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Research

Therapeutic aspects of Connection to Country and cultural landscapes among Aboriginal peoples from the Stolen Generations living in urban NSW, Australia

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Key points

- Many older Aboriginal peoples living in urban places have limited access to natural landscapes that are minimally impacted by colonisation (cultural landscapes) and ancestral lands (Country)

Abstract

Objectives and importance of the study: Most older Aboriginal peoples live in urban locations. Many of these people were displaced by the policies and practices that produced the Stolen Generations. As a result, access to 'Country' and cultural landscapes that are minimally impacted by urbanisation can be limited for older Aboriginal peoples, restricting the health and wellbeing benefits these environments promote.

Study type: Qualitative study.

Methods: Our study worked collaboratively with Aboriginal traditional cultural knowledge holders to observe and analyse how participation in a 'cultural camp' on a Yuwaalaraay sacred site in New South Wales (NSW), Australia, impacted wellbeing and connection to place among older Aboriginal people who were survivors or descendants of the Stolen Generations.

Results: Eight participants (three women; five men) attended the cultural camp and took part in a yarning circle. Thematic analysis of the yarning circle uncovered memories of traumatic experiences of institutionalisation, including abuse and loss of Country, community, and culture. Experiences of the cultural camp generated a sense of reconnection, cultural pride, wellbeing and place attachment. The sensory experience of Country emphasised a sense of belonging and healing.

Key points (continued)

- Our study explored the impact of facilitating access to a Yuwaalaraay cultural landscape and sacred site for a group of older urban Aboriginal people who were survivors or descendants of the Stolen Generations through participation in a sensory-led cultural camp
- Participant experiences reflected a sense of (re)connection, cultural pride, belonging, wellbeing, and place attachment
- Policies and resources supporting grassroots initiatives such as Aboriginal cultural camps are needed to ensure accessibility for older Aboriginal peoples living in urban places

Conclusions: Our findings reflect the importance of sensory-led experiences on Country for older urban Aboriginal peoples and reinforce previous evidence on the 'therapeutic' aspects of culture and natural landscapes minimally impacted by colonisation. Policies and resources supporting grassroots initiatives such as Aboriginal cultural camps are needed to ensure accessibility for older Aboriginal peoples living in urban places.

Introduction

'Country' is a multifaceted concept that incorporates a "*deep, intimate, holistic, complex, localised and reciprocal relationship and connection between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (herein Aboriginal) peoples and elements of land, sea, waterways, sky, stars, and living and non-living entities*".[1] Country can be seen as a living system and is closely linked to Aboriginal cultural practices, law/lore, language, and identity[2], which are tied together through kinship and place-centred narratives.[3] Urban environments and cityscapes are also recognised as 'Country'. They are made visible through resurgent place-centred activities such as language revitalisation, art, activism, changing colonial place names to original place names, and history and truth telling.[1,4] Physical sites minimally impacted by colonisation, including natural and sacred sites protected from urbanisation or development, are sometimes called 'cultural landscapes'.[1] Aboriginal peoples' connection to Country and cultural landscapes are critical elements for health and wellbeing.[1] Evidence points to culture as a protective factor in health and wellbeing among older Aboriginal peoples[5] and connection to Country is linked to better biomedical outcomes.[6,7] In urban environments, such connections can be easily lost. A recent systematic review[8] documented that Country, culture, family support, community and Eldership are priorities in ageing from the perspectives of older Aboriginal peoples in Australia. Yet, contemporary discourse, policies and frameworks focusing on 'successful', 'productive', or 'healthy' ageing often lack adequate consideration of the impact of ongoing colonisation, racism, intergenerational trauma, and displacement and disconnection from culture and Country.[8]

As a result of racist and assimilative government policies and practices, forced displacement and relocation, many (older) Aboriginal peoples live in places that are disassociated from 'Country' – notably in highly urbanised environments. Their access to cultural landscapes, which are often found in rural and remote areas, is restricted.[1] Further, limited mobility and poor availability of programs facilitating physical access to cultural landscapes, particularly for older Aboriginal peoples in assisted living or residential care, also create barriers to improved health and wellbeing.[8] Lack of access is compounded among the Stolen Generations and those forcibly displaced from their Country, as they primarily live in non-remote areas (79%)[9] and are more likely to have poorer physical and mental health, have been incarcerated, and experience higher levels of socioeconomic disadvantage.[9] Notably, between 1910 and the 1970s, one in three Aboriginal children were removed from their families and institutionalised in foster or group 'homes' under the Stolen Generations policies[10]; this presently represents one in five older Aboriginal people (> 50 years).[9] Recent evidence[10] shows that the descendants of Stolen Generations victims also experience increased stress, discrimination and poorer education and health outcomes, emphasising the intergenerational impact of trauma and displacement from and dispossession of Country and culture. It is important to note that the Stolen Generations are recognised as ongoing, with a 2021 report showing that one in 18 Aboriginal children are removed from their families and placed in the out-of-home care system (11 times the rate of non-Aboriginal children).[11]

