



# Post-Colonialism (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders)

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**Trailer**

In this chapter, Noritta Morseu-Diop talks about the ongoing effects of colonialism and the need to put aside pre-conceived ideas and build trust and rapport when working alongside Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Corrinne Sullivan reflects on her confusing and sometimes haphazard experiences in ‘Western’ education. And finally, Sharlene Cruickshank describes both personal and professional experiences as an Aboriginal woman working in mental health.

**2.1 Introduction**

*Vicki Hutton*

Australia’s Indigenous peoples comprise two distinct cultural groups made up of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) reports over 649,000 people living in the major cities, regional and remote areas of all states and territories identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (ABS, 2018a). This is approximately 3.3% of Australia’s resident population.

**Definition**

According to s51 (25) of the High Court of Australia (1983), defining ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ is based on three key points: descent, self and community. This is clarified in the following definition: ‘An Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person is a person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent who identifies as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (person) and is accepted as such by the community in which he or she lives’ (Queensland Health, 2019). This three-part definition received some debate in the 1990s when it became evident that it was open to different interpretation around which criterion—descent, self or community—was the most important if all three could not be confirmed (Gardiner-Garden, 2003).

Irrespective of legal definitions, there is great diversity within these two groups of First Australians, as evidenced by over 250 different language groups across the nation, and laws and customs to determine membership of specific groups (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies [AIATSIS], 2018).

**Statistics**

One issue common to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is their continuing reduced life expectancy at birth compared to non-Indigenous Australians. In 2015–2017, life expectancy of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men was 8.6 years lower than non-Indigenous men, and life expectancy for women was 7.8 years lower than non-Indigenous women (ABS, 2018b). In remote and very remote areas, these differences became more evident, with differences at birth for the

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups being 13.8 years lower for men and 14 years for women compared to non-Indigenous Australians.

At the other end of the lifespan, child mortality amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children aged 0–4 years remained higher than amongst non-Indigenous Australian children in 2017 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2018). Identified as a crucial target for change in the Federal Government’s ‘Closing the Gap’ agenda, the 2017 data analysis indicated there was still almost 90 deaths per 100,000 more among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children compared to non-Indigenous children.

Globally, the United Nations estimates there are more than 370 million Indigenous peoples living in 70 countries. Many retain their own unique knowledge systems, beliefs and traditions and importantly, a special relationship to their ancestral lands, waters and territories which is of fundamental importance for their physical, emotional and cultural survival (AIATSIS, 2018). This is evident in Australia where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples may refer to themselves by names relevant to the greater region they are connected to (e.g., Koori, Murri or Nunga), a geographic location, or with names that relate to the environment in which they live (e.g., ‘saltwater people’, ‘freshwater’, ‘rainforest’ or ‘desert’). All this highlights the strong connections Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples retain to their lands, and the implications of not understanding this connection, or removing a person from this connection.

Developing sensitivity when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples must therefore occur at a range of overlapping and interconnected physical, emotional, social, historical and environmental levels that may seem overwhelming at first. Attempts to develop a ‘one size fits all’ response will fail to capture the diversity and uniqueness of each person and group identifying as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander persons. This is crucial when considering the mental health statistics of this group.

Australia’s *Fifth National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Plan* draws attention to the untenable and profound levels of distress among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals, families and communities (Department of Health, 2017). The Plan reports that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults are almost three times more likely to experience high or very high levels of psychological distress, and have twice the rate of suicide, compared to non-Indigenous Australians. They are also hospitalised for mental and behavioural disorders at almost twice the rate of non-Indigenous people.

### Statistics

The 2014–2015 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (ABS, 2016) provides a range of information into the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years and over who self-reported being told by a

doctor or nurse that they had a mental health condition (i.e., depression; anxiety; behavioural or emotional problems; and/or harmful use of, or dependence on drugs or alcohol). Based on this criterion, 29% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people self-reported as having a mental health condition. Approximately 23% reported both a mental health condition and one or more long-term physical health conditions. Mental health conditions were less likely to have been reported by young people (22%) compared to older age groups (30–35%), and more likely to be reported by females (34%) compared to males (25%). Mental health conditions were also reported among twice as many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in remote areas (33%) compared to non-remote areas (16%).

A strong cultural identity and connections to country, family and community were identified as protective factors, countered by the commonly cited stressors of: serious long-term illness, alcohol and drug-related problems; overcrowding at home; being treated badly and/or discrimination; unemployment; poverty; isolation; trauma and trouble with the law (ABS, 2016). In addition, having been removed, or having had relatives removed, from their natural family was cited more often among those with a mental health condition (50%) compared to those with a long-term physical health condition (42%) or no long-term health condition (34%).

Despite there being a clear need for support, there is evidence that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have lower than expected access to mental health services and professionals (Department of Health, 2017). Some barriers to accessing these services include the cost of health services, the cultural competence of the service, remoteness and availability of transport, and the attitudes of staff. Experiences of discrimination, victimisation and exclusion played a significant role in whether Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals attended health services, and their acceptance and adherence to treatment.

Given the strong connection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' wellbeing to spiritual and cultural factors, especially connection to the land, community and traditions, it is evident that culturally informed mental health services are essential. Services that respect this holistic concept of health and respect traditional and cultural healing are fundamental to maintaining an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person's social and emotional wellbeing. Where non-Indigenous mental health practitioners interpret symptoms within the Western medical model rather than the complex Indigenous socio-cultural context, there can be misdiagnosis and/or non-adherence to treatment. Therefore, inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in planning and implementing mental health services, as well as training non-Indigenous staff to better understand how to respect and incorporate culture into therapy, is crucial to building culturally respectful and effective models of care.

## 2.2 Post-Colonialism: The Myth

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Noritta Morseu-Diop

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The term ‘post-colonialism’ is synonymous with the after effects of colonisation in a former colony (Morseu-Diop, 2010). History tells us that Lieutenant James Cook landed in North Queensland in 1770 and Governor Phillips arrived in Botany Bay in 1788 (Bennett, 2013; Morseu-Diop, 2017). These historical events have also placed the idea in the minds of many Australians that colonialism ended when this country was “discovered” and settled. In actual fact, this notion is far from the truth.

