent and grass-roots based Arrernte efforts to re-assert sovereignty over their cultural materials and therefore their Country and identity?

The appropriateness of accessing research collections means inevitably there must be an understanding of what is accessible and what is not. Museums, universities and institutions all have ethical processes in place to regulate access to the materials they hold. Rightfully so, access to these collections today is strictly available only to those who have the cultural credentials, totemic relationship, experience and knowledge, or have gained permission from those who do. Much of what was recorded by Spencer and Gillen, and later TGH Strehlow, includes the sacred performance of rituals and ceremonies, sacred men’s objects (Tywerrenge) and the vast numbers of video and audio reels that captured ceremonies in real time images and sound. This is particularly the case with the TGH Strehlow collection as he was requested by his informants to record their rituals for ‘safe keeping’, as the changing world of the Arrernte in central Australia in the period between the 1930s and 1960s meant those who would normally receive these through the usual traditional inheritance were often
not yet in a position to inherit. For example, many were unable to do so because they had been forced onto mission stations, to The Bungalow in Alice Springs, or removed interstate, making cultural transmission between older and younger generations difficult if not impossible. Others had little interest in receiving the Arrernte cultural learning, which they too had increasingly come to consider irrelevant to the ‘modern’ world.

However, there are considerable materials that exist in many institutions that are not of a secret or sacred nature. Since colonial incursions in central Australia commenced in the latter part of the 19th century, Arrernte people have been one of the most researched of all Australian Aboriginal groups. In many ways, Arrernte have become the emblematic foundation of all colonial representations of Aboriginal peoples throughout the continent. The term ‘Dreamtime’ for example, popularised and exported through the writings of Spencer and Gillen, is illustrative of such (mis)representations and (mis)appropriations of Arrernte culture and identity. Today, how knowledge is used is different to how it was used in what is considered the ‘traditional’ Aboriginal society of the past. Much study of the archives has been undertaken to support land claims or for consultation processes over land development but they are rarely used for the growth, identity strengthening, re-engagement, collective knowledge, health or wellbeing of Arrernte people; in other words for continuing and contemporary Arrernte tradition. Institutional priorities sometimes diverge with cultural practice and on-going obligation to maintaining the health of country. Meanwhile, paintings and rock engravings fade out, water holes and soakages silt up, sites are destroyed by exotic weeds and wildfire, and important totemic species become extinct as a result of unchecked feral animals – cats, rabbits, camels and horses. It is often essential, and an unfulfilled passion, for Arrernte people to relearn and re-engage in their culture; however, many are frustrated with and confused by the positions taken by western academic and political institutions towards contemporary tradition, and the systems of power that are so hard for an Arrernte person to navigate. This is particularly the case for those in our community who have limited English literacy, numeracy, educational background, or understanding of modern-day western governance systems that exist within representative bodies.

Cultural knowledge encompasses social wellbeing, health, personal growth and spiritual wellbeing; however, in the current climate we are seldom producing materials that will enrich the lives of our community. With the explosion of new technologies like phones, tablets and Wi-Fi, can these mediums be utilised to provide education platforms? Instead of having clear pathways and directives to develop the curriculums and cutting-edge communications technology platforms that might carry them as effective means to re-engage our youth, we encourage sport or music as the only viable avenues to achieve a meaningful and productive life. Additionally, with remote engagement in education at critically low levels, having locally based culturally appropriate curriculums to re-engage our youth is imperative for building self-esteem and self-awareness.

