

Negotiating the right path: Working together to effect change in healthcare service provision to Aboriginal peoples

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Abstract

This paper outlines the centrality of a Nyoongar worldview to an engagement framework designed with the Nyoongar community to enable the community to work meaningfully with service providers in the mental health and drug and alcohol sectors to bring about systems change. This paper follows on from a previous paper by the author (Wright 2011) in which the principles and methods of both Indigenous research and participatory action research are explored in relation to each other as a way of mitigating the delegitimising effects of colonisation. Privileging a Nyoongar worldview disrupts the dominant western paradigm so that service providers and the Nyoongar community can meaningfully work together to change the way services are provided to Nyoongar people experiencing mental health and drug and alcohol concerns, and indeed offer a way forward in working with other Aboriginal communities.

Key words

Worldviews, Nyoongar culture, Nyoongar worldview, mental health and wellbeing, shared understanding, difference, dialogue,

engagement, systems change, community based participatory research, Indigenous research

Introduction

This paper will describe the challenges being experienced by Nyoongar¹² peoples, in particular Nyoongar Elders, in their efforts to negotiate mainstream Australian society. Both authors are research colleagues on a mental health research project (*Looking Forward* Project) working with the Nyoongar community living in the southeast metropolitan suburbs of Perth, Western Australia (WA). One of the authors is a Nyoongar man, who is the chief investigator and the other is a *nyidiyang*¹³ woman raised in a small farming town in the southwest of WA. Our paper explores our understanding both of the differences and similarities experienced by Nyoongar Elders and service providers in their interactions as they work together to effect systems change in the mental health and drug and alcohol service sector, based on findings of the *Looking Forward* Project.

We begin with what we believe is both necessary and critical for people who are not Nyoongar (*nyidiyang*), and that is to ask; how can they truly work with Nyoongar peoples in ways that will advance the process of decolonization (Wright, 2011; Tuck and Yang, 2012)? What is not fully realised is an understanding and acceptance of these decolonising acts as being central to sustainable and meaningful change. The work of decolonization is not easy for it requires critical inner reflection that may give rise to feelings of inadequacy, and on occasions an intense sense of displacement. Therefore, as you would imagine, the work is challenging, perplexing and perhaps even scary, and if not well

¹² Nyoongar peoples are the First Nations people represented by 14 clan groups located across the southwest region of Western Australia.

¹³ Nyidiyang is the Nyoongar word to describe a Non-Aboriginal Anglo-Saxon person.

understood could result in withdrawal (Hopper, 2013). Our aim is to keep participants in a 'communicative space' enough to work through these challenges, and we see that being in relationship with each other enables this.

This paper is structured around four themes. The first explores the uniqueness of a Nyoongar worldview, and for this paper we will provide examples of what constitutes a Nyoongar worldview, through interviews with Elders and forums conducted with community members in 2014 and 2011-2012 respectively. The second theme describes the participatory action research process undertaken for this project, underpinned by Aboriginal ways of conducting research. The third theme is the story of the unique approaches by Nyoongar Elders and service providers in their process of working together, underpinned by relationships informed by a Nyoongar worldview, characterised by trustworthiness, reciprocity, adaptability and inclusiveness. The fourth and final theme explores the implications of 'breaking new ground' through this process of engagement.

To begin, we first 'place' our research so that we can acknowledge that relationships are not just with and between people, but also with the world around us. In our case our research takes place on Wadjuk *boodja*, that is, the Perth metropolitan area and we pay our respects to Elders past and present and in particular thank the Elders – as co-researchers – with whom we are working.

Although we may share the same time period and the same physical space, we construct and shape the world according to our lived experiences. Understanding the uniqueness of worldviews, we believe, is the main concern, for even though as Australians we share the same place, geographically, our experiences shape our views in a diverse range of ways, informing our values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviours. So too, as with other Australians, Nyoongar peoples have a unique worldview (Wright et al, 2013). It is the uniqueness of a Nyoongar worldview to which we now turn.

