

## **Title**

*“If you don’t speak from the heart, the young mob aren’t going to listen at all”*: An invitation for youth mental health services to engage in new ways of working

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## **Abstract**

### **Purpose**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people are more likely to experience mental health issues or end their life by suicide than non-Aboriginal youth, but are less likely to access mental health services for support. Systemic change is required if mainstream youth mental health services are to be relevant and culturally secure for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.

### **Basic procedures**

*Building Bridges* (2017-2019) is a three-year participatory action research project being conducted in partnership with the Nyoongar community and three mainstream youth mental health services in Perth, Western Australia. The project involves Nyoongar Elders and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people working directly with senior management and key staff of youth mental health services to co-design, implement and evaluate a framework for systems change. The aim of the project is to increase Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people’s engagement with services and improve mental health outcomes for young people and their families.

### **Main findings**

This paper outlines the engagement process that underpinned the first phase of the project. Our research methods are premised by an investment in establishing safe spaces for the Elders, young people and service staff to engage in open, honest dialogue. We present two key activities that illustrate this process of building trust and deepening understanding, namely: spending time ‘On Country’ and engaging in a ‘storying’ process.

**Principal conclusions**

*Building Bridges* demonstrates the centrality of trusting relationships for systemic change and the way in which meaningful engagement is at the core of both the process and the outcome.

**Keywords:** *Aboriginal; cultural security; Indigenous, mental health services; youth*

## INTRODUCTION

Early and appropriate intervention is crucial to altering the trajectory of mental illness experienced by young people (McGorry & Purcell, 2009). This relies on access to, and engagement with, age- and culture- appropriate mental health services. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, access to culturally secure mental health care in an early and timely manner has the potential to have significant impact across the life-span. Cultural security is an essential component of health services delivered to Aboriginal people, however it is often misunderstood or unaddressed in mainstream services. Culturally secure practice goes much deeper than basic cultural awareness; it demonstrates both an understanding and a skill set to implement the necessary actions for ensuring services are culturally safe for Aboriginal clients, and embedding these work practices at an organizational level (Coffin, 2007). Despite the research conducted in recent years, little progress has been made to reduce the risks and impact of racism, poverty, high rates of unemployment and disenfranchisement that affect the mental health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people (Brown, et al, 2013; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2011; Blair, Zubrick & Cox, 2005; Haswell, Blignault, Fitzpatrick & Pulver, 2013; Kelly, Dudgeon, Gee & Glaskin, 2009; Mitchell & Gooda, 2015). There is still far higher burden of disease and injury for Indigenous Australians than for non-Indigenous Australians (Vos, et al, 2008). Community surveys show that psychological distress is three times higher for Indigenous people than for non-Indigenous people (Jorm, Bourchier, Cvetkovski & Stewart, 2012). Suicide remains the leading cause of death for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people between 15 and 34 years of age, with an age-specific death rate of 47.2 per 100,000 persons and suicide rates over three times that of non-Indigenous young people of the same age. This age group accounted for 67.3% of all Indigenous intentional self-harm deaths (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018). Young peoples' ongoing mental health issues and high risk of suicide is of significant concern within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. While Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people experience high rates of mental health concerns, they are less likely than non-Aboriginal young people to access mental health services, are more likely to present in crisis or at a chronic stage, and often engage with services for shorter periods of time (Westerman, 2010). Deferring timely access is primarily due to mistrust, and the belief that mainstream services do not understand and respect Aboriginal people and their culture (Wright, Lin, & O'Connell, 2016).

