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Ngara Dyin: Listening to Aboriginal women of the Illawarra and Shoalhaven

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About the authors

Mary Goslett is a psychotherapist, clinical psychologist, supervisor, trainer and consultant, with an extensive history in clinical practice, community services and adult education. This research was completed as the thesis component of Mary's Master of Psychology (Clinical). Mary knew of her Indigenous heritage for many years, but it took a long time to find her heritage because of the fractured nature of her family and the mentality of "Shame Job" within modern Australia. She is of the Yuin Dharawal People, one a clan of 13 different family groups from the southeast coast of Australia. Her individual clan is the Buddawang People from the Ulludulla region of New South Wales, bounded by Durras Lake to Lake Conjola and across to the Shoalhaven River, as well as Country around Tilba.

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Abstract

The marginalised position and unequal health status of Aboriginal people in Australia are a direct consequence of the trauma and dispossession of colonisation. Aboriginal women experience even greater levels of distress and ill health than Aboriginal men, and are more disadvantaged than any other group of women in Australia. While strength of cultural identity leads to increased social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) and reduced socioeconomic hardship, Aboriginal people in urban and regional areas suffer greater discrimination and resultant psychological stress than those in remote areas; they are additionally subjected to accusations of inauthenticity. Improving Aboriginal women's SEWB is pivotal in advancing Aboriginal SEWB overall. This research has explored nine regional Aboriginal women's experiences of culture and identity by a process of deeply listening to each woman: *Ngara Dyin* (Dharawal language). The aim was to discern means to strengthen cultural attachment and enhance positive cultural identity for this group of women, and consequently their community. Through the process of interpretive phenomenological analysis, seven interdependent over-arching themes were developed: walking and talking black; it's not easy growing up in a white society; we sit down and listen; connection to Country; strong black women; the way forward; and, wanting that magic. Decolonising approaches to increasing Aboriginal women's SEWB dictate that understandings of culture and identity must be informed and guided by the very people whose experience is being sought, and these women clearly indicate the need for strengthened cultural connection through funded gatherings and connections with senior women from remote areas.

Keywords

Aboriginal women, social and emotional wellbeing, regional culture and identity, deep listening, strengthened cultural connection

Introduction

Aboriginal people occupy a marginalised position in mainstream Australian society, experiencing greater rates of morbidity, mortality, socioeconomic hardship and adverse mental health than non-Indigenous people (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] 2006; Dick 2007; Durie 2004). Aboriginal women suffer even greater psychological distress than Aboriginal men and have poorer overall mental and physical health than any other groups of Australian women (Campbell, Kelly & Harrison 2012; Fredericks 2003). This unequal health status is directly related to the decimation of Aboriginal people since colonisation, successive government policies aimed at eradicating the social and cultural unity of Aboriginal communities, and the subjugation of women (Atkinson 2002; Kurtz et al. 2008).

Such policies, greatly influenced by contemporaneous anthropological theories of reified, primitive “other” (Moreton-Robinson 2000), shifted from “protection” to “assimilation” to “integration”, and the current espoused aim of “self-determination or self-management” (Clark 2000). “Protection” seemingly arose from concern regarding the slaughter and abuse of Aboriginal people as colonisation spread inexorably across the continent. Yet established reserves and missions largely perpetuated violence and abuse, and the dislocation of families and whole communities (Baker 2012; Kidd 1997).

“Assimilation” was based on notions that Aboriginality equated to varying degrees of blood quantum, and aimed to absorb Aboriginal people and culture into white society and to “breed out colour” (Harris, Carlson & Te Ahu Poata-Smith 2013; McGregor 2002). It resulted in the abduction of thousands of children from their Aboriginal parents, a period of profound trauma now referred to as the “Stolen Generations” (Dudgeon & Hirvonen 2014; Kennedy 2004).

“Integration” and the declared progression towards “self-determination and self-management” commenced with the 1967 National Referendum, allocating Aboriginal people citizenship, voting rights and inclusion in the national census (Clark 2000). However, interventionist policies are still enacted (Coulehan & Gaykamanu 2009), there is continued debate regarding “self-determination versus assimilation” (Dockery 2012), and current practices of defunding cultural programs have halted celebrations of Aboriginal achievements and pride in cultural identity (Feneley 2014).