Throughout the development of the *Looking Forward Project*, in consultation with Nyoongar community members, and in

particular with Nyoongar Elders, we have come to understand the unique worldview embodied by Nyoongar peoples. It is lived through the interconnectedness of kin, community and country. For mental health and drug and alcohol service providers, developing a working understanding of a Nyoongar worldview is central to the change efforts they undertake alongside the Nyoongar community. Our findings demonstrate that when *nyidiyang* are open to and accepting of a Nyoongar worldview, the shift in intention is profound and in turn becomes an intention shared with the Community, an intention that is, to change the system that continues to disenfranchise and re-traumatise Nyoongar clients and their families (experiencing serious mental illness). Intent is also about both understanding the needs and aspirations of Nyoongar peoples, and being prepared to investigate and critically inquire into any doubts, concerns and aspirations on both a professional and personal level. The beginnings of a meaningful relationship are now being formed.

Worldviews: not same, not different, but unique...

In this article we are mostly concerned with the critical question of 'what does it mean to be Nyoongar?' In posing this question we do not seek to ignore a *nyidiyang* worldview, but instead we aim to create a space that enables a Nyoongar worldview to be realised unimpeded by the dominant paradigm that shapes our modern way of life. For service providers, being introduced to the unique qualities that comprise a Nyoongar worldview will provide a better understanding of the practices they develop to respond effectively to Nyoongar clients and their families (Wright et al 2013). Activities such as trips on country, listening to and telling stories, sitting with Elders sharing food, learning about family, and so on, all enable service staff to directly experience aspects of a Nyoongar worldview. The relational process of explaining a Nyoongar worldview, provides an understanding of what (re)shapes the *nyidiyang* perspective in the context of unique representations of culture.

We now introduce the concepts of *not same* and *not different* in relation to developing an understanding of worldviews other than our own, so that we can inquire more deeply into the ways in which our respective worldviews offer us a *unique* perspective on the world in which we live. Recognizing the concepts of *not same* and *not different* in respect to worldviews is a critical part of the decolonizing process when working with Indigenous peoples. It is our view that *not same* and *not different* serve to move the debate away from extreme polarity. The Nyoongar and *nyidiyang* worldviews share the same geographical and sensory space but their perception on the physical, spiritual and intellectual levels are, at first glance, often seen and perceived as being very different. But we say they are not different, yet not the same, but unique, for it has been our experience in working with the Nyoongar Elders and service providers that, through a process of shared storying, connections are fostered and we see a way forward and thus, the realization of *not different* and *not same*, therefore *unique*.

The title refers to the concept of 'negotiated space', and we believe, effective research works on the principles of transparency, honesty and authenticity. Working in this way will result in degrees of tension. Robust and honest human interaction will always invoke tension, and researchers should not be afraid to encourage tension, for it will validate and legitimate their work. The following quotes from the *Looking Forward* Project reflect the negotiated nature of the tension in our work together.

'I'll be honest; there have been times when it's been incredibly uncomfortable just because I've never sat around the table with Aboriginal Elders before. My sense is that - or my feeling is that if you put me in a room leading a meeting amongst service providers or with other staff, I know the unwritten ground rules and I know how things work and how things operate but if you put me in a group, and [that's been] around this very table, any meeting with Aboriginal Elders, I don't know what the unwritten ground rules are and I'm learning very slowly. They've been very welcoming and very approachable but just from myself, I just think having a complete lack of confidence in myself to know what is appropriate...' (Service Executive staff member, 2014).

We had a lot of problems with schools, you know, with the little ones when they start kindy and pre-primary. The teachers would use this big long sentence on them and the kids didn't - you know, our language at home is all cut in half, hey? You know, we don't use every word in the dictionary to make a point come through (Elder, 2014).

In our attempts to answer what constitutes a Nyoongar worldview we consulted with those who are the holders of cultural knowledge and wisdom: Nyoongar Elders. The Elders are very generous and provide many accounts of being Nyoongar and, in very typical Nyoongar fashion, not only describe but embody what it means to be Nyoongar through a process we call *storying*. There is not the space in this article to discuss storying in great detail; it is a topic for another paper in its own right. However, we can say that the practice of storying is both the means to encounter and engage with the spiritual dimension of life. It allows for a process referred to as *circularity* (Styres, 2011). Circularity, according to Styres,

...represents wholeness and connectedness that brings all of creation together in a circle of interdependent relationships grounded in land and under the Great Mystery. The Great Mystery is generally seen as a creative force that finds expression through land in all of its abstractedness, concrete connection to place, fluidity and interrelatedness (2011, p. 718).