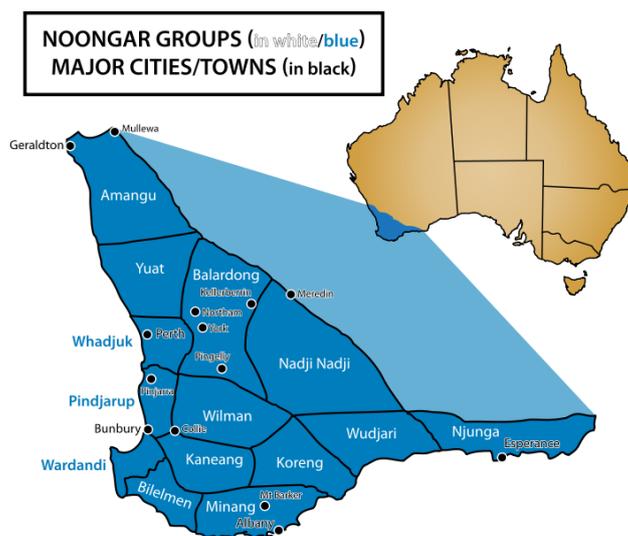
Improvements in the design, development and delivery of mental health services requires urgent attention to ensure they are accessible and responsive. The Australian Government's National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2013-2023 (Australian Government, 2013) highlights the need for health programs and interventions that acknowledge the unique health experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and

Torres Strait Islander youth is inextricably linked to their cultural heritage and a sense of belonging and identity (Australian Government, 2017). For positive change to occur, it is imperative that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have direct input into the design, development and implementation of the programs delivered to them. A new paradigm is required that is innovative, inclusive and sustainable, that allows for both community members and service systems to be committed and engaged. Mainstream youth mental health services have to be included as change partners because they play an important and critical role in the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people. It is our view however, that the answers lie within the community.

This paper is structured around three themes and outlines the engagement process that underpinned the initial phase of the *Building Bridges* project. First, we provide a brief overview of the *Building Bridges* project and the participatory action research methodology employed, specifically engaging local Aboriginal Elders and young people as co-researchers. Second, we discuss the importance of preparation and engagement, and the value of cultural immersion for service providers, such as spending time ‘On Country’ and engaging in a ‘storying’ process. Finally, we present some of the implications of this engagement process and how it translates to meaningful change in work practices.

### THE BUILDING BRIDGES PROJECT

The *Building Bridges* project (2017-2019) is a three-year participatory action research project located in Perth, Western Australia, on Wadjuk Nyoongar *boodja* (country). Wadjuk is one of fourteen clan groups that make up the Nyoongar Nation in Western Australia’s southwest, as shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Map of Nyoongar country (Whadjuk Trail Network, 2018)

Participatory action research involves participants, or co-researchers, being actively and meaningfully involved in all stages of the research process. This methodology maintains a commitment to local contexts, with researchers working in partnership with local communities towards action and social change (MacDonald, 2012; Wright, 2011; Minkler, 2010; Wallerstein, 1999). The *Building Bridges* project engages a number of co-researcher groups including local Nyoongar (Aboriginal) Elders, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, and senior managers and key staff from mainstream youth mental health services.

The *Building Bridges* project builds upon the foundational research of the *Looking Forward Project* (2011-2015) (Wright & O'Connell, 2015; Wright, et al., 2015; Wright, et al., 2016; Wright, Culbong, Jones, O'Connell & Ford, 2013). In the formative *Looking Forward Project* (Wright, et al. 2015), the team worked in collaboration with the local Nyoongar community and developed an approach that is grounded in relationships and recognises and promotes the cultural leadership of Elders to effect systemic change. Engaging Elders as co-researchers provides cultural security, cultural insight and authenticity to the research process, and their status as custodians of culture and *budiyas* (bosses/leaders) in their community naturally affords them a position of legitimate authority (Wright, et al. 2015). Given the youth context of the *Building Bridges* project, it was essential that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people also be engaged as co-researchers alongside the Elders. As one of the participants expressed:

*“Elders are the keepers of the knowledge and a very important part of the process, but just as much are the young people, their voices need to be put out there.”* (2018)

Central to the research process is attention to ensuring meaningful engagement and the building and sustaining of relationships between the Elders, young people and service staff. The key lesson learned from the *Looking Forward Project* (Wright et al., 2015) was the critical element of relationships. Working together, the *Looking Forward Project* Elders and senior executives co-designed the *Minditj Kaart–Moorditj Kaart (Sick Head–Good Head) Engagement Framework* (Wright et al., 2015). The Framework is held by a Nyoongar Worldview. It describes how Elders can guide and mentor service providers to better understand Aboriginal culture, recognise the real impact of colonisation and build service partners capacity to work more effectively with Aboriginal people in a culturally secure way (Wright et al., 2015).