Background

One author (TF) is a Yuwaalaraay/Gamilaraay traditional knowledge holder and custodian for a culturally and spiritually significant site called 'Dharriwaa' (Narran Lakes, New South Wales [NSW]). Dharriwaa is a protected cultural heritage, bird breeding, archaeological and sacred site jointly managed by an Aboriginal

committee (including TF) and National Parks and Wildlife NSW. Dharriwaa means "*a place for all*" in the Yuwaalaraay language and was a meeting and corroboree site for nation groups across the continent. Two authors (TF, MO) deliver walaay (ceremonial camps that occur in cultural landscapes) at Dharriwaa for Aboriginal communities in north-western NSW. The walaay focus on reconnecting to Country, intergenerational healing, reclaiming languages, and traditional ceremonial, medicinal and food knowledge.

Feedback from those attending walaays suggests that opportunities to forge and strengthen cultural identity and connections to Country and kin have therapeutic impacts, which in turn may be protective factors for health and wellbeing. While wayaays are well attended by those living in the north-western NSW region, there is limited opportunity for the many older Aboriginal peoples living in urban Australia to participate due to geographic and socioeconomic barriers. This reflects a missed opportunity to facilitate enhanced wellbeing for older Aboriginal peoples living in urban places. Through discussions with Yuwaalaraay Elders and traditional cultural knowledge holders, it was decided that it would be valuable to explore the process of connecting older Aboriginal people impacted by displacement from Country – as victims, family members, or descendants of the Stolen Generations – to Dharriwaa. As a result, the study aimed to collaboratively explore and facilitate physical access to the cultural landscapes of Dharriwaa for Aboriginal peoples living in urban NSW and document the impact this had on wellbeing and connection to place.

Methods

The study works under an Aboriginal cultural governance structure, which ensures that place-based traditional cultural knowledge holders or custodians lead decision-making and are supported by researchers facilitating and guiding the study. In this study, a Yuwaalaraay Elder and a traditional cultural knowledge holder (TF) formed the cultural governance group. The study aimed to deliver a walaay at Dharriwaa for older (> 50 years) Aboriginal people who are survivors, family members, or descendants of the Stolen Generations and explore how this impacts wellbeing and connection to place.

Ethics approval and funding

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council of NSW (#1971/22). This research was supported by UNSW Ageing Futures Institute funding under the 2022 seed funding scheme. The views expressed herein are those of the authors and are not necessarily those of the institute.

Participants

The research team sought a partnership with a Stolen Generations Survivor-led organisation, which works with survivors from a former boys' home based in Sydney, NSW. Through this partnership, eight people were recruited to participate in the study. Participants ranged between 51 and 80 years of age, lived in the broader Sydney region, and were survivors (five men), family members (two women), or descendants (one woman) of the Stolen Generations.

Dharriwaa 'walaay'

The walaay took place at Dharriwaa in August 2022 and was delivered by two authors (TF, MO), and all other authors participated. It included activities focused on reconnection to culture and Country and forming place-based attachment. Activities included a smoking ceremony with a local Elder, speaking in language, listening to creation stories, and interacting with plants, animals and Aboriginal artefacts on Country. Data collection followed localised cultural protocols using Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing that pay respect to the reciprocal cultural relationships between peoples, animals, plants, lands, and waters and governance of these.[12] Data was collected using a yarning circle arond a fire, which is an Aboiginal research method similar to a relaxed topical group discussion.[13] The yarning circle was deliberately open-ended, allowing the discussion to flow organically (following cultural protocol) and topics of culture, Country, urban living, and experiences as survivors, family members, or descendants of the Stolen Generations to be addressed. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis methods[14] were used to explore 'meaning-making' and understand participants' experiences and perspectives. This approach also helped us explore – in real time – what meaning cultural connection/reconnection had for participants, including therapeutic impacts on health and wellbeing.