In reality, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples continue to live under a colonialist regime brought to their Land and Islands by the first boat people (Hagan, 2017). Colonialism is still ongoing and continues to be a debilitating factor in their lives today (Elder, 2003; Green & Baldry, 2013; Phillips, 2003).

Therefore, as a First Nations Australian, I declare that post-colonialism is a myth. For us First Nations Australians, colonialism is still here, we are still being colonised (Heiss, 2012). More precisely, hegemonism is alive and well and exists on all levels of Australian society (Morseu-Diop, 2017).

This chapter will shed light on the post-colonialism myth and it will bring to the forefront the myriad of challenges facing social workers, allied practitioners and all those who wish to work with First Nations Australians. I will begin this discussion with an excerpt from my book, *Healing in Justice: Giving a Voice to the Silent and Forgotten People* (Morseu-Diop, 2017).

### 2.2.1 The House on the Hill

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#### Quote

- » There was once a big house that stood on a small hill, overlooking the beautiful green valley and the gentle flowing river down below. Blue mountains in the horizon, stood regal and strong as they stretched endlessly into the sunset as far as the eye could see. In this house lived a mother, a father and their six children. The father and mother were avid gardeners and planted many fruit and nut trees and root vegetables around the house. The family lived there happily, they ate the fruit, nuts and vegetables from their garden and they caught fish, yabbies, eels and mussels from the river, they were proud, healthy and strong.
- » Then one day, another family walked past their house and they saw that the land was good, and this house on the hill had everything they’ve always wanted. Even though they knew that the house on the hill, the river and the surrounding valley belonged to someone else, they decided that they wanted this house, they wanted this land and so they took their guns and shot and killed the father, the mother and four of the children. The other two children were down in the valley and saw what had happened, so they ran in fear for their lives and hid in the mountains.

- » The new family then moved into the house on the hill and lived there. They ate the fruits, vegetables, nuts, fish, mussels and yabbies to their hearts content and they were very happy. A couple of years later, the two children that ran away, decided to go and check on their house on the hill and see who is living there now. They had been living in abject poverty up in the mountains and now cold, destitute and hungry, they went up to the front door of the house that was once theirs and knocked on the door.
- » Upon hearing the knock on the door, Mr. Cook opened the door and asked, “What can I do for you?” The children then replied, “Please sir, we are cold and we are hungry, can you help us?” Mr. Cook replied, “of course! James go and gather some fish and mussels for these poor souls. Matilda, go and pick some fruit for them. Mrs. Cook, bring some spare clothes and blankets for these two, they look very sickly indeed!”
- » So, James gave them some fish, yabbies and mussels from their river and Matilda gave them the fruit, nuts and vegetables from their parent’s garden and Mrs. Cook brought them some blankets and gave them their own clothes to wear (Morseu-Diop, 2017, pp. 25–26).

The House on the Hill story noted above depicts the impact of colonisation on the lives, land and livelihood of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. It depicts the theft of their land and islands and the disruption to their ways of being and highlights the gross injustice meted out upon them since the dawn of colonisation in Australia (Gapps, 2018; Moses, 2004; Trigger, 2010).

Furthermore, it indirectly highlights the current mentality and attitudes of the racists in Australia, the notion that they have already given enough to First Nations Australians and poses the question, “How much more do we owe them?” When in reality what they have given already belongs to First Nations People, and it is merely a teardrop in an ocean (Morseu-Diop, 2017). No amount of money can ever compensate what has been lost; the magnitude of the loss is incomprehensible.

I ponder and reflect on the thoughts of my Ancestors at the arrival of Lieutenant James Cook who took possession of the east coast of Australia for King George III from the shores of Bedanug or Bedhan Lag, a tiny island in the Torres Strait renamed by Cook as Possession Island. I also wondered about the perception of the Eora Nation when the Tall Ships arrived into their waters in 1770.

For mainstream Australians, the 26th of January marks a day of celebration, with festivities around the country marking the arrival of Governor Phillips into Botany Bay on the First Fleet (Gapps, 2018). However, First Nations Australians perceive this day as a day of mourning. This day heralds the beginning of the massacres, mass incarceration and wars that decimated whole communities of Australia’s First Peoples, starting in Botany Bay and spreading throughout the continent (Elder, 2003; Harding, Broadhurst, Ferrante & Loh, 1995; Richards, 2008; Trudgen, 2004). For First Nations Australians, the 26th of January is perceived as Invasion Day or Survival Day. For us, genocide is alive and well in Australia even until this day (Morseu-Diop, 2017).

## 2.2.2 The ‘Benefits’ of Living Under a Colonialist Regime

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There is a perception that the arrival of the colonisers was indeed a blessing to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples because the colonisers developed the land and brought in all of the modern conveniences and the technology that are enjoyed today. Furthermore, First Nations People are recipients of special benefits for everything from health and housing, to education and employment, and more. The two questions I ask here are, “How has the past and current colonialism been a blessing to First Nations Australians?” and “What types of benefits have First Nations Australians received since the arrival of the colonisers?”

In retrospect, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples lived long and healthy lives, they were strong in their cultural ways of being. They were a healthy and happy people, self-sufficient, living off the land and sea. They lived in what could be described as “paradise on earth”. They had complex cultural systems and lores guiding their customary practices. Each Nation had their own laws governing their behaviour and conduct, wrongdoers were dealt with according to their own customs and traditions and there were no prisons (Morseu-Diop, 2010). Their spirituality and ways of being were and continue to be deeply connected to their Ancestors and embedded in respect for Mother Earth (Morseu-Diop, 2017).

