Just want to be Black: Practice thoughts on Aboriginal Ways

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Abstract

Over recent decades there has been a long overdue movement within social work and other areas of health and human services towards the acknowledgment and recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges. In celebrating this, we acknowledge that social work has historically been predominantly a white western centric profession in Australia. Social workers implemented policies of assimilation such as those which led to the forced removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families and communities which we now know as The Stolen Generations, and continue to be part of large, structurally racist institutions.

This article examines, through yarning, practice experiences that honour Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing in the social work context from an Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal perspective. Yarning is the practice of reciprocal sharing, deep listening and retelling, allowing new understandings to emerge. We found genuine cultural safety is evidenced in often overlooked ways in which Aboriginal People centre and place themselves in relation to place and connection. We argue that the intrinsic 'whiteness' of the service system continues to place Aboriginal Peoples as the 'Other' disallowing this. While token efforts to create 'culturally safe spaces' may emerge, genuine celebration and honouring of Aboriginal people's cultural identity in all its diversity must come for social work to truly embrace Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing.

The Authors

We write this article in the spirit of reciprocity and paying respect to Aboriginal research methodologies and commitment to gaining knowledge with the purpose of sharing it. We aim to illuminate stories and lived experiences, placing those learnings within an Aboriginal theoretical framework, while also highlighting our own process of yarning as research. Below we introduce and place ourselves in relation to Country and connection with respect for Aboriginal Ways.

Author 1 is a proud Mutti Mutti Woman living Self, Spirit and Mother Earth, who honours Ancestral cultural heritage, knowledge, wisdom and natural attuned connection to Earth medicine. Author 1's multifaceted profession as a social worker, certified holistic counsellor, reiki master and teacher is primarily focused in areas of family and children's services, youth education, community development, mental health and social and emotional spiritual wellbeing, and trauma and recovery. Author 1 lives on Country on the Murray River.

Author 2's family have lived on Mutti Mutti Country in the Mallee in North West Victoria Australia for generations. Auther 2 has strong family connections to the Yitha Yitha Nation through her children and grandchildren. While now living on Daramurragul Country, she still calls the Mallee Home. Author 2 is a social worker and academic who believes people are their own best experts. Author 2 pays her respects to Elders past, present and emerging and acknowledges that sovereignty was never ceded.

For the purposes of this paper, we use the identification of Aboriginal and Black as these are terms most commonly used in our region and those Author 1 is most comfortable with. We use the identification First Nations or Indigenous in the context of the original source. We acknowledge the Aboriginal scholarship we have drawn from the academy, and also acknowledge that Aboriginal Wisdom pre dates any such academy.

The Yarning

Our research follows Aboriginal traditions of Yarning as knowledge building (Atkinson, Baird and Adams, 2021; Bessarb and Ng'andu, 2010; Terare and Rawsthorne, 2019) and we will present our findings as learnings from this narrative.

Yarning is the practice of reciprocal sharing, deep listening and retelling, allowing for the development of new understandings. Yarning and other Indigenous research methodologies

have gained momentum over the past two decades as research methods in Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies as well as internationally (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010; Kovach, 2009; Rigney 2001; Smith, 2021). Atkinson, Baird, and Adams (2021) describe yarning as essentially the sharing of stories which is grounded as an Aboriginal culturally specified process. They describe the creating of a collaborative space and note both voices in the yarn are important.

Wilson (2008) reminds us that an Indigenous research paradigm is made up of an Indigenous ontology, epistemology, axiology and methodology … and includes a distinct way of viewing the world and of "being" (p.13). Like Parter (2021), Author 1 situates herself, her Aboriginality, her blackness, as central to her story and thus her research.

Parter (2021) powerfully centres her own image in her illustrated framework of enquiry stating, "the centrality of my visibly black image gives credence to the relevance and positionality of my Indigeneity" (p.17).

Geia, Hayes and Usher (2013) espouse the importance of Indigenous research and Indigenous method(ology), inclusive of the process of knowledge creation within collaborative respectful partnerships with non-Indigenous researchers. Author 2 brings her commitment to paying this respect and to living culturally humility. As identified by Terare and Rawsthorne (2019) both authors bring a lifetime of deep listening and respect for the narrative.