Applying the key findings from the *Looking Forward Project* (Wright et al., 2015) of working relationally, the aim of the *Building Bridges* project is to develop the capacity of mainstream youth mental health service providers to be flexible, confident and competent in their interactions with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people. Most mainstream services recognise the need for

change and convey a strong desire to better engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients, but realize their inability to do so. Our hypothesis is that when youth mental health services undertake systemic change through their direct collaboration with Elders and young people, their work practices will be more culturally secure, resulting in an increase of Aboriginal and Torres Strait youth engagement and better mental health outcomes for young people and their families. Furthermore, we hypothesize that the local Aboriginal community will develop greater trust and confidence in the services and their ability to meet the mental health needs of young people.

### **PREPARATION AND ENGAGEMENT: HOW CULTURAL IMMERSION DELIVERS CHANGE**

Successfully working and capturing young people's experience of mental health care is complex and requires significant time and effort. Translating experiences with the aim of facilitating systems change is even more challenging (Wright, et al., 2016). Moral and ethical research practice with communities who have been, and continue to be, disenfranchised and marginalised requires translating findings responsibly. Being responsible means research findings should challenge and dismantle oppressive structures that create situations of power imbalance (Wright, et al., 2016). Meaningful relationships in a research context is therefore essential, as it provides both the foundation and the glue for holding the research process. From the beginning of the *Building Bridges* project there was an investment in establishing *safe spaces* for the Elders, young people and service providers to engage in open, honest dialogue. Safe spaces in this context requires service providers having a heightened awareness of their role and actively addressing the power imbalances between young people and themselves as clinicians and service managers. Safe spaces is about ensuring the voices of the young people and the Elders are heard and respected. We also applied a decolonising research framework, as outlined by Bartlett, Iwasaki, Gottlieb, Hall, and Mannell (2007) that "employ[ed] iterative, culturally based, and process-oriented methods" (p. 2374) that privileged a Nyoongar worldview. In using a decolonising approach, the dominant worldview through which the western mechanisms, structures and value systems are produced and supported recede to the background, allowing Nyoongar mechanisms, structures and value systems to stand in their own right (Wright, et al., 2016).

A critical element for building relationships and building capacity involves cultural immersion practices, which provide and allow for deeper experiential change. For example, the first *Building Bridges* engagement activity that brought the Elders, young people and service staff together was an 'On Country' event. This involved the group visiting two locations that the Elders identified as meaningful to them, where they spent time walking, sitting and being on *boodja* (country), and the Elders sharing stories about place and history. These 'On Country' activities place Nyoongar culture

and country at the center of the engagement and honors the wisdom and leadership of the Elders. It also immediately disrupts the service provider's typical ways of working and asks them to demonstrate flexibility and trust in the process. Being 'On Country' helps service staff develop a deeper understanding of a Nyoongar worldview. As one of the young people expressed:

*"The experience so far has been incredible, the stories shared and knowledge passed on is invaluable. Either in a room or out 'On Country', hearing and working in hand with the Elders is key to sustaining the future."* (2017)

It is also of note that such rich, experiential activities are significantly different to other 'Cultural Competency' activities that mental health service providers have completed as a way of 'preparing' them to work with Aboriginal people. As one of the Aboriginal workers stated:

*"I think part of the problem is how we already approach cultural competency, we have this idea that you do a two hour lesson and you've ticked a box, and I don't know who came up with that because it definitely wasn't Aboriginal people."* (2018)

After the 'On Country' experience, the group engaged in a 'storying' process over two workshops. In the *Looking Forward Project* (Wright et al., 2015), a research method was developed for sharing stories by bringing Elders and service staff together over a series of gatherings, which enabled staff to 'hear' past and present experiences of Elders and their families and build a base from which relationships could be developed. Storying is a shared healing process involving participants, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, listening, being present and 'bearing witness' to each person sharing their story. Shared storying is a cross-cultural research methodology that involves deep listening and cyclical reflection of lived experience captured in stories recounted by participants from different cultures. Engagement in shared story experiences lays the foundation for locating and reconciling points of difference and confirmation of mutual benefits and concerns that are often not discussed in cross-cultural settings.