The enduring impact of such policies of cultural extinction and dispossession is a diaspora of Aboriginal people across Australia, predominantly comprised of people of mixed European, Aboriginal and other cultural descent, the majority of whom live in urban and regional areas in evolving communities of increasing stratification (ABS 2013; Clague 2014). They occupy a liminal space, criticised by a dominant polemic of “authentic” versus “inauthentic” Aboriginality and accusations of “contaminated” culture (Brough et al. 2006; Harris et al. 2013). An ambiguous transitional borderland where meaning and identity are questioned, and distress arises in the wake of censure that denies the reality of people often painstakingly tracing hidden and obliterated family or seeking cultural connections lost through deliberate policies of alienation. Mainstream condemnation is internalised by

Aboriginal people themselves, often creating an abhorrence and denial of their own personhood and complicity in racism (Langton 2012).

Positive self-identity and cultural connection are deeply interrelated and pivotal in the development of psychological wellbeing for all people (Erikson 1968). Gee et al. (2014) argue that for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, the concept of social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) is particularly relevant. It encompasses an individual's social, emotional, spiritual, mental and cultural wellbeing, and recognises the impact of connection to ancestry, land, culture, spirituality, family and community.

Such connections strengthen cultural attachment, as described by Dockery (2009), which in turn is positively linked to increased subjective SEWB and enhanced mainstream socioeconomic outcomes for Aboriginal people. While it was found that Aboriginal Australians overall report more episodes of extreme sadness and fewer episodes of happiness than non-Indigenous Australians, they also report significantly higher levels of life satisfaction that are independent of adversity (Biddle 2014). Notably, those in remote areas reported greater happiness levels than those in non-remote areas (Biddle 2014).

Identifying as Indigenous is particularly problematic for Aboriginal people in urban or regional areas where maintaining identification with traditional culture creates accusations of inauthenticity and opportunism (Elinghaus 2009) and reduced SEWB as a result of discrimination (Dockery 2012). Paradoxically, Aboriginal people often continue to choose to identify more with their Aboriginal heritage than other aspect, despite the resultant stress. To achieve increased subjective SEWB and improved socioeconomic outcomes, any attempts to address inequities between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous people must be targeted to specific and identified regional variances to create culturally appropriate approaches to address marginalisation (Bolt 2009; Pholi, Black & Richards 2009).

Aboriginal women suffer from greater marginalisation than Aboriginal men. Their poor levels of SEWB result from complex interconnections of socioeconomic factors, founded on the colonial legacy of abuse, dispossession and suppression (Department of Health and Ageing 2010), the annihilation of traditional structures that respected the contributions of both genders, and the failure of western feminist movements to acknowledge the subordinate position of Aboriginal women (Moreton-Robinson 2000). The improvement of Aboriginal women's SEWB has been established as pivotal in advancing overall community health and welfare (International Fund for Agricultural Development [IFAD] 2003) and reducing levels of societal violence (Pinker 2011), yet there is limited research into localised and gender-based experiences of identity and culture.

Authentic understandings of culture and identity must be informed and guided by the very people whose experience is being sought (Fredericks 2003). Research must adhere to a respectful, inclusive and reciprocal Indigenous research praxis that is empowering of Aboriginal people, and not serving to sustain dominant ideologies informed by colonising principles (Rigney 2001). Research should thus be conducted by Indigenous people within their own communities, for the benefit of those communities.

This research was conducted by a woman who is a descendent of the Yuin Dharawal people of the land areas now known as the Illawarra and Shoalhaven. The paper aims to inquire into aspects of lived experiences of this group of regional Aboriginal women; to deeply listen, *Ngara*, to the ways in which each woman, *Dyin*, makes meaning of their experiences of identity and culture. The aim was to discern means to strengthen cultural attachment and enhance positive cultural identity for this group of women, and consequently their community, and additionally, to detect aspects to inform the

development of decolonising approaches to SEWB that can sustain and promote similar emergent cultures in urban and regional Australia.