The yarning circle was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, and analysed inductively by two of the authors (AY, NS) using NVivo 12. Results were further developed collaboratively with the cultural governance group and research team.

Results

Several key themes cut across the yarning circle discussion, including childhood memories, participation in sports, preferred foods and reflections on parenting. Participants' experience of health is understood in intergenerational and social contexts. In other words, health is impacted by the trauma of being a member of the Stolen Generations, which filters down to descendants, and healing is expressed through familial

and community bonds and connection to culture and Country.

Intergenerational trauma

Recollections of trauma permeated the yarning circle at different points. The older participants, who were removed from their homes and placed in the well-known boys' home in regional NSW, recalled experiences of physical abuse from male carers and staff in the home. They were also forced to fight each other. Participants described being made to eat food they did not like or be punished. They perceived these experiences as having ongoing effects on their families and communities, noting that these issues were not spoken about much until later in life.

> *"We started drinking with other mob drinking, and we thought it was great — alcohol, a lot of abuse and that on the alcohol. Then you have partners, and some of the boys used to abuse their women. Cause no one showed them what love was all about. It's just our part now." (Survivor)*

Speaking to the multiple types of abuse faced by their peers ("[they] *poured in sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse, psychological abuse"*, Survivor), one of the participants described the interconnected and intergenerational way this is experienced: "*That's seeped out to the kids, the partners, and all that. Even their communities.*" (Survivor)

For those individuals removed from their communities, the experience resulted in losing their place in their communities in multiple ways.

Respondents recalled being subject to dehumanising practices which included: being physically displaced, being referred to as numbers rather than given names ("*I was number X, you were X*" [Survivor]), and "reprogramming" or not being allowed to speak their language. Individuals felt rejected when attempting to return to the communities because they were changed:

> *"... like a lot of boys went back home in communities and noone wanted to accept you. Like you got taken away from language, your culture and that, and you come back as a different person." (Survivor)*

The intergenerational impact was talked about through the loss experienced in relation to language:

> *"It's important for the Uncles because they are not able to speak language, but it makes them feel good. If they have the opportunity to learn. I suppose trips like this that fill that cultural gap for the Uncles in particular. Then for us kids who because of our fathers and grandfathers disconnection, are disconnected as well." (Daughter of survivor)*

Participants' experiences of relocation into urban areas were a central theme. One participant said that although he has lived in an outer region of Sydney for more than 40 years, he is not connected to mob from that area. As well as loss of culture, urban environments have been alluded to as landscapes of ongoing traumas via social issues such as aimlessness among youth (which they describe as "zombies"). A daughter of a survivor emphasised that the experience of the removal of children is not limited to one generation; it is in the living memory of those still present. It shows up in the loss of language, culture and identity experienced by descendants.

As a result of being taken from their families as children, the participants spoke retrospectively about the lack of guardianship they had while institutionalised and how this impacted their lives once they left the boys' home.

> *"When we got taken away from our own families and that, we didn't have that guardianship we [were] all led to one man, two men, three men flogging you in the back of the head." (Survivor)*

Eventually starting their own journeys as guardians and parents, participants shared difficulties and complex desires to break cycles of anger and abuse within their own families.

> *'Growing up to be no one when we was young fellas, and we had kids ourselves, but we had no fathers around us that teach us how to be fathers." (Survivor)*

> *"I went out and abused myself, like get into fights and just to take all that anger out of my system onto somebody else, [rather] than take it home to your wife and your children and that you didn't want to see that child grow up with that same anger as you." (Survivor)*

Strength in cultural values and identity

Participants shared stories about the continued practice of Aboriginal cultural values in their adult lives. They acknowledged this as an important part of their cultural identity, which was conducive to the process of healing from past traumas associated with being stolen from their families and institutionalised. The centrality of family was a key cultural value; where biological families had been lost, chosen families were built through shared trauma, experiences, understanding and healing. For those who had been institutionalised, a family was built through the process of developing a survivor-led Aboriginal corporation and leading and engaging in projects that focused on communicating and documenting truth-telling about the Stolen Generations. Through this process, the group referred to and treated each other as 'family', including survivors and their descendants.