Today, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples are continuously dealing with the past and present consequences of colonialism. They are Australia’s most disadvantaged people. They are stricken by poverty and ill-health and die 15 to 20 years before their mainstream counterpart. First Nations Australians are struggling to maintain their cultural ways of knowing and cultural ways of doing within the confines of the current political, societal and economic agenda of the colonialist government (Phillips, 2003). They are a disenfranchised and disempowered people in their own country due to the implementation of racist policies serving to subjugate them on all levels. I reiterate that the present colonialist regime have disrupted their traditional customs and cultural ways. Colonialism continues to bring immense devastation to the lives, livelihood and subsistence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples throughout the country. This is hardly beneficial, nor is it a blessing.

## 2.2.3 Exploitation of the Natural Resources

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Since the arrival of the First Fleet to this present day, First Nations People have witnessed first hand the degradation and destruction of their natural environment and resources (Reynolds, 2003). The vast wealth and riches of this country have been acquired through the exploitation of the land and resources stolen from Australia’s First People (Morseu-Diop, 2017).

Australia is currently a leading exporter of coal and gas and other minerals, all of which are being extracted from stolen land. Hence, the colonisers have become extremely wealthy from the mining industry, the fishing industry, the farming industry, the gas/fracking industry and the past whaling, pearling and sealing industries just to name a few (Altman & Kerins, 2012; Neumeier & Schaffer, 2014).



Alarming, the ongoing extraction of resources from the natural environment has caused insurmountable, if not irreversible, damage to the land, rivers, lakes, estuaries, creeks, reefs, ocean and sea. The Australian rivers, streams, creeks and estuaries are polluted. For example, in Queensland, there are approximately 40,000 fracking wells (J. Buckingham, Former Greens MP, personal communication, 2016). The fracking industry has caused ground tremors and earthquakes and poisoned the land and rivers.

The ongoing environmental carnage and degradation has brought irreparable destruction to traditional homelands. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples have been actively fighting to preserve their lands and homelands for their grandchildren's grandchildren.

All over Australia, First Nations people are taking a stand to preserve their homeland and environment. For example, the Wangan Jagalingou people of the Galilee Basin are currently battling to protect their homelands from the mining giant Adani. Adani has been granted permission by the federal and state governments to commence their coal mining industry at the Carmichael coal mines in the Galilee Basin of Central Queensland (Wangan Jagalingou Family Council, n.d). The federal government has also granted Adani unlimited access to water for the next 60 years. The Galilee Basin sits directly on top of the Great Artesian Basin, Australia's major underground water source. It is envisaged that the poisons from the Adani mines will contaminate the Great Artesian Basin, which will impact adversely on the natural environment, including the lives and livelihood of all Australians.

Furthermore, the people of the low lying islands of the Torres Strait archipelago are taking a stand and lodging a complaint against the Australian government at the United Nations Summit for their failure to address climate change and its impact on their island homeland. Rising sea levels have threatened the subsistence of Torres Strait Islanders, and the Australian government has turned a blind eye on the highly critical issue of climate change. This ongoing struggle to protect their homelands has caused immense trauma, grief, loss and ongoing physical, social and emotional ill-health amongst First Nations Australians. In addition, the colonialists' descendants have not only benefited immensely from the sins of their forefathers, many are also following in their footsteps.

### 2.2.4 A One-Sided Story

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I reflect on the stories that have been told or should I say not been told about First Nations People. Since their arrival on this land, the colonisers have set the template for the history of Australia. The history has been told through their eyes (Anderson, 2003), but the Australian story has been a one-sided story, the story of the colonisers (Huggins, 1998). It has been about their achievements, their successes, their goals and their victories. Their history asserts that they came in "good faith" as if we did not exist; they settled, built and developed the land with their own blood, sweat and tears.

In reality, there were frontier wars when the colonisers arrived. Aboriginal people fought hard for their land and country, but their spears could not withstand the colonisers' guns (Gapps, 2018; Reynolds, 2003). Furthermore, this one-sided story was written without acknowledging the contribution of Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and South Sea Islander Peoples in the building of this country. First Nations Australians and South Sea Islanders were instrumental in the building of Australia.

In addition, the story in the history books has been about the colonisers' pain and suffering. It is about the battles that they fought and won to protect the land they named Australia. They commemorate their ANZAC Day annually, and they remember their dead who fought in Gallipoli. The Australian history books and classroom education from Primary School to High School have deliberately omitted the stories of the First Peoples of this country (Kidd, 2002). They deliberately omitted the contribution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Peoples who fought for this country and died in the war.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples are now writing their own stories and recording their own history and telling their side of the story. They contributed immensely to the development of this land, and the majority of this contribution has been through 'slave labour'. For example, Torres Strait Islander People were actively involved in the railway industry, breaking the world record in the Pilbara, Western Australia, for laying down 7 km of railway track in 11 hours and 40 minutes compared to the previous US world record of 4.6 km set in 1962 (Lui-Chivizhe, 2011). They also laid down 400 km of track between Mt. Newman and Port Hedland in Western Australia in just 9 months. The non-Indigenous men would have found this work unbearable in the extreme Western desert sun.

The Torres Strait Islander men worked under extreme heat, and the work was backbreaking. On the 22nd of September 2012, a statue was erected to honour the Torres Strait Islander men who worked on the railway tracks, a clear example of our contribution to the building of this country (Lui-Chivizhe, 2011).

Australians use the 50 dollar note every day, but very few of them know the identity of the Aboriginal gentleman depicted on this note. The Aboriginal person depicted on the Australian currency is David Unaipon (1872–1967). He was born on 28 September 1872 at the Point McLeay Mission, South Australia, fourth of nine children of James Ngunaitponi, evangelist, and his wife Nymbulda, both Yaraldi speakers from the lower Murray River region. He was a preacher, author and an inventor. He had approximately 19 inventions, and one of them is the shears for shearing the fleece of the sheep brought to this country by the colonisers. David Unaipon was an extremely skilful man with a brilliant mind and he was referred to as the black Leonardo Di Vinci (Jones, 2019).