The most notable absence in historical ethnographic and anthropological research is the contribution of Arrernte women. Through the early contact years and at least until TGH Strehlow was completing his life-long research in the early 1970s, cultural research was undertaken by non-Aboriginal male researchers, exclusively focussed on Arrernte men’s culture. This isn’t by default; however, it is a reflection of the strict gender and cultural differences that meant Arrernte men only spoke of men’s cultural business to researchers who were also male. Arrernte women and the cultural practices and knowledge of women were not made available for documentation through ethnographic research. Because there were no female researchers present during this time Arrernte women’s culture was not recorded or documented and is not well represented in contemporary museums or collections. This presents difficulties for the Arrernte female learner looking for archival materials to enrich her identity, and more female-specific Arrernte research needs to be undertaken to better encapsulate female cultural perspectives, practices and knowledges.
When I was a teenager, my Nanna Emily Liddle (née Perkins) mentioned to me the mythical Uremerne Rockhole, place of the Untyeaye Altyerre (Corkwood Honey Dreaming) and her relationship to that land and women’s Altyerre through her maternal grandmother, Untyeyampe Perrurle (also known as Maggie Kana). From the time I returned to central Australia, it became a personal mission to rediscover it and survey the landscape to see what the health of the Country was. In one of my Nan’s oral histories she mentioned being at the Rockhole as a young girl for a women’s ceremonial gathering, so it was important for me to retrace her steps in an attempt to reconnect with her memories of that time and the events of the past. It was also through the research that I became aware of my Aunty, Kathleen Kemarre Wallace, because of our shared ancestry. Aunty Kathy has since become one of my most important cultural teachers and mentors as she shares the same interests in land, visiting sites and country, hunting and the on-going health and maintenance of our culture. Today in central Australia, someone like me has the privilege to be able to engage in language and cultural learning through the tireless, lifetime works of senior women like Kathleen Kemarre Wallace, Veronica Perrurle Dobson (Hayes), Margaret Kemarre Turner, to name only but a few. These relationships reflect the continued importance that women play and will continue to play in the renaissance of Arrernte culture. It is imperative that Arrernte women also have access to repositories of cultural material and knowledge, particularly in respect to genealogical information, as knowledge of family and kin is central to women’s business.

Access to archival materials creates opportunities for the replenishment of country and revival of culture. Throughout my research, I have become aware of place names and stories for country that indicate sites, events and ancestors from the Altyerre. Senior Arrernte man Kwementyaye Stuart once said, “Every hill got a story”. In no place is that sentiment truer than in Alice Springs and central Australia. Though access to collections has at times proven difficult it has allowed me to learn about country, place names and areas of great religious practice while also providing me with a culturally enriched appreciation of land management and conservation. I have travelled to sites to assess the impacts of noxious weeds like buffel grass and seen ancient paintings and engravings destroyed by hot buffel grass fires. I have seen soakages and waterholes silted up, full of algae and dead animals where once they were pristine sources of life for our ancestors. I have researched important totemic mammals like the Antenhe (possum), Aherte (bilby) and Akwerre (bandicoot) all but extinct now in this region because of unchecked feral animals. Relearning creates a new conversation: what do we need to do for country now? What is the role of individuals – is it only to be concerned with country for the monetary rewards from royalty distributions or to be invited to a land council meeting to discuss outside economic interests? Or is it to visit, look after and maintain so that our history and knowledge for country extends to future generations? How can these repositories, archives and representative bodies assist us in re-enriching our community? Where learning can sustain and enrich country, cultures and languages and has proven health, holistic and socioeconomic benefits to community, support for research-based cultural curriculums within our education systems, Arrernte researchers are critical to the on-going support and maintenance of culture. Replenishment of culture through learning and current-day contributions to the archives will serve to enhance our community, and provide employment and economic pathways, and we will start to make marked change in the health and wellbeing of Arrernte people.

Concluding Remarks

The case study of an Arrernte researcher outlined above documents the experience of Joel Liddle Perrurle in attempting to harness research as a tool for cultural revival, the rediscovery of identity, the reconnection to Country and ultimately the reconstruction of the Arrernte people into a viable, healthy social and political nation that meets the needs of a people who live in the context of on-going contemporary settler–colonialism. The problems and complexities that he identifies suggests Aboriginal researchers need to remain focussed, determined and highly
resilient in their support of what might be broadly called Aboriginal national reconstruction. The power and authority that institutional repositories of Aboriginal knowledge and cultural materials hold over Aboriginal researchers’ ability to access ‘their’ collections can be read as a structural problem when referenced against the concepts of cultural hegemony and the colonial impulse to eliminate the ‘Aborigine’. In the colonial context of Australia, Gramsci’s idea that intellectuals and scholars might play a key disruptive role in undermining the ideological power of elites must be jettisoned as those elites who control museums, galleries and universities are found to regularly uphold the logic of Anglo-Australian colonialism in their attempts to eliminate the Aboriginal researcher by means of barring and restricting their ability to access institutional collections.