This state of connectedness is something of a new experience for service staff, particularly as personal stories are not often advocated in the mental health workforce itself (although, ironically, clients reveal detailed and complex personal histories to practitioners who themselves remain an anomaly to their clients). Service staff struggle initially in making sense of the stories the Elders tell, taking them at face value. Over time, however, service staff begins to experience the circularity in their engagements with the Elders and find they can reciprocate in a similar way as they begin to tell their own stories. It seems then that stories teach us how to sit, listen and learn.

Storying is central to Nyoongar peoples' ways of being and doing for it enables engagement and inclusivity, and is critical in

understanding both the depth and closeness of relationships. In practical terms it also serves to connect people over space and time to remember, place and recall people and events (Styres 2011). The story of colonization is one such phenomenon that can be redressed through a (re)telling of past events from a Nyoongar point of view so as to even out the playing fields of history (Wright et al 2013a, 2013b).

We struggled with trying to formulate or translate a Nyoongar worldview by using concrete examples, which we discovered, were totally inappropriate. In our view it is virtually impossible to try and describe the Nyoongar worldview as a concept in concrete terms. As we sat in the garden of one of the Elders, amongst the garden art made by her grandchildren, and listened to the stories of family and traversing country, we realized that the Nyoongar worldview cannot be perceived, conceptualized or constrained within a narrow definition of a concept or a theory; it must be experienced and witnessed firsthand.

You learn a lot just by camping and sitting round a campfire...because that's the way people used to get things sorted out. Sitting round a campfire can also be used as a healing for you because it makes you feel good and it's amazing but when you look at a campfire you see things in the campfire and then ideas come from that campfire. You're not only getting a feed from that campfire but you're getting ideas [in your head] and when that smoke comes through it's cleaning - actually helping to clear your lungs and it's clearing your eye ducts, so when your tears - you get a lot of tears - it's doing you good...(Elder, 2014).

For service staff, learning happens on country and through listening to Nyoongar Elders tell stories of country and thus, more deeply and directly connecting to what it means to 'be Nyoongar' by sitting with or walking alongside them. Culture is a dynamic process, and Nyoongar law and culture is continually adapting to suit constantly changing situations (Host and Owen 2009). Nearly always, Nyoongar communication, whether through language, song, dance or art, embodies and conveys the spirit of, land, family and kinship. Within the experience of engaging with a Nyoongar worldview there is unlimited potential for anything to happen, in

particular, we have witnessed a stronger and more direct experience of the meaning of, and relationship to, country by service staff.

***Lessons Learned:** Understanding the concept of not same, not different, but unique has been a critical learning for the project team. Often greater emphasis is placed on difference, which then frames a dichotomy of us and them. The ongoing negative portrayal of Nyoongar people is a constant struggle with the community, which impacts on the access and responsiveness of service delivery. Therefore, as a research team, we are determined to model to service providers that our interactions with the Nyoongar people be open and inclusive. A key lesson learned during this period for the team is that Nyoongar people still carry deep scars from past interactions with both researchers and service providers. They, with good reason, have deep misgiving about the motivations of service providers. Therefore, we believe that all those who work with Nyoongar peoples have a responsibility to ensure that their interactions are both moral and ethical, as well as being open to a decolonising process.*

Clearing the obstacles on the path of research: A space in which to relate...

Our research process is based primarily on an Indigenous research paradigm. It has been inspired and guided by an 'Indigenous research framework', underpinned by the research and writings of other Indigenous scholars and researchers (Chino and DeBruyn, 2006; Smith, 2003; Rigney, 1997; Moreton-Robinson, 2000; Watson, 2004, Wright, 2011), and by researchers working with a 'participatory action research' focus (Cornwell & Jewkes, 1995, Stringer, 1996, Wallerstein, 1999, Pyett, 2002, Khanlou & Peter, 2005), 'emancipatory research' (Lather, 1991; Freire, 1983; Wallerstein & Sanchez-Merki, 1994, Fine & Weis, 2005), and community development (Gilchrist 2009, Ife, 2013)

A key objective of our research activities is to engage in practice that facilitates the process of decolonization in society (Alfred, 2009). It is our view that engaging in a decolonising research

process should not be either coercive or repressive, but offer hope and new opportunities, as Alfred states:

Beyond the effects on the individual, it is a real tragedy that First Nations people are generally wanting of the inspiration and support that healthy and cohesive communities provide. Cultural dislocation has led to despair, but the real deprivation is the erosion of an ethic of universal respect and responsibility that used to be the hallmark of indigenous societies (2009, 718).