First Nations Australians were actively involved in the labour force as domestic servants and in the pastoral industry and in the mining industry and in the Australian armed forces fighting for Australia on home soil and overseas just to name a few. The sickening reality is that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples were paid pittance for the amount of work they carried out to build this country and to represent this country in the war; hence, I describe this as slave labour.

Moreover, due to the extreme heat in Australia, the colonisers brought other slave labour from the South Pacific Islands to work in the sugar cane industry in a practice known as blackbirding.

Racist government policies have kept First Nations Australians at the very bottom rung of the political and economic ladder. These colonial processes have meant that colonialism is still here, it has not gone away and it is not over. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples are still experiencing the ongoing damaging effects of colonialism in all aspects of their lives (Hagan, 2017). These experiences have impacted significantly on their social, emotional, cultural, spiritual, psychological and mental health and wellbeing (Bird, 1998; Fejo-King, 2015a, 2015b; Morseu-Diop, 2017).

With racist government policies came the removal of children from their family, also known as the Stolen Generation (Garimara, 1996; Moses, 2004; Ranzijn, McConnochie & Nolan, 2010). From the 1900s to the 1970s, the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children was a common practice causing widespread trauma, loss and grief. Today, children facing out of home care are being removed from their family and community network and placed in non-Indigenous foster care, all of which are sanctioned by the government; hence, this practice has been branded as the new Stolen Generation (Bird, 1998).

In reality, many people in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community are suffering from intergenerational grief, loss and trauma due to the unjust policies and practices of this colonialist regime (Boulton, 2016; Hegarty, 2015; Wingard & Lester, 2001). For many, these practices and policies have caused a wounding of the soul and a breaking of the spirit (Morseu-Diop, 2017; Garimara, 1996).

## 2.2.5 Personal Experiences of Ongoing Colonialism as a First Nations Australian

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Looking back over the last 50 years, I reflect on my own life journey under the colonialist regime. I was born on Thursday Island, situated in a remote community in far North Queensland in the Torres Strait archipelago. I was raised on Tamwoy Town reserve during the time of the Assimilation Policy. Going to school, I did not understand the policies that separated children according to our cultural heritage. First Nations children were separated from the others and placed in a different class. We were not allowed to speak our own language at school. Those children who were caught speaking their language were sent to the office to be caned. As a child, I observed that all of the non-Indigenous people living on my island were all very affluent. They were described as ‘rich’ by my grandmother—some owned big fishing boats, and they lived in beautiful homes and were all gainfully employed.

My grandfather was the son of a Rotuman pearl diver and was not under the Act, and was able to buy land, which was allotted to him and his brothers on Tamwoy Reserve. As for my family, we lived in a two roomed house that my grandfather built and we had no running water, refrigerator or electricity and we had a wood stove for cooking and we collected rainwater for drinking in two 44 gallon

drums. For washing our clothes, we walked down the dirt path to a well where we collected water not only for our washing but also for our baths.

On Tamwoy Reserve, there was a Native Police as they were called, to monitor everything and everyone (Richards, 2008). A big black police van called locally known a black mariah would come onto our reserve frequently to keep everyone in order and to usurp their authority. There was a curfew too, and those who did not keep the curfew were locked up in the watch house, and if they were unlucky, they would be sent down to Palm Island Mission and other faraway places, far from their loved ones.

My grandmother suffered from mental illness and was a ward of the state. She was sent down to Cherbourg where she spent a number of years in the single women's dormitory, and she gave birth to her son in Cherbourg.

I remember going to the general store with my grandfather to purchase some groceries, and I did not see any exchange of money between my grandfather and the storekeeper. My grandfather simply wrote his initials on a type of logbook, and we were then allowed to 'purchase' some potatoes, rice, sugar and flour.

As a child growing up I had no understanding of the assimilation and segregation policies of the government during that time. I could not comprehend why all of the different Nations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples lived together on Tamwoy Reserve at the back of the Island. It was only through my Aboriginal Studies course at the University of Queensland that I was able to learn about the true history of Australia and the plight of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

Learning about the true history of this country not only opened my eyes to what really happened during my growing up years; it also opened up a Pandora's box to the current living reality of all First Nations Australians. They were and are disempowered, and they have no voice in decision-making about their lives, their livelihood, their land, their islands and their community. All of the decisions impacting on their lives and ways of being are made for them by the colonisers. It gave meaning and understanding to the terrible inferiority complex that plagued my life from childhood to adulthood and still raises its ugly head and impacts on my psyche today.

### 2.2.6 Building Bridges

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Working as a social worker or allied practitioner within a colonialist construct and finding ways to build bridges, the late Dr. Ranginui Walker said, "In order for Māori people to have good mental health and well-being, Pakeha people need to view us as their social and intellectual equal" (R. Walker, Wellington School of Maori Studies, personal communication, 2006, n.p.). Although Dr. Walker was referring to the situation for Māori people, I believe his words of wisdom are also relevant for working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. I highly recommend that you take heed of his words when you come into our community.

Working as a social worker within a colonial construct has opened my eyes to the degree of hopelessness and helplessness faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals and families on a day-to-day basis. There is a sense of melancholy that exists in the Indigenous community throughout this country. At times it is difficult to measure the wave of grief, loss and trauma constantly flowing in the community like the ocean. It comes in and washes over you and it goes out and comes back again and again and again, it is never-ending (Morseu-Diop, 2017). These are the things that I had to understand first and foremost; I had to learn ways in which to break into that shell surrounding my clients that had become so hard due to the general feelings of mistrust towards social workers and the colonialists in general.

Hence, I ask this question, “How do we find a solution to work effectively in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities?”

One of the first things that social workers and allied practitioners must be mindful of, when entering into our communities, is that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are still living under colonialism. They are the most disadvantaged group in Australian society today, due to the degree of losses faced by them since colonisation.

### ➤ Important

An important factor to remember is that First Nations Australians are not homogenous. There are similarities as well as vast differences in each community. Be patient and ask questions. It’s okay if you don’t know, by asking questions, you will learn and you will know.