Methodology

Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) guided this research project. Results derive from nine semi-structured interviews of Aboriginal women who live in or grew up in the Illawarra and Shoalhaven coastal areas of NSW. Prepared interview questions guided the interviews while allowing flexibility and responsiveness to the narrative. The researcher was very aware of “right way”, as taught by Aboriginal Women Elders; therefore, while there were some probing questions, if they were evaded this was respected. Interviews were recorded. There were three occasions when the women asked for the recording to be stopped because the conversation was too sensitive, and this was also respected and none of the verbal content was included. Interview transcripts were thematically analysed according to IPA principles, exploring the women’s experiences of being in the world.

Interpretive phenomenological analysis

IPA is a qualitative research method that aims to understand how individuals make sense of the phenomenon of their psychosocial worlds by generating meaning-making explanations (Brocki & Wearden 2006). Based on the assumption that humans are self-interpretive beings, it is an inductive method that aims to uncover the truth of phenomena as they appear to the individual, and to understand and represent the sense-making individuals employ, allowing themes to emerge rather than imposing a predetermined theory (Martin & Sugarman 2001). These components are identified via eidetic reduction, whereby the particular “eidos”, or essence of an experience, is sought as the researcher inquires into “concealed” knowledge and essential structure of phenomena and their contexts, seeking intimations of meaning (Pietkiewicz & Smith 2012). IPA reveals both unique experiences and those shared across cultural contexts.

Sample sizes are routinely small to allow in-depth analysis of intricate details, generating themes that capture subtle articulations of significance (Smith 2004). The researcher must recognise, critically reflect upon and endeavour to suspend or “bracket” their inherent cultural assumptions (Braun & Clarke 2013). Bracketing of one’s presuppositions regarding the phenomena under investigation facilitates entering into the participants’ frames of reference, personally interacting with them to gain an understanding of their meaning-making constructs, and aiming for thick description that would allow behaviour and constructs to become meaningful to an “outsider” (Dickson-Swift et al. 2009). While the participants’ own accounts of their experiences are privileged, “it is only later that the emergent analysis is examined in light of the extant literature and theoretical relationships established” (Eatough & Smith 2006, 486).

Use of IPA allows an emic perspective particularly suited to Indigenous research, focusing on individuals’ specific experiences of their culture and its phenomena rather than imposing predetermined conceptualisations and ideological structures (Jones et al. 2001). It is concerned with attaining subjective, personal accounts of lived experiences rather than objective, formalised reports that often impose dominant hegemonies and view culture through colonising ideologies (Brocki & Weardon 2006). McDermott (2010) said Aboriginal listening is more than “hearing”, requiring deliberation and self-reflection, and listening between words. IPA, too, requires open questioning, willingness to immerse oneself in the other’s worldview, empathy for that world, and the ability to critically observe and question to glean underlying assumptions and stances.

Reflective analysis

Researchers additionally need to examine their positioning as an “insider” or “outsider”, that is, whether they share characteristics of identity with the subject of study (Braun & Clarke 2013). In this research, aspects of both were present. The project was a process of exploring Aboriginal women’s experiences of identity as the researcher explored her own identity as a woman of Aboriginal descent. As Aboriginal relations are based on kinship connections and introductions require an acknowledgment and explanation of family and country, the researcher honoured the ritual and told of her descent from the Yuin nation. As she was raised as a white woman, the researcher was also an “outsider”. The researcher had to be vigilant lest she presume cultural understandings and shared biases and assumptions and seek to bracket her perceptions and conceptualisations as she made sense of the described world.

Participant recruitment

The Australian College of Applied Psychology, Human Research Ethics Committee (approval number 115090114) approved this research. Verbal permission was gained from Elders and written support from the Waminda South Coast Women’s Health and Welfare Aboriginal Corporation. Flyers describing the project were prepared; however, participation transpired through word of mouth. According to community protocol, the participants were introduced to the researcher through kinship connections and asked whether they would like to participate. There were originally twelve women who expressed willingness to participate, but three simply did not meet at required times or venues, a tacit way of withdrawing that was respected.

Participants

As illustrated in Table 1, nine women aged 39–77 took part. All were mothers, and there were five grandmothers and two great-grandmothers. Five were raising their own children, and one was raising grandchildren and a great-grandchild. One participant was reared in a children’s home and four grew up in community at either Jerrinja or Wreck Bay. Two women identified as Aboriginal in adulthood; six had tertiary education; and seven worked in or with Aboriginal government or community services.