Storying is based on the principle of reciprocity and provides the necessary foundation for trust and inclusivity. Direct engagement and exchanges of this kind provide service staff with the opportunity to undertake profound shifts in their thinking, based on first-hand accounts of the impact of colonising forces. Shared storying is a powerful process which provides a conduit for deeper understanding and appreciation of shared histories, shaping new possibilities, and shared understandings about health, wellbeing and identity. Storying is central to Aboriginal peoples' ways of being and doing for it enables engagement, inclusivity and reciprocity, 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. Story sharing gatherings provide a safe space in which people can

move away from the conventional 'business like' interactions and connect at a more personal level. Connecting in this way was a new experience for many participants.

To illustrate this process, the Elders typically begin the storying and may share stories about where they were born, where they grew up, about their parents, siblings, childhood home, relationships, working life, and families. Interspersed within these personal stories are insight about the impact of colonization, structural racism, oppression, discrimination and intergenerational trauma on Aboriginal peoples. Amongst this, we also hear stories of strength of spirit. Ultimately, through the Elders we hear the true history. As one Elder stated:

*"It's important, it's very, very important, because history was told on lie, it was not the truth... there was nothing about being Aboriginal, how brilliant our people were, you know how they can go out and live in the bush, you know and live off the land, but still survive. But none of that is [recorded] in the history, because they don't want it to be told. But you know what, our people are that strong, we're still here, we're not going nowhere." (2018)*

As well as bearing witness to the powerful stories of the Elders, the service staff were also invited to share their own story. The Elders provide a template for others to follow for introducing themselves, indirectly inviting staff to reflect on who they are and what their story is, to participate in the process as a whole individual rather than isolating their professional and personal identity. This is a stark contrast to the introductions usually experienced in a working environment, which typically include name and profession. As well as developing a deeper understanding of others worldviews (or potentially learning for the first time that there are multiple worldviews), this process encourages service staff to engage in self-reflection and starts dismantling their own worldviews and assumptions. In reflecting on their participation in the storying activities, one staff member described:

*"I feel privileged to hear the stories which have been shared today. It's always powerfully moving and stirs up a lot of sorrow and emotion to hear about the deep injustices and terrible things which have happened in the course of the shared life stories, but also good to hear of the successes and strengths which came through." (2017)*

As well as building relationships between participants, the practice of sharing their own story is a valuable experience for non-Aboriginal staff to help them become more comfortable with this way of working and translating it into their work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients. As two of the Aboriginal staff explained:

*"It's natural for an Aboriginal clinician to be able to give their story whereas it might not be as normal or easy for a non-Aboriginal to give their story because it's how we grow up, you meet*

*someone 'aw who's your mob?' it's just natural. So, I feel like that's an important factor in trust and relationship is, you know, even though we're still clinician's we still have to give a little bit to build that trust." (2018)*

*"If you don't speak from the heart, the young mob aren't going to listen at all." (2018)*

In the Elders quote below, we can see the interconnectedness between this more personal way of relating and creating the conditions to build trust:

*"Let me tell you something as an Elder and an Aboriginal person, it's called ignorance, all ignorance is; is a lack of knowledge. There is a wall between you and another person and you can't see that person, how are you going to trust that other person? For Aboriginal people we don't know who we're dealing with in the organization. The first thing you do is look at them, and say hello, breaking down that wall of ignorance. The more you talk, the more you become friends, and when you become friends, you start trusting. If we can break down that wall of ignorance, that ignorance is from not knowing history, so once they start learning about who we are and where we come from we become really good friends. And we tell our story, and our stories might be really similar. As you learn together you become friends and you start trusting, we start learning together." (Elder, 2018)*

The attributes of authenticity, openness and reciprocity are key to building trusting relationships. This is true in the context of staff working with the Elders and young people as co-researchers, as well as their work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients and families. This question of trust has been given little consideration when it comes to engaging Aboriginal people, which has significantly compromised the effectiveness of mental health service delivery (Wright, Davison & Petch, 2017).