You may have read all the articles about the cultural ways of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; however, keep in mind that reading about us and working one-on-one with us at the coalface are two different things. In reality, you will be faced with many challenges; some of these challenges are the cultural norms, customary practices, non-verbal communication, multi-layered languages, idioms, body languages and more. A lot of this cannot be found in academic theses or books. You will learn from being at the coalface, sitting with Elders and becoming involved in hands-on work with First Nations individuals, families, groups and communities (Morseu-Diop, 2010).

Putting aside your pre-conceived ideas and coming in with a humble heart, patience and an open-mind and with a desire and a willingness to learn is a good start. Looking, listening and learning will help you significantly (Morseu-Diop, 2010). Building trust and building a rapport is paramount when coming into our communities to work alongside us. It is important to understand that there is no 10-point plan, and everything will not happen overnight. It can take months and even years, before you are accepted into our community.

### ➤ Important

I will end with the words of our much-loved Elder, Dr. Aunty Lilla Watson, “If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together”.

## 2.3 Personal Stories and Current Affairs

### 2

#### 2.3.1 Ending the Confusion: A Reflection of My Experiences in Australian Education Spaces

*Corrinne Sullivan*

Education. Learning and Teaching. Research. These are not new concepts for Indigenous Australians. We have been educators, learners, teachers, researchers and knowers since the beginning of time. My grandmother was my main teacher. Though when I was young I would sit on the ground with my great-grandfather who would tell tales of the ancestors, I remember them to be great stories that I would want to hear again and again. I now understand how those stories hold Knowledge, and that great lessons were being passed to me. I learnt how to read animals, how their movement would signify the weather or the season. I learnt how to find foods, and in which season certain foods could be found. I never mastered the ability to play the gum leaf, my great-grandfather was a pro, as a child I was sent for great walks to find a good leaf. I did not recognise then that I was learning country, feeling country and knowing country. After my great-grandfather passed, my grandmother took the role of imparting Knowledge to me, my siblings and my cousins. She would tell stories of the old days, as well as the story of the Dyirri-dyirri (Willie Wagtail). She would often remind us of how animals would communicate with us. Ants tell the rain story, birds bring us messages and cautionary notes. We were enriched with Knowledge, an education that was not contained by classrooms, chalkboards and curt teachers. My grandmother was a firm believer in education. Education was our ticket out. Out of what I was not sure. Education, albeit a 'Western' education, meant that we could play the game, the colonial project. You go to school, you get a good job (a good job is determined by income—not by how much but having one), marry, have children, die—masquerading in a White society that my body betrays.

Primary school and secondary school were bewildering entities for me and for most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. I was confused by the wonderment of the discovery of Australia by Captain Cook, a land I knew as existing from the beginning. I recall learning about the 'Aborigines'. A disembodied education filled with brown and black crayons, lap-laps, spears and cartoons of noble, savage, often singular, and always male, for my feeble fingers to colour. A confusing task, these caricatures only exist in 'Western' classrooms, they were not representative of me, my family or, in fact, any Aboriginal person I knew—Torres Strait Islanders were not represented, it was as if they did not exist. I was confused. In secondary school I confused others, my pride in my identity and culture became a source of my teenage rebellion, a way to be unique amongst my mostly Anglo-Saxon peers. I became both the Aboriginal expert in class at the same time as having to prove I was Aboriginal to both my peers and my teachers—how much? How authentic? How real was I? It would have been 'easier' to deny my Aboriginality, to be silent, to be invisible, the desirable figure in the colonial project. I was confused, they were confused. It was confusing.

In spite of my haphazard experiences in ‘Western’ education, I would later enrol in university study. I was at a crossroads in my life. I had a ‘good’ job, but I wanted more. I yearned for more. I feel sometimes that I am construed as the ‘Aborigine’ above my station, that I lost my place and that I forgot to be invisible. I guess my teenage rebellious streak was still firmly engaged. However, in my imagination, university would be the space that would nurture my thirst for more. I was excited and terrified. I was ready to learn and grow—I did, but not without some powerful and painful ‘lessons’. I entered the illustrious halls of higher education believing that I would find a space of higher understanding, that academics would somehow be better than everyone else. Academics, I surmised, would be ultra-intelligent, clever and sophisticated, they would behold a kind of worldly knowledge that was to be revered. I had high expectations. I suspected such demi-gods of higher learning would know about Aboriginal people, about human rights, about building and guiding humanity to a better world. Instead, I learnt that even academics and the institutions in which they serve are not above racism and discriminatory practices.

At university I encountered classrooms filled with racism, at times subtle and casualised, other times, it was firmly directed at me. Although there are multiple stories to recall, one that stands out to me occurred in my first semester of study. I delivered a presentation to my class, my self-selected topic was on Aboriginal affairs. At the end of my presentation, just one question was directed to me. My lecturer asked, ‘why do you still lay claim to your negroid gene’?. I was devastated and felt humiliated. Just like in primary and secondary school, I was both subject and object—it did not matter what I had said, only who I was, or should not be. I had not yet developed the language nor the muscle to respond. Yet it was obvious to me that I would have to fight if I wanted to stay. I was out of place. I was confused, they were confused. It was confusing.

Ironically higher education is where I make my living. I turned my anger and out of place-ness into my driving ambition. A need to prove that not only do Indigenous people belong in universities, but that we also have much to contribute, we have as much right to this space/place as everyone else. I am developing the language and the muscle to speak back. I will take up space and find ways to make space for others. I am not alone. I owe an enormous amount of gratitude to my Indigenous colleagues, those who have come before me, those that stand beside me. Our collective voice and support of each other are paramount. Seeing Indigenous faces and hearing Indigenous voices should not be underestimated. Most Indigenous Australian academics and students will probably recall similar feelings of unease, displacement and outright racism delivered within the sacrosanct halls of the Australian education system. From early childhood to tertiary education, there is a continuance of silence, ignorance and avoidance of all things related to Indigenous peoples, places and philosophies. However, Indigenous education or the education of Indigenous people is just one part of this story.