Table 1 Demographic characteristics of nine participants, based on self-report

	Age	Education level	Raised in community	Raised in children’s home	Still raising children	Raising grand-children	Worked in Aboriginal-specific position
Arran*	63	Degree					X
Kathy	62	Degree	X				X
Kerry*	46	Degree			X		X
Lou	67	Degree		X			X
Maggie	39	Diploma			X		X
Nina	47	Degree	X		X		X
Tamina	77	Year 8					
Thelma	62	Year10	X			X	
Wendy	43	Degree	X		X		X

* Identified as Aboriginal in adulthood

Data analysis

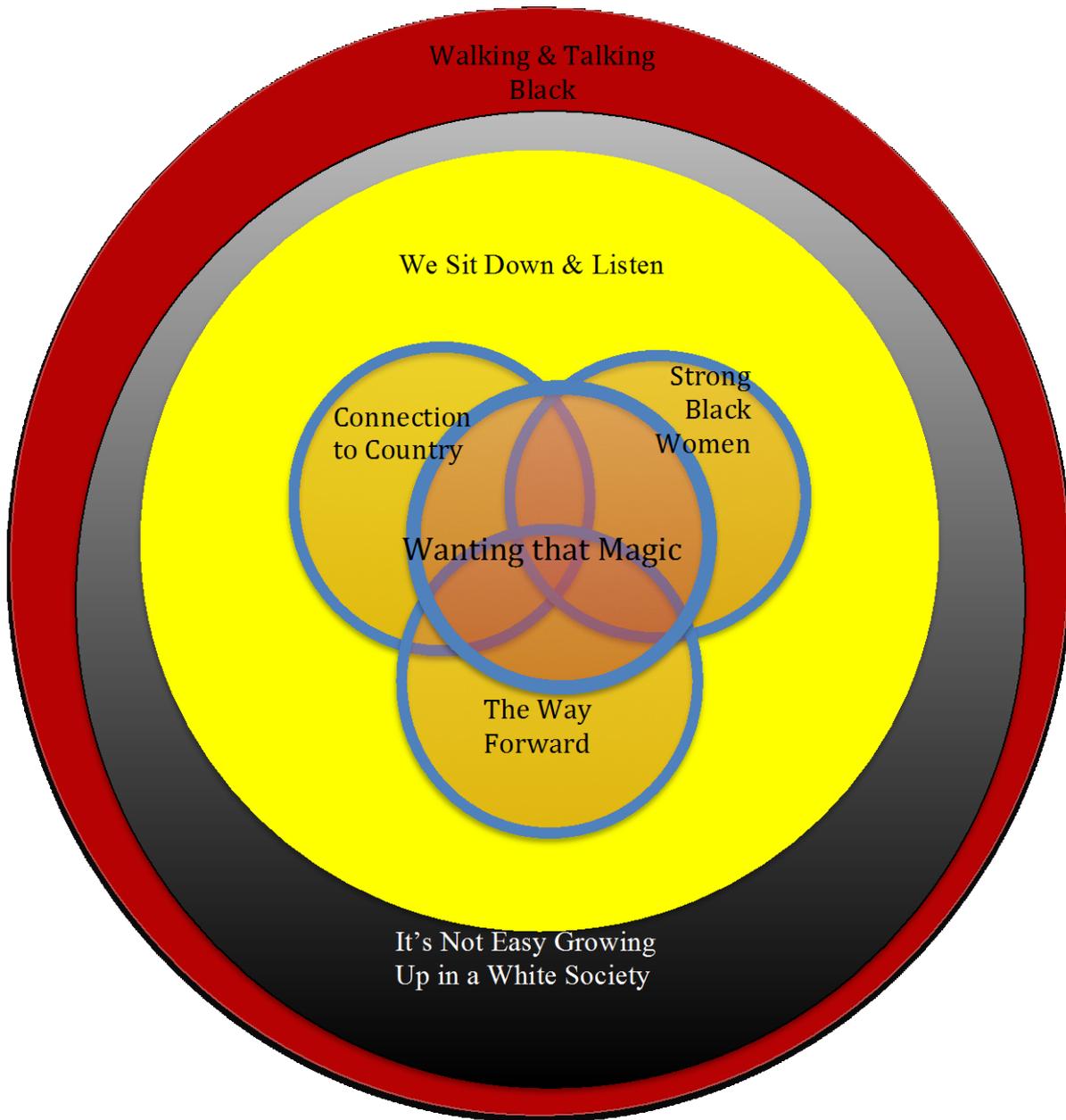
Data analysis occurred in several stages. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed. The researcher immersed herself in interview data, listening to each recording several times and repeatedly reading transcripts. Copious notes were made, including about content and use of language, preliminary interpretations and reflexive observations. Notes informed emerging themes; facilitated integration of details and descriptions with nuanced meaning; and allowed interpreting the parts in relation to the whole, and the whole in relation to the parts (Pietkiewicz & Smith 2012).