The solution to the problems that Aboriginal researchers may encounter as they attempt to access the cultural material and knowledge of their ancestors in order to relearn culture in order to re-active their personal identities as Aboriginal people and that of their immediate family and extended kin as a self-determining community or nation may be varied and complex. We believe that solutions might start with an act of recognition that accepts that Aboriginal people in the 21st century are no longer merely the objects of museum and archival collections but seek to actively engage with institutional repositories as independent and community-based researchers in their own right. Their right to research and their right to access is one that is ultimately based in the immediate relationship they have with the cultural materials and knowledge held by the archive, museum or university. Denying the right of the living to communicate with, and learn from, their own ancestors seems a denial of human rights as well as a denial of the rights attributable to Indigenous peoples under various United National charters and declarations. Change, however, will require more than acts of recognition, and we believe that solutions to the issues in respect to central Australia will require Arrernte people to take more control in how questions of Aboriginal researcher access to institutional repositories are handled, addressed and determined. We look forward to the day when Arrernte people are the anthropologists, the archivists, the libraries and the mangers of the institutional repositories that hold and keep a cultural inheritance that rightfully belongs to them.

Translations

**Altyerre:** The creation of the world and all things in it. Altyerre includes moral codes of conduct, land and totemic inheritance, epic accounts of ancestral characters and their journeys across country, sacred sites, a system of social behaviour, and a life force. Altyerre refers to the world as both continuous and permanent, for all time since its creation.

Also, laws, strictly defined rules for living, social and cultural governance structures.

Known in English as ‘The Dreamtime’.

**Perrurle:** One of the Eight Arrernte skin names. Known in English as ‘skin name’. From the Kemarre/Perrurle patriomoietie. Others include Ampetyane/Ngale, Pengarte/Penangke, Kngwarraye/Peltharre.

**Anpernirrentye:** Kinship system. Includes the eight Arrernte skin names. Dictates how Arrernte inherit land, roles and responsibilities, marriage, rules for living, family, creation and identity.

**Kwementyaye:** Name used out of respect for someone who has passed away.

**Aperle:** Fathers, mother. Paternal grandmother.
References


The making of *Monstrous Breaches: An ethical global visual narrative*

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**Keywords:** ethics, artistry, intercultural, global, visual, narrative, monsters

**An introduction**

Kathleen Wallace is an Eastern Arrernte custodian and artist with a 45-plus year career as a cultural expert and teacher. Her paintings are widely collected and when considered as one extensive body of work represent her homelands and the relationships of Eastern Arrernte to the sociocultural traditions and systems within those homelands. Judy Lovell has been a collaborator with Wallace for 15 years; she is an Anglo-Australian academic and artist with a background in arts therapy and research. Judy’s interest in Bajan and Caribbean folklore stems from the links in her ancestry to African and British descendants from Barbados.

Describing the making of *Monstrous Breaches* here gives us an opportunity to reveal some of the elements at work when our artistry, narrative and research occur in intercultural contexts that depend on our adoption of ethical processes as artist researchers who are communicating from very different cultures and heritages. Though they are so often left unspoken and remain unseen, it is important to uncover and explore these processes that underpin the concept of our ethic in this applied research and artistry – if we wish to engage well at this interface of cultures and styles and traditions with the wider global intercultural imagination.