I have worked for many years teaching Indigenous Studies, influencing how students, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous view, experience and make sense of the world. More often than not students come to Indigenous studies feeling disorientated and bewildered. Out of place. Why had they not heard this before? Why was this their first experience of learning about the histories and contemporaries

of Indigenous Australia? Buoyed by student outrage, I looked to the wider higher education sector noting that students are not given knowledge of Indigenous people, places and philosophies unless they are in specific courses. The need to include Indigenous Australian perspectives and knowledges across university curriculum is two-fold. Firstly, to provide Indigenous Australians with an avenue in which to learn and grow, and to position the Knowledges that they bring to the university space with value and respect. Secondly, to provide non-Indigenous students with an instrument in which to discover, learn and realise Indigenous Knowledge sets that both challenge and compliment 'Western' knowledge systems.

There is a real lack of Indigenous people, places and philosophies within Australian education curriculum. Indigenous content has been cited mostly in anthropological and historical texts written from the perspective of non-Indigenous scholars, this content formed what would be considered Indigenous knowledges and cultures within the curricula since they were introduced some 40 years after the first university in Australia was established. This limited and one-dimensional content would be taught in Australian universities right up to the 1960s. The evolution of curriculum change arose in 1961 with the establishment of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (AIAS) which was assigned the task of embedding Indigenous knowledges. As the new millennium approached, varying degrees of inclusion were witnessed in university curricula. Offerings across institutional degree programmes were often left to the goodwill of individuals, and rarely a systematic approach implemented. However, there has been a rise in advocacy for inclusion of Indigenous Knowledges. In 2017, Universities Australia introduced their Indigenous Strategy 2017–2020, which outlined a collective intention to address the cultural capability of every graduate, bringing with it a dilemma in how to achieve the embedding of Indigenous Knowledges.

Indigenous Graduate Attributes were born of this era. Institutions are in the infancy of implementing these attributes. For the most part, the development and incorporation of Indigenous Knowledges have been the work of Indigenous academics. However, should institutions be serious about their commitment to implementing Indigenous Graduate Attributes, then that burden needs to be carried more systematically. At this point, there appears reluctance to embrace teaching about Indigenous people, places and philosophies more broadly. It would be my position that such discomfort stems from those that will need to do the most work. Largely non-Indigenous academics who are not likely to have been exposed to Indigenous Knowledges within their own programmes of study, or within their research. They simply do not know where to start, what to include and most likely afraid of what to say. Non-Indigenous academics are crippled by their inexperience. But we are no longer in an era where ignorance is tolerable. We all live in a time where information is at a click at the end of your hand. The writings by Indigenous scholars is but a Google away. This is not the time for cognitive dissonance. There is no time for confusion.

In the academy, Indigenous scholars are developing, advocating and implementing Indigenous Knowledges within their curricula. It is paramount that non-Indigenous academics look to Indigenous colleagues to guide and inform



approaches to introducing Indigenous content. The work of Indigenous scholars provides a roadmap of knowledge creation, as well as building and dismantling ‘Western’ knowledge systems. This scholarship which when read and heard with intent can assist our non-Indigenous counterparts to wrestle with their confusion and discomfort. It is okay to be uncomfortable, but allowing discomfort to stymie social justice and to halt change in the way in which academic institutions do business is inexcusable. Indigenous scholars have been doing this work for decades. However, Indigenous academics are under resourced and overburdened by this reliance on us to inform, craft and deliver content—we simply cannot do all the work, we need non-Indigenous scholars to step into the space of crafting and delivering content too. The active engagement of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in this space can only serve to nourish the collective space of academic institutions for everyone.

Why am I here when my experiences have suggested that Australian educational spaces are not for me, or people like me? The boundaries placed around Indigenous Australians still exist, but they are being challenged, upturned and rebutted. I believe in the power of change. I believe in people. I believe that to make change you have to create change. Indigenous Australians do belong in all educational systems; it is as much our space as it is anyone else’s. There is unique, valuable and insightful ways that Indigenous people see the world that hold deep Knowledge. I implore all of us to challenge this outdated concept of the ‘Western’ institution. A systemic change is required across all institutional spaces; I believe that starts with education. Knowledge is power, and while education systems and ‘western’ learning have been weaponised against Indigenous peoples, they can present an opportunity to develop the emancipatory weaponry that we all need to dismantle the colonial project. From early childhood right through to tertiary education, all students need to be afforded the knowledge, skills and experience to work *with* and *for* Indigenous Australians. Such challenge promotes new space in which knowledge can be introduced, created, built upon and dismantled in ways that are not only exciting but may well hold the key to solving some of the crisis we face globally. Let’s no longer be confused.

I sit in two spaces, happily, though not always comfortably. As a consequence of the invasion of Australia, the way in which Indigenous Australians know, do and be has shifted. I walk in the colonial project, but I also walk on country. I am always on country, learning, growing, questioning. It is not my country that I walk on most days, but as I take up space on unceded lands, I know that country holds deep knowledge, so I listen—we should all listen. There is an assumption that Indigenous Knowledges no longer exist due to invasion and colonisation, but Indigenous Knowledges have been here since the beginning, and they live in the past, the present and the future. My Knowledges are both deep and shallow, learnt on country, with country, with family, with friends, with Indigenous colleagues. My Knowledges have also been learnt within Australian educational spaces, within the academy I have cemented these Knowledges in ways in which I could not have imagined, and in ways I am yet to imagine. My yearning for more is unquenched. I am less confused. However, I am yet to find that elusive gum leaf and learn to play it just like my great-grandfather.

### 2.3.2 The Past Is Always Present

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*Sharlene Cruickshank*

2

My name is Sharlene Cruickshank and I am an Aboriginal person. I am a descendant of the Wandj Wandandian - Wodi Wodi and Jerrinja peoples of the Yuin nation on the New South Wales' South Coast. My story line or song line covers from one end of the state to the other, from Far West New South Wales to the South Coast of New South Wales with a few diversions along the way. I have over 30 years' experience working in health-related areas including the past 13 years in community mental health, social and emotional wellbeing.