The context of the yarning was the authors sharing of stories relating to their social work practice when Aboriginal knowledges have emerged, been observed and honoured. Bessarb and Ng'andu (2010) discuss yarning with the aim of gathering information through participants stories; a conversation with a purpose. In following this methodology, the authors would often preface the conversation with "we need to yarn about this" and highlight a specific topic or theme. Over several months the yarning leading to this article became more focused. Deep listening and mutual respect allowed a greater depth of understanding to emerge for both authors.

For us to gain understanding and learnings from the yarns a context must be provided. Some historical background of social work and Aboriginal Peoples provides this.

Social Work and Aboriginal Peoples

Social works professional history dates back to the 1930's when workers started to organise themselves professionally, with the first Australian Association of Social Work being founded in 1946 (Lawrence 2016). Since that time social work has been an oppressive force in its engagement with Aboriginal Peoples in Australia (Bennett 2015; Katrak 2015). It can be argued that at the very core of social work identity in Australia has been the intrinsic norm of 'Whiteness'.

Morten-Robinson (2004) defines 'Whiteness' as 'the invisible norm against which other races are judged in the construction of identity, representation, subjectivity, nationalism and the law' (p.7). Walter, Taylor and Habibis (2011), discuss the invisibility white privilege gives to enable those to live unchallenged within societal formations. This is in stark contrast to the non-Indigenous preoccupation with politicising Aboriginal Peoples' identities for the purpose of continually monitoring, categorising, dissecting and controlling (Paradies, 2006).

The assimilation policies that led to the forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families and communities are based on this very premise of white superiority and the colonisers desire to 'absorb' Aboriginal people into white Australia (Cassidy, 2006). Social workers, along with other health and religious bodies enacted the devastating polices of assimilation that we know have impacted and continue to impact every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family and community. A reflection of white Australia's inability to acknowledge and own our First Peoples history, social work has had a complex engagement with Aboriginal Peoples, and continues to carry the weight of the legacy of this past (Bennett, 2015; Katrak, 2017). We would also argue this legacy prevents genuine embracing of Aboriginal knowledges outside of the 'Other'.

Cultural Safety

In considering the historical engagement of social work and Aboriginal People, and the emerging recognition of Aboriginal Ways, it is important we have an understanding of cultural safety. Williams (1999) provides the most commonly used definition of cultural safety as;

> "An environment which is safe for people; where there is no assault, challenge or denial of their identity, of who they are and what they need. It is about shared respect, shared meaning, shared knowledge and experience, of learning together with dignity, and truly listening" (p.213).

Frankland, Bamblett and Lewis (2011) call striving toward cultural safety "forever business", reminding us that Aboriginal Peoples have "lived for millennia due to the strength and authority of complex cultures and ways of being" (p.28). This understanding of cultural safety, along with Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing, will underpin our analysis of the practice examples we share in this paper.

Aboriginal ways of knowing being and doing

There has been a welcomed embracing of Aboriginal ways of knowing being and doing in social work and other health and human services in recent years. This has encompassed practice and research with the value of Aboriginal ways such as yarning, deep listening, reciprocity and connection to family and community being valued as both practice and research methodologies in their own right (Bessarb and Ng'andu, 2010).

Terare (2020) describes First Nations Worldviews as encompassing a unique set of values and beliefs system, creating a theoretical location of First Nations people and culture and that highlight that Creation stories were well established in Australian First Nations lives before 1788. Terare (2020) reminds the reader that prior to 1788 First Nations people had unique way of being. The nature of First Nations worldview, their epistemology (ways of knowing) and axiology (ways of doing) and their ontology (ways of being) treasure and reveres the wisdom of Elders (citing Williamson et al., 2010). It is in honouring these First Nations Worldviews that we share the following practice examples that honour Aboriginal Ways.

Being Black in a White System

Reflecting on working within mainstream social work as a sole Aboriginal woman, Author 1 discusses the deep relief felt when connecting with another black woman. Both for the 'service user', but also for herself as a black woman. Author 1 illustrates it here;

Aboriginal women who are stuck in the system are searching for other black woman, the black healers, black counsellors who believe in them and with whom they can trust to talk about their blackness.

To be validated and accepted as a black woman that its ok to dance to the rhythm of the moon, stars and the wind or to the music only we can hear.

To talk to her ancestors, spirit, and guides.

That's its ok to show up and be spirit.

To sit in sacred space and be safe. Safe to be accepted, trusted, believed and celebrated.

To be heard, felt, held and healed.

To be honoured.