Emerging themes were compared and contrasted, and those conceptually similar were grouped together and labelled. Traditional pen-and-paper methods were employed and themes were allocated colours to later allow quotes or themes to be considered in context. Superordinate themes were identified, each with a number of related subthemes. All interview transcripts were scrutinised again to ensure themes accurately reflected the data, and any further themes or subthemes were considered. Final themes were assigned descriptors reflective of their dominant underlying principle. Themes were reviewed with the academic supervisor, and an external individual conducted a reliability check (Braun & Clarke 2013).

Results and Discussion

Data analysis generated seven superordinate themes, each incorporating subthemes encapsulating experiences and meaning of identity and culture for these Aboriginal women. As represented in Figure 1, themes did not emerge as separate and discrete components, but as interrelated, interdependent constructs with overlaps among them all. Three were fundamental to all others, which consecutively reduced in significance, yet were still inherent in the last four, with overlap among the subthemes in these aspects. Overall, all themes were components of the major one, "Walking and Talking Black", and each was predicated upon preceding components.

Figure 1. Superordinate themes of identity and culture.



The parameters of this paper preclude a comprehensive discussion of all components; therefore, a limited number of quotes are included as indications of thematic content. Pseudonyms were allocated to participants, quotes have been taken directly from the raw data, and changes to quotes have only occurred when necessary to clarify the participants' experiences.

Walking and Talking Black

The first theme, "Walking and Talking Black", was the most salient and fundamental to all other themes, referring to aspects of identity and relationship viewed as intrinsic to Aboriginality. As stated by Arran, "(we) ... see it [identity] in different ways depending on

how connected up [we are] ... you must have ancestry, of course, but as well as that, how you feel. How you connect.” All women spoke of, as Lou said, “that connectedness we have”. Family, kinship and clan connections were paramount, but as said by Arran, “there’s a great sense of safety” in being with other Aboriginal people. Secret business, Aboriginal English and jargon, “straight talking” and knowing history were all part of that connection.

The term “black” did not refer to skin colour but to socialisation as an Aboriginal person, something Bolt (2009) found to be more crucial than descent. Skin colour was an aspect of identity, but Nina described going home to her community after a prolonged period away and realising that although a number of relatives are fair-skinned: “We’re all talking the black talk ... we identify so strong that yeah, I just did not see the difference.”

The notions of contributing to family and community, and the ties of reciprocal obligations, were intrinsic to identity, and there was an underlying repudiation of individualism. Contributing included and extended beyond employment that benefitted the Aboriginal community, to passing on knowledge to the next generations and caring for Elders in very commonplace ways. “Being Black” was augmented by connections through work, community, political activity, shared adversity, cultural gatherings and geography (Thompson, Gifford & Thorpe 2000).

A subtheme of “caring and sharing” was prominent, including nurturing others, with the roles of mother, aunty, and grandmother pivotal in being an Aboriginal woman. “Straight talking” was also key, the comfort of being with other Aboriginal people who can “say it as it is” and argue without rancour; and the use of Aboriginal English and jargon was a strong identifier, even if original language has largely been lost.

The willingness and ability to describe the particulars of Walking and Talking Black seemed to be clearly linked to the degree of socialisation the women had experienced. This was most marked in discussion of “secret business”. Nina, raised in community on her traditional lands and returning regularly, alluded to but did not describe secret business; Thelma, raised on a reserve, divulged details of ceremony and then asked for them to be deleted; Arran and Kerry, who came to their Aboriginal identity as adults, freely described spiritual experiences.