There are a few events that have influenced the way I work with individuals' families and communities throughout my life. Like many Aboriginal people in Australia, I have questioned my own identity as an Aboriginal person at times—feelings of confusion, embarrassment and sadness as well as pride, love and honour.

My mother who was a non-Aboriginal woman instilled a great amount of pride in her children about our Aboriginal heritage and was the first person to teach us about the positives of being part of the oldest living culture in the world; she also instilled the importance of family, obligations and connections to community. Our dad, an Aboriginal man, was sadly a man who was a bit shy and a bit reluctant to talk about his heritage or his community until later in life when he would talk about how the family had been moved from their ancestral lands to the other side of the river by the colonial system and chuckle that “the white man tried to breed us out but were just breeding in”

One incident I recall when I was about 18 years old working as a trainee enrolled nurse at the Broken Hill Base hospital; as the least experienced and junior staff member, I was often assigned into the gastroenterology ward for children. One afternoon shift a tiny little baby boy was flown in by the Royal Flying Doctor Service (RFDS) from a small town a couple of hours from Broken Hill. He was very unwell and was described as a “failure to thrive” baby; he was covered in scabies, had severe gastro and the most heartbreaking cry I had ever heard. The story I was told at the time was that his mother was an “alcoholic” who had rejected this little boy and abandoned him under a bush. I can still feel the rage, confusion and embarrassment I experienced at the comments and judgement staff levelled at the mother and the Aboriginal community in general. I also questioned at that time how could a mother leave her sick baby? Obviously, all the stories my mum had told us about family being so important to Aboriginal people were lies.

My next big learning moment or series of moments was about a year later I had gone off to teacher's college in Bathurst, NSW, and I stayed in an Aboriginal hostel which housed Aboriginal students from all over NSW. This was an interesting experience in many ways as for the first time I was meeting Aboriginal people who all looked different—no typecasting here redheads, blondes, brown hair blue eyes, pale skin and freckles we were all as diverse as the towns and cities we came from. Here I met two of the most memorable women, Viv (19) and Sally (25). I have ever

met even now many years later both of these girls one who I will call Viv who was about the same age as myself 19 or 20 and Sally who was a few years older than me in her mid-20s. Both were beautiful, intelligent, funny, caring people. Taught me so much about my own privilege and the impacts of child removal and trauma on Aboriginal people.

Viv, she was tall and beautiful with short black curly hair which she styled in a very modern 80s' style. She wore great clothes and fabulous earrings; in fact, I borrowed a pair and still wear them to this day. She was smart and a bit sassy, and we got to know each other very quickly in the way people do when they are thrown together and away from home. We would sit in her room, which she shared with Sally, talking about our studies, music, other people—whatever young people talk about. We also partied and that included a bit too much alcohol, I must admit.

As we got to know each other, I started to notice some strange or unusual behaviours: isolating herself, crying a lot and cutting and scratching herself on her arms and legs. One day I asked her about these cuts and some old scars and fresh wounds of varying depths, a few quite deep wounds and other more superficial. What she told me shocked and horrified me at the time (I was quite a naïve country kid back then). She told me about being removed from her Aboriginal mother along with her younger brother, that her mother didn't want her anymore and that her mother had abandoned her and her brother. Viv was put into care and then adopted by a "lovely" German family. Unfortunately, that lovely German family turned out to be full of people who abused and traumatised a beautiful little girl and made her feel worthless, hopeless, guilty and ungrateful.

Her adoptive grandfather began to molest her from the age of 4 years; her adoptive father raped her several times from the age of 10 and finally her adoptive brothers took turns to rape and abused her from the age of 14 until she ran away at the age of 16 with her younger brother then only 14. So, three generations of a family who were supposed to love, care and keep her safe actually almost destroyed her.

Sally also had her own story to share. Sally told us her experiences of being removed from her mother and never knowing her father. At age 26 she found out that she had several siblings who had also been taken away from their mother "due to neglect". She was told that her mum had asked for support, and this was used against her to remove all of her children. This led Sally's mum to use alcohol to deal with her grief over the loss of her babies. So when Sally finally met her mum, she was very unwell and died only months after meeting with Sally and one of her brothers. Sally struggled to make sense of losing her mother for the second time, and this led to a decline in her mood and behaviour. Sally was probably one of the most intelligent women I have met in my life. A true story teller and artist who struggled with mental illness for many years; often locked in her room, experiencing flashbacks and nightmares of past physical and emotional abuse, long periods of depression and several periods of what I now know would be called mania; not sleeping, singing, laughing, writing, drawing or spending money; sometimes creative, sometimes erratic or disorganised. I heard years later that Sally had died by suicide.

I struggled myself in that year in Bathurst to adjust to studying, people and my own sickness for home so I deferred and ran back home to Broken Hill. I kept in contact with these girls for a short time but lost contact as we do; but I never really forgot their stories and the impact they had on me, and when 18 years later I finally went back to study, this time about Aboriginal mental health and wellbeing, I found out the reason why.

Their stories I would later come to realise reflected some of the experiences of many Aboriginal people across Australia later to be known as the Stolen Generation. In 2005, I commenced my studies at Charles Sturt University (Bachelor of Health Science [Mental Health]) and worked as part of the community mental health and drug and alcohol service in Broken Hill Far West NSW. I moved back to my home town which brings with it some challenges as well benefits—some people knew me but many more knew my family, my parents and my five younger siblings.

Although I had grown up in Broken Hill, I needed to gain trust and build rapport in the local communities which include the nearby communities of Wilcannia and Menindee; both of these communities have a history of being Aboriginal Mission towns which to this day influence the social structure of the towns. I met people with great passion resilience and character in these little communities.