Describing the engagements that may seem fleeting or casual to a non-Indigenous observer, but are actually profound cultural connections, Author 1 recounts one example of meeting a young Aboriginal mother and her baby in a service provision setting;

As I moved toward the mother and baby the baby's eyes fixated on me.

"He's an Old Fella this one, Aunty", the young mum said, and I responded. "I can see that, look at him watching me".

As Author 1 and Author 2 yarned about this exchange Author 1 spoke of the deep understanding, herself and this young woman shared, of being black, and the cultural safety she had felt for both of them in this exchange. We considered how this mutual understanding of Aboriginal Ways connected them in that moment, and how that moment created the energy for further connection. Author 1 elaborates;

To embrace our cultural blackness, to know its ok, its safe, you can be your dreaming.

To connect with Mother, be Self and Be Spirit.

Author 2 shares a story of respecting Aboriginal ways as a non-Aboriginal social worker in the following example;

I knocked on the door in my social work manager role, hoping to engage with this new family for support and hopefully, prevent further child protection involvement. I had been told the mum was very difficult to engage with. Having just relocated to a larger regional centre, I knew of this family, and had mutual connections but hadn't met them.

The mum answered the door and I introduced herself and stated all my social work credentials and why I was visiting. The mum looked at me and posed one question "Do you know X?" she asked. Social work and mainstream agencies are very big on 'boundaries', and I knew many mainstream professionals would deem this question inappropriate. But I

knew immediately that she was positioning me. And she was seeing if I was showing up authentically too and was willing to position myself.

"Of course," I responded and stated the connection. She let me in. She may have let me in had I skimmed over, or not answered her question, but I would have missed an opportunity to honour her positioning of and thus authentic acceptance of me.

Bennett, Zubrzycki and Bacon (2011), discuss the introduction process for non-Aboriginal social workers and note it also involves a willingness to share aspects of the personal and cultural self, in order to be seen as real and authentic and remind us that boundaries with Aboriginal people are much more "wide spread and encompassing" (p.27). We would further contend that the observance of such mainstream 'boundaries' actually purpurate and continue to validate culturally unsafe spaces for Aboriginal Peoples by removing and deeming inappropriate the ritual of connection.

Author 1 further elaborated on her example, how she knew the young mum would not have been culturally safe to proudly introduce her baby as an "Old Fella" to a mainstream worker, and therefore lose the opportunity to connect in a culturally black way, exemplifying the feeling here:

A Black dot in a white world, a world that supported the vanishing and removal of that black dot. How do, and can we live, navigate, stay safe, feel safe, be culture, be black.

Shepherd, Delgado and Paradies (2018) propose a strong cultural identity is a key component in Aboriginal social and emotional wellbeing, as opposed to a mainstream definition of mental health. They state (citing Gee, Dudgeon, Schultz, Hart and Kelly, 2011) cultural connectedness by means of participation in traditional practices and sustaining bonds with family, kinship networks and community is thought to underpin a strong Indigenous cultural identity. Likewise, Davey (2016) highlights, in the context of Aboriginal Elders in the primary health and aged care setting, the need for a sense of cultural pride as paramount to their wellbeing, valuing it above their importance as a senior member of the community. Calma, Dudgeon and Bray (2017) discuss Aboriginal social and emotional wellbeing, as having a culturally distinct meaning. In relating the health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals to the health of their family, kin, community, and their connection to country, culture, spirituality, and ancestry (citing Gee, Dudgeon, Schultz, Hart, and Kelly, 2014) they remind us it also accommodates experiential differences.

So, we question how can Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing be genuinely embraced in an overwhelmingly white system; using the term 'whiteness', (as Parter does) in the context provided by Morton-Robinson of a system of power, authority and structural dominance (2004).

Author 1 considers the very essence of culture in this response as identity centred rather than othered.

The system needs to feel, hear, hold, connect, experience, dance, sing, celebrate, honour,

We just want to be black. Be the Dreaming of generations of grandmothers before us.

The system needs to be black.

How then, we may question, can mainstream social work respond to learnings such as these? Does it highlight the need for learning cultural humility, attempting to embrace of Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing? Is it working towards deep listening, yarning and sitting with uncertainty?

Or are all these merely token responses when actioned from the centred white system? If we decolonise and deconstruct social work from this context of Morton-Robinson's power, authority and structural dominance, what in fact is left?

Perhaps that is the starting point.

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