## **HOW MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT TRANSLATES TO NEW WAYS OF WORKING**

The impact of investing in these personal, experiential activities has been both positive and evident as we move in to the next stage of the project. Services involved in the project are now more reflective in their practices and decision making. Their involvement with the Elders and young people has allowed and given them permission to work in a more attentive, considered and safe manner. For example, one of the services recently employed an Aboriginal worker, and the service engaged the Elders to assist with the recruitment process. The Elders provided advice with the job description and had a role on the interview panel, and the selected candidate was approved by the Elders. Unfortunately, the candidate decided that the role did not fit their expectation and has since left the service; this transition from the worker being employed and moving on was managed appropriately

by the service in discussions with the Elders. This experience far exceeded the expectations of the service, who now feel more confident that they have the support of the local community. The success of this initiative cannot be underestimated for it has resulted in a significant shift in the improvement of the relationship between the Aboriginal community and the service.

Another example of the shifts is the change in communication style within services; rather than an impersonal approach to communicating, staff are now seeing the benefits in moving toward a more personal approach to communicating. Again, this was a suggestion by the Elders and young people and has been wholeheartedly embraced by service staff. This was demonstrated by a non-Aboriginal service manager who premised his introduction in a meeting by reflecting on his experience engaging in the *Building Bridges* project. He shared that he previously introduced himself by his work role and professional background, however this information has since become less significant to him. He described going away from these activities and investigating his family origins, having a sense of needing to figure out where he fits in terms of Australian and Aboriginal culture, and questioning the lessons he received through his schooling. He shared that as a result of this process, he has developed more curiosity about himself and who he is. Similarly, we observed another non-Aboriginal service manager begin a meeting by introducing herself by her name and position. She then stopped mid-sentence and exclaimed “actually, I’m a human” and began to introduce her life outside of her work, such as being a mother of four children. The *Building Bridges* project encourages youth mental health service providers to bring their whole self to this process, for this provides the foundation for building meaningful relationships.

Participatory action research in this context is the preferred research methodology for the project as it fits with the needs of the community. The community has its own unique rhythm and it moves with the reciprocal demands and expectations of that community. For example, funerals take precedence and the research has to fit with these events. Participatory action research is premised on working with the rhythms of the community; not forcing and rushing participants, simply being where they are. As one of the Elders always says, “we are timeless people” (2018). This methodology is about respecting and acknowledging local contexts, and working in partnership with participants on the issues important to them.

*Building Bridges* has shown that positive outcomes can occur when inclusive research techniques are used. Critical to the process has been the work of facilitating participants to move deeper and be self-reflective in their practice and engagement. Going ‘On Country’ and engaging in a process of shared storytelling did move participants into a space that was neither familiar nor stable. This can be disconcerting if you are not familiar or are uncomfortable working with uncertainty. Regardless, we,

the project team and the participants intuitively understood that we were fine, for the Elders provided the necessary leadership and authority. The Elders remind us of the importance of staying with the process, recounting the Nyoongar words, *debakarn, debakarn, debakarn* (steady, steady, steady).

When participants were asked to reflect on their engagement with the project and the experience of working together, one of the senior managers chose to trace his own hand and an Elder's hand (Figure 2). This, we believe, creatively speaks to the power of relationships and the engagement approach employed. By investing in this engagement phase, service providers are encouraged to look at systems change through a lens of trust, relationships and a Nyoongar worldview.



**Figure 2.** Reflective activity, service managers drawing of his own and an Elder's hand

As participants move in to the next stages of the project, they will work together to co-design, implement and evaluate new work practices within the partnering services that better respond to needs and priorities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people. The reflective and experiential nature of the initial engagement process has allowed the service staff, Elders and young people to move in to this next stage with a shared intention for change, an openness to challenging, robust discussions, and a commitment to the process of working together. The *Building Bridges* project has the potential to offer a new way of working to the wider health sector and other service sectors more broadly; one that is grounded in an Aboriginal worldview.

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We declare no competing interests.

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