The creative provenances of *Monstrous Breaches* include the style of its representation as well as the sometimes-thorny issues of the references within it to Indigenous and other iconographies and narratives. We discuss our collaboration as a form of provenance that is dependent on an ethical engagement with practical wisdom and applied while drawing, carving and printing this image to its completion. We believe this provenance is essential to the imagery, designed to challenge and take away the power of today’s monsters through illuminating their contemporaneity and the *Monstrous Breaches* that affect our globally connected worlds.

This narrative is about the making of *Monstrous Breaches*. Stories and depictions of monsters have been told and shown in every culture, with the intent that, as artistry does, these provide ways to interpret those things in our lives which may be beyond what we know, beyond our experience, and yet are within the grasp of our imaginations. Some monsters are beyond what we know, but monstrous things still happen. Many of us have had some experience of the monstrous in our lives, of monstrous things we can’t control, but which breach our worlds, laws and beliefs, and whose conduct is unethical.
The background

The references for the making of *Monstrous Breaches* are the monsters with whom we, the authors, are most familiar: those of the Eastern Arrernte and other central Australian Aboriginal homelands, and those with Bajan and European roots. Here in central Australia, Arrernte stories have been told by Aboriginal people for generations (Turner & MacDonald, 2010; Wallace & Lovell, 2009). Many of them have been the subject of Wallace’s work – especially her public storytelling, teaching and painting – over the span of her career. They are also the stories that informed her education and assisted in her survival as a child in the homelands, growing up with grandparents who lived entirely on country and away from the missions and other settlements until Wallace was 12 years old. Only then did her European education begin, and the intercultural, global and educative elements of her work begin to develop.

Further influencing *Monstrous Breaches* are the folkloric Bajan monsters of the Caribbean, particularly those that prey on the ‘unbecoming’, people whose fate is cast in both physical and spiritual dispossession from their ancestral homelands (Clarke, 1999, p. 37). These monsters relay something of the manipulation of the vulnerable, and the savagery of the powerful – the colonisers’ brutality, and the global diasporas of the aftermath. These are monsters who prey on insecurity, on the uncertainty of becoming, an uncertainty born into generations without ancestral paths to follow, generations who were enslaved in a country far from their ancestral beings, demoted in the monstrous breach that was slavery and indenture, and the economic exploitation which remains. Folklore of these monsters and stories of those monstrous breaches are taught and told in the hope that we never forget, never allow, and never repeat.

And yet then there are monstrous breaches today, which are global and, while never associated with one country or one people or one place, have the power to breach the natural world. Capable of powerful and monstrous havoc, such global monsters arrive without foretelling, without tradition, without face or name. Personal monsters abound too, capable of producing the monstrous breaches in the social fabric of our worlds that we see and fear and live with every day, and yet we have no stories to prepare ourselves to do battle with these monsters either. We have no folklores or Arrernte laws governing the damage wrought when today’s monsters take over. So how do we name them, call them out, diminish them? How do we know them to deny or defeat them?

We made this big picture, not to give power to monsters but to imagine within one scene the unseen and unspoken nature of today’s monsters, making them present, so that in seeing and naming them they are diminished, reduced, overcome, recognised, called out, or put aside. We created this imagery because we wanted to interpret the foundation through which others can see meaning even without a common spoken language. This image is for all who want to tell their own story of monsters. It is intended to be given meaning by you, the audience, and in the process of engaging your imagination, we are all making tangible a greater intercultural and global imagination – one that defeats monsters, and reduces monstrous breaches.
The artwork

Figure 1. Monstrous Breaches, 2016 (2/6).

Source: Kathleen Wallace and Judith Lovell. Linocut limited edition monoprint (1.75m x 1.1m) Graphics Ink on Fabriano paper, roller and barren printing method.
Monstrous Breaches, (the image) is a large black and white lino monoprint (1.75m x 1.1m) that we, the researchers, have worked on for a year, between 2015 and 2016. This work is important for its process, its provenance, and for what its content means to you, as well as to us.