It’s Not Easy Growing Up In a White Society

The next most significant theme, “It’s Not Easy Growing Up in a White Society”, speaks of the hardship and challenges faced by the women and their communities. Numerous researchers have reported the greater marginalisation and hardship experienced by Aboriginal people than non-Indigenous Australians (ABS 2006; Campbell et al. 2012; Dick 2007; Fredericks 2003). This was supported by the women’s narratives and was seemingly indivisible from being a regional Aboriginal woman. Much of their accounts concerned socioeconomic conditions, racism and the traumatic clash between black and white cultures.

Kathy said, “A lot of our people are just speakers of Aboriginal English and they’re the ones that are ... living the disadvantaged lives.” Mentions of racism were prevalent, and Tamina said, “Oh yeah (we were called) black nigger ... So in the end I didn’t like to admit that I was Aboriginal.” Wendy spoke of her grandmother and great-grandmother being servants without ever receiving wages, her father being denied schooling, and her own experience of racism at university. Maggie said, “It’s not easy growing up in a white society

... like even here they think ... they're good for nothing drunks, stinking Aboriginals." She told of recently being in line in a shop and "... non-Indigenous people just coming in and just getting served over the top of you"; and later, "I wish I could be white just for one day, just to see what it's like."

These findings additionally support the concept of the liminal space occupied by Aboriginal people of mixed-heritage, where their Aboriginality is both questioned and denigrated (Brough et al. 2006). Urban and regional Aboriginal women must continually negotiate a borderland between white romanticisation of deserving "pure blood primitives" living a traditional lifestyle versus those of mixed descent, seen as opportunistic and inauthentic. Tamina's childhood experience of reluctance to identify as Aboriginal poignantly evidences the traumatic legacy of racism and its internalisation. Perhaps even more poignantly, lateral racism was also mentioned, with Thelma telling of vilification for being too fair-skinned. As coined by Foley (2000), "Too white to be black, too black to be white."

We Sit Down and Listen

"We Sit Down and Listen" concerned law and protocol, and overwhelmingly referenced respectful listening to transmitted cultural knowledge from Elders, leaders and each other. Reflecting on growing up in community, Kathy spoke with deep love for the communal upbringing and teaching she received from Elders, and Nina stated, "When the Elders are sharing knowledge to you, then we sit down and listen." Knowledge of and adherence to protocol was essential, with subthemes of acknowledging country and ancestors; spirituality; learning humility and accepting responsibility; contributing to community; and being "growled" or "flipped" (ostracised) if you step out of bounds.

This theme evidenced the paradoxical nature of urban and regional Aboriginal identity (Baker 2012), wherein there is a deep desire to know and abide by cultural protocols that have been thwarted by severed connections with land and kin, resulting in lost law and lore. Colonising practices have fragmented community structures and severed many cultural rituals, and these factors have made enduring protocols more precious, with adherence to them deeply linked to identity in the face of the difficulties brought about by colonisation.

Connection to Country

All the women referenced connections to Country as essential to Aboriginality. Nina talked of the importance of "land and seasons", Thelma spoke fondly of "traditional lands and ... the ocean, because (I'm) saltwater too". Wendy emphasised "certain stories and places of significance" as being central to herself as an Aboriginal woman, and Arran told of "feeling this tremendous sense of a peacefulness coming home (to this land)".

There was expressed grief about disconnection from original Country, and their ancestors' experiences of being moved on from their traditional lands. Only three of the nine participants could trace descent to traditional owners of Country around Illawarra and Shoalhaven. Those who had been disconnected from their Country told of attempts to reconnect and seeking out examples of activities that reinforce this, such as eating traditional foods, using traditional medicines and continuing cultural practices around fishing. Reclaiming places such as the Wreck Bay and Jerrinja reserves and a local Aboriginal children's home seemed to be a way of re-establishing traditional ties to land and belonging, and to have become elements of cultural attachment, with participants actively engaged in redefining relationships with Country. Childhood experiences of

travelling with family and contemporary camping and fishing trips also denoted “Travelling Country”.