> *"I reckon it's all so good to just have the [boys' home] family because we are family. Even if we're not blood…Them colonisers obviously done the wrong thing, and we know that. At the same time,*

they've also created another family." (Daughter of survivor)

"[The survivor-led corporation] put on a birthday party for us…Walked in with this big birthday cake, and they [began] singing out happy birthday to all of us. We all looked at each other and started crying. They gave us a heritage… First birthday we had all together, all us boys here. All [boys' home] boys. We all cried aye, all tearful, it was just one of those things that we never had." (Survivor)

Cultural values centred on family were also reflected in stories of healing through parenting, working through cycles of trauma and abuse, and reciprocal love and care from their children.

"It took us a while before we come to act like fathers and mothers and all that, to have children of your own was the most important thing… My wife used to say, 'oh why don't you go give them a smack', I said I can't do that. I sort of rather go and talk to him if he's playing up." (Survivor)

Cultural values were reflected in role modelling for other children through participants' work with youth and sports coaching, allowing participants to fulfil a role not available to them as children.

"They [kids] used to get in trouble, and I'd pull them out, take them to the [youth club] and things like that… They looked after me they said, "Oh, come down here. We'll get you a cup of coffee." That's what I love. I had two boys, I coached them when they were six to nine years old, and now they [are] all playing senior football." (Survivor)

Participant narratives from the yarning circle revealed that despite being dispossessed of their culture while institutionalised, maintaining a connection to their cultural identity and practising cultural values were a source of strength and pride.

Intergenerational healing through connection to Country

The walaay at Dharriwaa provided access to a multisensory cultural experience allowing participants to reflect on aspects of their cultural identity individually and intergenerationally and what this meant for their sense of connection and wellbeing. This was expressed through narratives of 'returning' to, and becoming 'reconnected' with, Country. Several of the participants identified they had 'ancestral' connections to the surrounding areas within the Yuwaalaraay and Gamilaraay nations, which led them to discover they also had ancestral connections to Dharriwaa:

"The best part of life through education, knowledge, is going back to Country, that's what we all love. Coming back to Country. You go up and down the coast all the time, but you come back here inland and see the land. Just part of our nation like Gamilaraay." (Survivor)

"Probably one of the first times Mum is getting connected and knowing more about her country. Cause she'd never been here before. Then same with us, with me, you're getting connected, reconnected. I think that's pretty awesome." (Daughter of survivor)

As a sacred site and cultural landscape, Dharriwaa provided an additional avenue in the process of healing from past traumas associated with the physical, psychological, and emotional abuse endured by participants due to Stolen Generations policies. Participants reiterated the importance of being physically present 'on Country' and the joy of experiencing the different sensory aspects of a cultural landscape, for example, being able to see, touch, hear, and smell 'culture', and how this differed from urbanised landscapes.

"To bring them back to Country you can heal them. See what kind of life Country can give to them, on a clear night, you see a sky like this here, see the stars out. You don't see that much in the city. No one's looking up there, they looking down on the ground, and they are lost." (Survivor)

This was made possible by the presence of traditional cultural knowledge holders and custodians who facilitated the experience in a culturally safe way and could share place-based cultural stories and knowledge of medicines, foods, and the meaning of specific sites. During the yarning circle, narratives of cultural loss and dispossession contrasted those of emerging connections to Country, ancestors, and belonging through the walaay experience:

"The connection. Like water, birds, all the wildlife, it's so amazing what this Country's still got. Like it's through our nature, and you belong to it, you're just looking around, and you see where the old fellas would've been." (Survivor)

"When you come out further like this place here, it's like, what the hell are you missing out on? You got this beautiful place here, and like you bring your families, and it's a healing process for us, and it's like he said, you can't describe it. A lot of people say, what do you want to go out there for? I said you haven't seen a real thing yet. Talking about it, sitting around the campfire like this here and waiting for our Johnny cakes [damper or bush bread, an Aboriginal camp food staple]." (Survivor)

Language as a key aspect of culture was also discussed. Both the pain of not knowing language due to the legacy of ongoing colonisation, as well as the cultural pride in learning it through place-based knowledge of traditional foods, were highlighted:

> *"One of the uncles cries and gets upset when he hears some of the younger ones speaking language, like I was up in Kempsey and the little pre-schoolers they getting taught the Dunghutti language and they sing up, and he cries because [if] you don't have language, you can't speak it." (Survivor)*

> *"In Bran Nue Dae [movie] they sing about bush banana, and I didn't know we had bush banana out here [laughs]. Now I got a 'gaagulu' [bush banana in Yuwaalaraay], isn't it? So I learned that today!" (Daughter of survivor)*

Through the walaay experience, a lifelong 'reconnection' to Country and ancestral place was (re) established for some participants, which they expressed with cultural pride.