The imagery

The large black and white image depicts several monsters coalescing over land, through air and across water. The monsters don’t have explicit stories but instead are inspired by those we perceive in everyday life and find in the cultural roots and stories of the Arrernte and Bajan societies we refer to. The “everyday-ness” of our monsters also refers to the ordinary kinds of things that can become monstrous in people’s lives today, and how monstrous influences can control some people, perhaps for generations to come, while only affecting others briefly. We thought about how the monsters of today are similar to and different than the monsters Wallace grew up with – especially the Arrentye (monsters) stories from Eastern Arrernte homelands, and those in Bajan (Clarke, 1999) and European folklore, such as Lovell was taught about in childhood.

In this picture, monsters take many forms. As the bat lingers at the base of the picture we remember the anger and violence of bat tribes fighting each other at Arturte-akerte, a place in the Simpson desert near Wallace’s grandfathers’ homelands. In that story, the male bats hacked off and tore at one another’s flesh, burning the chunks as the piles moulded up around them, forming hills of molten stone. The victorious bat men stood atop these hills, chopping their enemies as they flew at them. As the flesh chunks moulded up, they burned so hot they become molten, smooth, round stones. Rock piles like that are still moulded into hills in the sand dunes behind Merne-anthenge, an eastern range of hills on the edge of the Simpson Desert (Wallace & Lovell, 2009, pp.145–149).

A third of the way from the top, in the centre of the picture, is that malevolent and mischievous two-headed monster. That was made while we were thinking about the Bajan La Diablesse – who is always out to take innocence away, luring those who follow her, drunkenly, to the edge and then over the precipice and into the abyss (Clarke, 1999, p.37–38). We drew our two-headed monster as one that drags people – claws extended, pulling and drawing them in – alluring, beckoning, seducing – crooning and soothing. Those are the traits of another Arrentye too, a monster with long fingernails, who may sing out in Arrernte, ‘apetayaye, apetayaye’ ‘come here, come here’ as she draws to her the children who are lurking alone near waterholes, and the curious, the defiant – those ones who won’t listen to their elders’ warning. Or are too curious, wanting to see Arrentye. Afterwards, the marks from her fingernails can be seen on them, scratched deep into the cheeks of her drowned child victim. (Wallace & Lovell, 2009, p. 72). This double-faced monster may not look as dominant as the bat, but you might never escape if she sinks fangs into your blood stream, poisoning your body and spirit. The Soucouyant of Caribbean folklore is sometimes called the vampire monster, and she too wreaks havoc with flesh, using fire and fangs. Stripping herself of her skin she becomes a fiery ball, and slips in through the cracks and crevices to the bedside of her victim, whose blood she then sucks out (Clarke, 1999, p. 37).

We live in central Australia and so we always have an awareness of this country. From it we took the contrast between the natural landscape and an urban landscape, which appears at first so powerful and fast, an enticing, inviting novelty (middle right). But in that hard-edged place, we can become disembodied. Unforgiving of natural forms, steel chain links are wrought by fire, forging the chains that bind and weigh down, restrict and encircle. These are symbols of enslavement as well as of unbroken links, bonds. It has been told that after La Diabliesse passes by some hear clanking chains. Here, chains hang from the tail of the many-headed
The making of Monstrous Breaches: An ethical global visual narrative | Judith Lovell and Kathleen Kemarre Wallace

serpent, suspended over the shadow-people and linked to the angled hard corners of the urban blocky city, where light is reflected harshly from flat-edged surfaces. Above the city float the masks of the disembodied, and the whirling serpent (middle centre and left) who sucks away the spirit, with its rasping hot air, ensnared by chains, and with slicing claws, it too holds a dead innocent (the bird top left).

Above the bat, the two human figures aren’t monsters, they are shadow people, barely there. We all have shadows, spirits, good or bad influences. Like the birds in this picture, some are harder to see or hear, to name or know, as shadows that come over us, and the little shapes around the shadow figures – like bacteria – maybe good or bad; they can be either, or both. They are in water, in air, and inside us – keeping us healthy or making us sick. It depends on the mix and strength, it depends on the source and whether we can discern wisdom from monstrosity, whether we can see the monstrous and call it out.