Facilitating decolonization at a societal level is a key aspiration of the project, and we believe decolonization can begin by engaging organisations and communities and enabling more meaningful relationships with the people in them. The application of a participatory and collaborative research framework initiates the decolonising process through by privileging a Nyoongar worldview (Wright, 2011, Fredericks, 2011, Tuck, 2009, Dudgeon P, 2008, Duran et al, 2007). In so doing, the dominant worldview through which the western mechanisms, structures and value systems are produced and supported recede to the background, giving ground to Nyoongar mechanisms, structures and value systems so that they can stand in their own right. A critical aspect of our research and knowledge exchange has been to tell the Nyoongar story of colonisation. In doing so, *nyidiyang* are invited to (re)view past histories as complex, contested and storied for the benefit of the coloniser. When Elders tell of their own experiences of the impacts of colonisation, *nyidiyang* witness a lived history rather than a written history. Such direct engagement cannot be taken lightly, for it is in these exchanges that service staff undertake profound shifts in their thinking, based on these firsthand accounts in response to colonising forces. In their telling, the Elders are effectively re-legitimising Nyoongar culture, by acknowledging past acts, so that decolonising processes can take hold. It is only then that Nyoongar peoples and *nyidiyang* can truly come together to create a shared future. Service staff are irrevocably changed.

'Every time I go away from these [working together] meetings I feel I can no longer walk on the land in the same way again'
(Service Board Member, 2014).

We are continually mindful that trusting relationships are critical when engaging in decolonising research and practice. Real change will only occur for Nyoongar peoples and the mental health and drug and alcohol system at large if we work together to dismantle the colonialist structures and systems that continually exclude and marginalise Nyoongar peoples.

***Lessons Learned:** Research is still a thorny issue for Nyoongar peoples, as research conducted in the past has been disrespectful, misguided and caused harm. The negative perceptions held by Nyoongar peoples about the motivations and purpose of research has been a constant presence for our project. As you would expect the project team are reminded continually by the Elders of the purpose and intent of the research for they 'carry their people on their shoulders'. As researchers it is invaluable for us to have the Elders remind us to maintain our purpose and intent. We are therefore, determined that our research process be both transparent and inclusive.*

Understanding the nature of relationships: Being in relationship with...

Relationships bring us together so we can better understand our shared histories. It is through connecting to Nyoongar Elders and peoples that a deeper understanding and appreciation of shared histories can become the new reality, shaping new possibilities as well as shared understanding of health, wellbeing and identity. There is the need to open a new communicative space that allows for critical discussions to reshape mainstream systems so they are relevant to Nyoongar peoples in their everyday lives and, in the case of the *Looking Forward* Project, their health and wellbeing. Relationships are neither passive nor neutral and the relationship qualities of trustworthiness, inclusivity, adaptability, and reciprocity are what service staff need to demonstrate in their practices. These qualities further refine our 'working together' methodology and sharpen both the engagement process and the protocols through which, together, Nyoongar Elders and service providers engage (Wright et al 2013a, p. 51-52).

Relationships can have multiple meanings, so it is important to establish trust. Trust arises out of our emotional connections and is thus foundational to our relationships (Styres 2011, p.723). It is the foundation for our new learnings about and understandings of our differences and the guiding principle that enables us to value these differences as being unique. Elders understand the importance of experience and its transformative power. They know this through their own lived experience. The notion of *not same, not different, but unique* is borne out of reflections on self rather than on the 'other'. If we are to transform systems we need to consider first what we must change within our being so that we can translate those capacities we must hone that then will transform systems. In their conversations with service staff, the Elders often recall experiences of colonisation. In turn they often challenge service staff to try some cultural adaptation of their own, because the Elders continually remind us that they have had to learn the 'white man's ways' in order to survive, and that they are still here today.

First Nation researcher Eve Tuck speaks of the concept of collectivity, which she describes 'begins with the group, and stretches to include, celebrate and support the diversity of its members' (2009, p.62). Collectivity in a Nyoongar context means the recognition of family, community and connection to country as elements that provide sustenance, and a sense of identity. So too, reciprocity involves obligations that ensure the continued functioning of culture, family and community through practices that reinforce these values. For organizations to have relevance for the Nyoongar community it is critical that they have, (i) an understanding and respect of the concepts of reciprocity and collectivity in a Nyoongar context, and (ii) a genuine commitment to engage in the practice of reciprocity with the Nyoongar community, such as realigning their resources to more directly support families. The Nyoongar Elders involved in the *Looking Forward Project* have displayed patience, courage and determination and have willingly and generously shared their wisdom with service providers in working for and on behalf of the Nyoongar community.