Strong Black Women

Aboriginal women were traditionally equal in status to men, with distinct sacred and secret knowledge and ceremonies (Payne 1992). However, the biases of white male anthropologists meant they were blind to the idea of “Women’s business”. In addition, western notions of male dominance and the severe social transformations since colonisation have resulted in Aboriginal women being subjected to white patriarchal power relationships. Nonetheless, the women viewed strength as an ongoing, distinct characteristic of female Aboriginal identity and central to Aboriginal community.

“Strong Black Women” revealed the resilience and fortitude of living and choosing to identify as Aboriginal despite adversity and acrimony. The women spoke with pride about those who fought for rights. Tamina told of individual courage: “She was a good strong woman, a hard-working woman.” Wendy became emotional telling of the Aunties who “taught me a lot, you know, just being a strong black woman ... like women are the backbone of ... family and community”. There was acceptance and determination, and an openness to non-Aboriginal people, despite experienced inequality. They spoke of wanting to instil strength in their daughters and granddaughters, as found by Fredericks (2003) when researching Aboriginal women in the Rockhampton region. This strength supported them in dealing with racism and hardship, and their ability to laugh at themselves and their experiences was seen as lifesaving.

The Way Forward

Contemporary social policies to overcome Aboriginal marginalisation often focus on children and largely disregard women, yet education of women is a powerful agent for change (IFAD 2003). The participants very much saw the empowerment of women and strengthening cultural ties as “The Way Forward”. They did talk of the need to educate their children, but not in just “whitefella” ways; they also emphasised the importance of having Elders working in classrooms as a means of ongoing cultural transmission.

They viewed the education and skilling of women as pivotal, and perhaps this was a reflection of the fact that seven of the participants had tertiary education. Kerry said, “I guess it all comes back to education [of our women]”, and agencies for women that both employed and upskilled workers while providing services to the community were praised. In addition, “Teaching whitefellas” was seen as vital, and Kathy said, “They [whitefellas] only saw the negative side of Aboriginality ... So I understood their racism and got involved in cultural awareness programs.”

Art was very much viewed as part of the way forward and seen as both providing healing and regaining lost identity. Lou spoke proudly of involvement in an exhibition that allowed Elders to relive memories of belonging. Appropriate programming on National Indigenous Television was raised as another means of strengthening cultural transmission, as well as educating both white and black communities. The women additionally spoke of the importance of “helping others find their way back”, referring to those of the Stolen Generations and the concealing of Aboriginality that resulted, as a way forward for Aboriginal people as a whole.

The need for and significance of funding gatherings and ceremonies for Aboriginal women was as an integral part of The Way Forward. The women spoke of these events being pivotal in strengthening cultural ties and healing trauma. Such ceremonies and celebrations are strongly correlated with improved SEWB and socioeconomic outcomes (Dockery 2012). As said by Wendy, "It's empowering ... seeing women who come from Country ... that still hold onto ... great cultural ties."

Wanting That Magic

As illustrated in Figure 1, the theme of "Wanting That Magic" linked the themes of Connection to Country, Strong Black Women and The Way Forward. It gave unique expression to the prevailing grief regarding lost ancestral law and protocol, sacred and celebratory ceremonies, severed connection to Country and the spiritual framework that structured precolonised Aboriginal societies. Baker (2012) wrote of senior women of Coober Pedy inviting Nunga women to learn more about "Grandmothers' law", and Wanting That Magic appears to distinctively reference the same impulse, a yearning so strong it emerged as a distinct phenomenon.

The women's stories involved grief, sorrow and longing for lost community, culture, Country and language, as well as frequent "Sorry Business" and funerals for loved ones. Loss of particulars and depth of culture wove through the narratives as they wistfully spoke of vanished knowledge. Thelma talked yearningly of gatherings where they can meet "... our sisters that come back down from the desert ... because they're the ones with that ceremony, too. Even though we've got our ceremony, they've got that ... magic. But it'll be impossible to do without funding and support."