The purposes

Looking back at the picture after making it, Wallace reflects on why she was drawn to it:

What draws me to look at this picture is that city [middle, right]. It’s bringing people in to where there is something happening…But when they are there they start the drinking. See their reflections [masks, top right]? They have changed. Look different. Now they become part – a part of that monster [grog]. First, they just go to see what’s happening and then from drinking, they become aggressive. Fighting. Just like those bats at Arturte. They don’t see how they changed from grog. Looking at themselves, they can’t see how monstrous they become.

In any of these monstrous states, a person is incomplete, losing their identity, or having never found it, they live with the loss of self, and with no will to complete (Clarke, 1999, p. 38). Perhaps feeling powerful, the aggressive one demands, the spiteful one challenges and takes, the novel one subjugates, and the alluring one manipulates. Then, having become overwhelmingly monstrous, looks for someone else, something else, to blame. The monster that is in our own reflection is hidden so well that we do not see what we are, or what we may never become. But that is, in some part at least, the job of stories and artistry: to reflect what we don’t see and give voice to the consummately disguised, like the ingratiate monsters that lurk at the edges of our imagination, or those that overcome us.

See: there isn’t one story here – there are many. Stories and ideas and themes, these are our images, fed by the stories of the homelands, of apmere Uyetye-akerte and Therirrerte-akerte, as well as the stories of other Bajan folklore that we know from books. Regardless of the stories that we are familiar with, it’s the different stories that the audience make for themselves from these images that matter most, and those are why we made Monstrous Breaches. The stories that the audience make will fill the space between Monstrous Breaches and their own experience – and in doing this, can articulate other, previously unspoken, invisible, or unfamiliar monsters. The audience confirms how these monsters, by their existence and actions, can cause monstrous breaches of the law and the land, ruining the human and non-human worlds we know, diminishing the fundamental things which govern our existence. Wallace reflects about how the stories of monsters ensured her survival and that of other generations of Arrernte:

When I was told monster stories, Arrentye is something it’s real frightening. We were always told not to do the things that Arrentye tells us to do: but some kids always want to know what Arrentye is. And they don’t listen to their parents or
grandparents they just want to know and then they end up being killed or being
drawn to do these things Arrentye wants. There were so many Arrentye stories we
were told when I grew up...I had to learn not to do many things but now days we
have kids doing things and they don’t listen to us – they just do things themselves
and they become part of these monstrous things we see today; today those
Arrentye(s) look like grog and gunja, ice and pills – there’s so many new things that
people do now, that we never even knew about.

That’s why we are trying to help young kids today teaching about not to do these
things; because Arrentye is taking them away, and telling them wrong ways. Maybe there is more Arrentye(s) now because there are lots of monstrous things
happening...

In life today, kids don’t have the same struggles as we had in earlier time...they can
go to the shops for food, there are shops everywhere and they sell everything; there
are houses for shelter, water in taps...In the old days, there was only the natural
world and living in that natural world people had to take care all the time; we only
had ourselves and there was danger everywhere. To survive, we had to know what
to do, where to go, we had to listen to the old people; we had to ignore the allure
of Arrentye to survive.

Some kids are curious though – they want to see what’s over there – see what
Arrentye is, and they see it in reflection – in gunja, in grog. Arrentye can take over
a person – grog can take over – grog is Arrentye – it takes over who a person is,
how they are to other people, it damages their mind, their spirit and body, their
relationships...that is Arrentye. That is like that Arrentye who would draw kids into
the water and drown them, or attack other people, kill them in the camp site.

Our learning

While making Monstrous Breaches we learnt one another’s cultural ways of understanding
and we also learnt about one another’s artistry and how we engage our own and each other’s
imaginations. We discovered how we each use design, and how we like to depict things within
a setting with references to landscape, how those things are arranged when our shared drawing
surface is treated as an Arrernte landscape – a landscape in which ancestors had an ordered
way of knowing and teaching stories about safety, survival and law. Monstrous Breaches is an
image formed by the aesthetic gaze of one whose eyes are turned to meet the aesthetic gaze
of another, in a learned Arrernte world that has its own systems of organisation and aesthetics.