> *"Because you don't have to go to the Northern Territory. There's more Blackfella stuff here in New South Wales. You don't have to go up there where people think the real Blackfellas live. That it's everywhere. Now I know where it is and have that little taste, you never know when we might come back like a boomerang." (Daughter of survivor)*

Discussion

In presenting the varied experiences of urban Aboriginal survivors of the Stolen Generations and their descendants, this paper has pointed towards the intergenerational ways our participants experience health, healing and wellbeing. The yarning circle held during the walaay on the cultural landscape of Dharriwaa uncovered our older participants' memories of traumatic experiences as children and young men in a well-known former boys' group home in NSW. These included physical and emotional abuse suffered in the home and loss of Country, community, and culture. However, participants also emphasised that they found strength in the bonds that were formed through the mutual experience of the institution. Cultural experiences that participants had on Country as part of the walaay generated a sense of reconnection and cultural pride. The sensory experience of Country, including sitting around a campfire, listening to birds, and seeing trees and water, were all emphasised as bringing a sense of belonging and healing. Such ideas are also discussed in the health and geography literature through the concept of 'therapeutic landscapes'[15], which considers how physical environments and social, spiritual, symbolic and cultural dimensions coalesce to create and support salutogenic (conducive to health and healing) spaces, places, and practices.[16] This paper reveals the positive experiences and outcomes of walaays as a powerful downstream, grassroots initiative for improving the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal people living away from Country and disconnected from cultural landscapes. A recent systematic review echoes our findings, reporting the 'untapped potential' connection to and caring for Country has on improving Aboriginal social and emotional wellbeing.[17]

Grassroots approaches such as the one taken in our study contrast with 'upstream' approaches which have dominated in recent decades. The latter includes the National Agreement on Closing the Gap[18], which is meant to strengthen inclusivity through structural changes around Australian Government work with Aboriginal peoples. Such upstream frameworks aim to bridge the great disparities in health and social outcomes between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians by acknowledging past mistreatments and abuse and ensuring Aboriginal inputs on policies, programs and services that affect them. There have, however, been criticisms of the effectiveness of such upstream initiatives in bringing about real change. A recent review found that implementing policies under the Closing the Gap banner since 2008 has not moved beyond 'business as usual' despite broad support for the framework and its subsequent 2020 National Agreement.[19] For example, tracking against key health and wellbeing targets of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap found that slow progress turned into regression.[19] There are similar critiques from academia, especially in the framework's focus on deficit-based (rather than strengths-based) approaches[1] and promise of improved outcomes, such as in health[20] and cultural reconnections[21], much of which has yet to come to fruition.

While the significant restructuring of such upstream initiatives and strategies may be required[22], we must also look beyond, to better support downstream initiatives such as walaays that can accompany and complement upstream approaches. Policy action must also be filtered downwards into everyday practice so that the "*complex, localised and reciprocal relationship and connection*"[1] between Aboriginal peoples and the natural and spiritual elements may be better recognised and realised.

Limitations

This paper is limited to the views of the participants who took part in the study and their experiences in a specific context.

Conclusion

This project provides opportunities to connect to culture through sensory-led experiences of being on Country, touching the land, the artefacts, hearing the birds, trees, water, and hearing the language. It reveals why these aspects of culture are critical to intergenerational healing with Aboriginal people. Further, our work lays the ground for the healing value of capturing these experiences through digital immersive technologies. These technologies allow for multisensory engagement when travel to Country is not available.

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Peer review and provenance

Externally peer reviewed, invited.

Competing interests

None declared.

Author contributions

AY contributed to the manuscript's conception, data collection, analysis, writing and editing; TF contributed to data collection, cultural governance and review; EL contributed to the conception, data collection, writing, editing and review; NS contributed to the analysis, writing, editing and review; MOL contributed to the data collection and cultural governance; GK contributed to the conception, data collection, writing, editing and review; VK contributed to the conception, data collection and review; JL contributed to the data collection and review; and EdL contributed to the manuscripts' review.

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