Lessons Learned: *The respect and mutual trust between the Nyoongar Elders and senior management has been the foundation practice in developing relationships that exhibit the four key qualities of trust, inclusivity, adaptability and reciprocity. Findings from the Looking Forward Project have showed that Nyoongar peoples want services to work more closely and collaboratively with them through the sharing of ideas and resources. They want better access to services and for services to be more responsive to them. Nyoongar peoples voice their resilience but want services to support them by shifting resources to ensure their capacity is sustained. This is an active and significant step in the decolonising process.*

Breaking new ground, or giving back ground...

Relationships are the key for effective research practice, as they are for highly responsive and culturally secure service provision. There is emerging research on the positive power of social and interpersonal relationships (that is, between patients, families and health care staff) in health care settings. Some say, for example, that social and spiritual support through interpersonal relationships can positively affect the family and significant others of an individual receiving care, influence the medical decisions made, and enable people to see a way through their suffering (Kane 2004, p. 181). People who have a strong web of active relationships exhibit greater sense of personal control, self-esteem, meaning and self-concept and are better able to access resources to support their health and wellbeing (ibid, p. 182).

There will always be points of difference when engaging in research with groups who have historically been marginalised and disenfranchised. Participatory action research approaches work in ways that can be both decolonizing and empowering. This type of research can be liberating for both researchers and participants, and in the case of the *Looking Forward* Project, undoubtedly for service providers. One of the authors (Wright 2011) wrote about how practitioners should approach research as a

...form of intervention that dismantles oppressive systems and empowers participants to seek and demand change. Research as an intervention should be the aim for researchers – research about

action and change should both challenge and transform systems
(2011, p. 41).

We believe that the *Looking Forward* Project is progressing the ideal research that dismantles oppressive systems and empowers Nyoongar Elders to be the agents of change. The system is being challenged and changed, not by researchers but by the participants, that is, Nyoongar Elders and service providers, together. We are very confident that change will occur, for we are witnessing such change emerging. This is a new paradigm for working, shaped by the Nyoongar Elders who have wholeheartedly taken up the opportunity to drive the change, and it is truly exhilarating.

Finally, we often speak of the resilience of individuals and communities. We often speak in terms of it being a 'badge of honour'. Unfortunately, it refers to the strength of the individual or community, and then nothing more comes of it. As Kim Hopper states;

The one pays tribute to human resilience; the other, to targeted investments that can substantially enhance such resilience-to undertaking the necessary social work of accommodation to expand real opportunities (2007, p. 870).

Resilience is a wonderful attribute but to truly sustain and enhance resilience requires investment in both knowledge about what constitutes resilience as well as the frameworks and practices that develop and grow it.

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For further information about the *Looking Forward* Project please visit the Project webpage:

[http://aboriginal.telethonkids.org.au/centre-for-research-excellence-\(cre\)/looking-forward/](http://aboriginal.telethonkids.org.au/centre-for-research-excellence-(cre)/looking-forward/)

Biographies

Dr Michael Wright is a Yuat Nyoongar man, from Western Australia. His mother's and grandmother's boodja (country) is just north of Perth in a region known as the Victoria Plains, which includes the townships of Mogumber and New Norcia. He has worked across the spectrum of health as a practitioner, policy officer and researcher and has extensive experience in Aboriginal health and mental health. Michael is Chief Investigator on the *Looking Forward* Aboriginal Mental Health Project, which began in 2011. The Project follows on from his PhD work investigating caregiving experiences of Aboriginal families living with serious mental illness. He is a Research Fellow at the National Drug Research Institute, Curtin University.

Margaret O'Connell is of Celtic Australian descent, born in Perth and raised in the southwest of WA on Nyoongar country. She works as a Senior Research Officer on the *Looking Forward* Project and is based at the Telethon Kids Institute, University of Western Australia. Margaret is an educational designer (MEd) and action researcher who has worked in the community, TAFE and tertiary education sectors for the past decade. Margaret has experience in project management, strategic development, and training and professional development, particularly in online teaching and learning, and has a particular interest in the development of reflective practice, action inquiry, and community-based participatory research methodologies.

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