We know that monstrous breaches are not specific to one culture or one group of people,
but are a force of human and nature and more-than-human worlds. Nonetheless, this picture
was made in this setting: in Alice Springs, which is in Arrernte country. A healthy Arrernte
framework was put in place first to make working on this project together a safe thing to do on
these homelands. So, as we designed Monstrous Breaches we started with the bat at one end
and the hands at the other, then we put down the lines of skin groups and ceremony grounds
underneath. That framework respects the healthy Arrernte system of country, people and the
relationships between them. This has always been the way Wallace paints, with the designs
and relationships of country and people as the first layer on her canvas, which also shows the
rest of us her sovereignty, responsibility and stewardship. We put those foundations there first
to make sure this was a safe and respectful thing to do here, together.
That composition gave us a balance in the image too, which we gradually changed. First, we had the bat and the two-headed monster – with the pulling and tension between them. Then we had other elements – water, fire, smoke, the city, all corresponding. Stronger symbols emerged after all those elements were placed and as we overlayed the monsters onto the compositional shapes of Arrernte organisation – human, more-than-human, law and country. Then the tension, the struggle, the fighting – monsters arranged in opposition to each other, as well as to us and to you, the audience. Tension and anger, fire and water, aggressor and seductress, reflections in water, smoke from fire, chains and torment – carved as light and dark. Wallace says of the way monsters overtake our lives today:

*This can happen to everyone, to anyone, it’s not just Aboriginal people; it can happen to anybody.*

But underneath all this mayhem is the ordered Arrernte life world, with a formal arrangement that respects the kinship of people, country and spirit, sources of strength and wisdom just as much as these depictions reflect contemporary monsters of our everyday world. Although no longer visible to the audience of this image, the ordered design of Arrernte relationship systems is the under-painted layer upon which these monstrous images are made visible. Weaving cultural, artistic, narrative and other sources into a global imagery is a task fraught with potential mishap, and dependant on robust collaboration, authentic communication and respect for those systems of knowledge, such as the Arrernte have, that have framed the human ecology of these societies and these landscapes over thousands of years.

**Our intent**

Using artistry increases the opportunity to communicate at a depth not available without a comprehensive vocabulary and a shared oral language, and as there are many spoken languages in the world we cannot share the depths of knowledge and understanding only with words. The visual holds the potential for rich communication with audience and between artists in situations where we are without commensurate depths of linguistic understanding. There are two levels at which we intended this image to ‘work’ across different cultures: between the artists and between the imagery and the audiences.

Just as with linguistic capability to interpret and respond to the cultural and social inferences that another language encapsulates, applying artistry across artistic traditions in collaboration requires skills that are honed in the familiarity and the give-and-take of shared studio practices – exchanging techniques and ideas, giving response and critique, but respecting one another’s aesthetic ideas and motivations, and acknowledging that traditions, while never static, are different; our aesthetics are derived differently. Working like this involved trust, and a shared commitment to learning and research. There is no short cut to this practice; no set of rules or list of skills that can be developed outside of such relationships, only the applied principles of artistry and practical wisdom.

In keeping with the intention of the piece to act as a cypher or conduit for audience interaction, right from the start we wanted *Monstrous Breaches* to be available to people who want to reuse the imagery in their own forms of art. We invite people to appropriate in the spirit of ongoing collaboration to name and defeat the monsters of fear, incommensurability, and othering that breach intercultural and other collaborative practice and in doing so, thwart the making of shared knowledge, global imagination and mutual respect.

This picture might help people express how they feel, what is in their lives, how they feel drawn or pushed, bullied or frightened – it might help children learn that monstrous things can seem
so attractive, but this can also make them part of the monster as they lose themselves. That’s the main thing about this picture – it’s to offer something that other people can use to express their story, make their own narrative. In ending, we’d like to ask you to remember: How did you learn about monsters?

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References


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