Losses of the Stolen Generations were commonly cited, and Thelma told of three families of cousins being taken away, and "It's like watching their mothers come back home with them; they walk with them... . you can see and hear their mothers ... [saying] look after my girl, teach her the right way". Kathy said communities need to "... understand why people [got] their identity lost in the past, you know, ... having their children taken and things ... you wouldn't get a job and things like that [if you identified as Aboriginal]." Arran told of conversations with her mother, who said, "Nanny never spoke about anything like that", so she came to learn that descent was secret and undeclared. Lou spoke of the importance of photographs for people torn from their families and her joy in receiving a photo of her father as a young man. She also said, "We don't know how it [law] operated and I'd love ... to really know because just imagine passing that information on to your younger generation.... How proud would they be, eh? Of their heritage." Maggie wistfully stated, "we've lost so much", and "our law has gone".

Kerry voiced a new concept within the narratives of yearning and loss, one that does not appear to have been discussed in previous literature. She said, "It's hard for me because I'm from the hidden generation, I feel that my life was taken from me in a different way." The naming of "The Hidden Generation" gives voice to the experiences of those suffering an aftermath of The Stolen Generation, the denial of descent. Due to the trauma and terror induced by the abduction of children, the rampant discrimination and subjugation associated with identifying as Aboriginal, and the fragmentation of community ties, Aboriginal descent was deliberately or inadvertently hidden. Choosing to reclaim heritage can result in accusations of opportunism or inauthenticity rather than a reasonable desire to understand ancestry.

Implications

Authentic understandings of culture and identity must be informed and guided by the very people whose experience is being sought and these participants have clearly stated their desire and need for connection with lost culture and identity. Eight of the women talked of the need for gatherings and ceremonies with senior women from remote areas to reconnect with traditional knowledges and supplement breaches in known law. They talked of the impediment of lack of funding, referencing government policies that eschew support of programs promoting cultural identity. It is recommended that funding be provided to implement regular gatherings between women of the Illawarra and Shoalhaven and senior desert women. Ceremonial gatherings would honour the participants' voiced yearnings and create protected alternative liminal spaces, "... in-between, safe, sacred spaces [where] ... endarkened, feminist, spiritual epistemologies can be enacted, and bruised, damaged souls can be healed" (Denzin, Lincoln & Tuhiwai Smith 2008, 215).

Second, further research could be conducted into The Hidden Generation, a hitherto unrecognised yet direct legacy of the brutalising acts and consequences of colonisation. In addition, proposed gatherings could begin to restore identity and belonging to those whose ancestry was hidden from them.

Limitations

Findings were based on a small sample of Aboriginal women who were not all of the same clan or language group, and it would be wrong to assume shared geography represents shared phenomena. In common was that they were of mixed-descent and lived in a regional area where maintaining identification with traditional culture is problematic and creates psychological stress (Bolt 2009), and yet, with one exception, they proudly asserted their Aboriginal identity.

There is great potential for the misuse of power in the relationship concerning researched and researcher, and reciprocal obligations within an Aboriginal environment, which must be continually interrogated (Baker 2012). Positioning as a researcher and the subjective nature of IPA additionally include inherent biases and significant ethical issues, and participants may not agree with the researcher's analyses. Further, readers may dispute the interpretations presented. Debate regarding this issue would be welcome, for there are many Aboriginal cultures and multiple Aboriginal women's cultures (Moreton-Robinson 2000).

Conclusion

Aspects of identity and culture discussed here attest to a vital, dynamic and developing culture among this group of Aboriginal women of mixed-descent who live in a regional coastal area of NSW. Gender inequity perpetuates and deepens poverty (IFAD 2003), and empowering women leads to decreased violence in all societies (Pinker 2011). Aboriginal women were anthropologically presented as submissive objects of both Aboriginal and non-Indigenous men, and profoundly disempowered by the removal of their children and denial of their motherhood through "assimilation" policies (Payne 1992). Aboriginal cultures in Australia are emergent cultures rooted in ancient practices and knowledges, and urban and regional Aboriginal women are actively engaged in maintaining, re-establishing and evolving social and cultural connections and practices as they navigate discourses of authenticity (Harris et al. 2013). They are dynamically occupied in creating a meaningful identity that encompasses various and paradoxical practices, acknowledging what was

stolen and hidden while reclaiming and affirming the surviving and evolving culture (Clark, 2000), and they should be supported in doing so.

Postscript

After completing this project, the researcher was employed by a private psychiatric hospital. She was successful in advocating they use allocated funds to support a five-year project to bring senior desert women to the south coast on an annual basis.

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