One memorable young man, George, I can still see his gorgeous smile which masked his painful and sad story. He was the same age as my youngest daughter and attended school with her so I think that may be why our brief contact mattered so much to me. He was brought into the emergency department by police intoxicated and threatening self-harm. The next morning we talked about what was happening; he denied suicidal thought. By the time I saw him, however, he told me briefly his story. On the day before he was brought into the emergency department, he had seen the person who had sexually abused him as a young child, and he felt unable to tell his family as he didn't want to worry them. He didn't think they would understand. We talked at length about his feelings and his strategies for dealing with his trauma and stressors. He assured me he would be safe so was discharged into the care of his parent, and he agreed to follow up in the community. We actively followed him up with minimal success, and then we were told he had been moved to live with family in a large regional town in NSW. Several months later, my daughter came to me crying telling me she had heard from friends that George had died by suicide.

One of the uncles I have worked with over the past 7 years is a member of the Stolen Generation. He is funny and passionate about his community but also quick to anger, mistrusting and easily distracted. Like many members of the Stolen Generation I have met, there is a powerful resilience and sense of protection.

Another fellow I worked with was referred for alcohol and “anger issues”. When we talked about his history, he told me he had been incarcerated for about 20 of his 36 years. Through his narrative, I learnt that he had witnessed the murder of his mother at the age of 8 years, and the adults and carers around him at that time didn't know how to deal with a grieving, terrified and traumatised little boy, so they gave him some cannabis to help calm him down. It worked as well as it does, and this became the norm for him. According to him, this led him to using

alcohol and other substances, risky behaviours including stealing cars, selling drugs, assaults and other behaviours that ended up with his incarceration at a rate that could make him the poster boy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander incarceration. In June 2019, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners represented 28% of the total fulltime adult prisoner population” across Australia (► [abs.gov.au](https://abs.gov.au)). We talked at length about his mother, and he told me that I was the first person to ever ask about his mum or talk about how it felt to miss her, grieve for her and love her. We talked about his anger, which you may have guessed had turned out to be fear, sadness and hurt. We explored his childhood and some of the events that impacted on his life choices including the use of substances, often to deal with pain, lack of trust for adults or authority figures.

Aunty M who was a member of the Stolen Generation in her 90s when I met her—she had recently been diagnosed with dementia. As is common in people with dementia, she was often transformed to her younger years telling stories of her childhood and young adulthood. She told of being removed from her mum as a child and the sadness and longing for home she still felt as an elder; her train journey across New South Wales to live with family members she didn’t know and who treated her like free labour and housekeeping staff. She spoke of her fight for justice for others, taking in young homeless, pregnant women who had nowhere to go in a small country town. She spoke of not meeting her mother again until she was in her 50s and her mother’s grief.

If these stories sound familiar, it’s because they were and still are true that Aboriginal women and men are still being deeply impacted by the policies and practices of colonisation and racism. Just because I am an Aboriginal person doesn’t guarantee immediate engagement or rapport with other Aboriginal people. It requires time, respect and lots of vouching.

Let me end this essay with a couple of stories that happened to me and my family this year. In May 2019, the same week as I was working on a community project for reconciliation and commemorating Sorry Day (26th May), my daughter and her partner took their two babies to the local health district hospital emergency department; their two-year-old daughter had fallen out of a box while playing and sustained a fracture to her lower leg; the five-week-old had a temperature and was also unwell. Instead of treating the family with compassion and understanding due to what can only be put down to racial profiling, they were interrogated by a hospital social worker. They had to put up with racist remarks and received poor treatment which only added to the fear, mistrust, stigma and stereotypes many Aboriginal people experience when trying to access a service that is meant for all Australians equally and without discrimination.

My last story happened in the small seaside community I live; while waiting for a coffee, I was standing in the July sun when another customer, an older White male, struck up a conversation. We were chatting about the weather, the area, what people do for a living, how we each came to be living here. When I commented about my connections to the local area and what had brought me to the area, I stated that my Grandmother had been born on the Aboriginal Mission of Rosebay Park at Orient Point and that my Pop had been born at Greenwell Point across the

river. I told him that I had been coming to the area all of my life. He expressed surprise and exclaimed that he was unaware of any Aboriginal community and had never heard of Jerrinja (the local Aboriginal community). He also crudely said that he was surprised to hear I was Aboriginal as he thought I looked like “something more exotic”. I was a bit affronted; but instead of acting on the burning rage I felt slowly rising inside my gut, we had a pleasant conversation about colonisation and the effects this has had on the diversity in the look of Aboriginal peoples. Only later did I think about what he said—Tell me truthfully, what could be more exotic than being part of a culture that has survived for more than 60,000 years or over 600 generations?

The truth is that Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander people have been living across this country we call Australia for thousands for years, and we still have cultural connections to our lands, sea, animals and sky, as well as our families, communities and spirituality. There are strong Aboriginal people across the country working together to improve the wellbeing of all Australians. Talk to us, engage with us, engage in community activities whether it is Reconciliation or Sorry Day events. We are the tapestry of Australia.

## 2.4 Experiential Activities

### ► Important

The experiential learning activities are designed to enhance cultural responsiveness. When engaging in experiential activities, it is important to create a safe environment for participants to explore potentially uncomfortable feelings or situations. Facilitators should consider the type of activity and role of the participant, and they should provide participants with ways to resolve feelings that may arise as a result of the activity including reflection and debriefing.

#### Activity 1

**Title** Movie time: ‘Rabbit-Proof Fence’ (2002)

**Purpose** Film can be a powerful experiential learning activity for cultural awareness. ‘Rabbit-Proof Fence’, directed by Phillip Noyce, is loosely based on the true story of three young Indigenous girls who ran away from a settlement north of Perth, WA, after being placed there in 1931. The nine-week journey home on foot to their Aboriginal families followed 2400 km of the Australian rabbit-proof fence (Noyce, Olsen & Winter, 2002).

**Purpose** Watch the 93-minute film and respond to the following questions.

#### ■ Questions

1. Were you aware of this part of Australia’s history?
2. What specific images stayed with you after the movie was over?
3. What do you feel is the underlying message of the film?
4. How has watching this film contributed to your understanding of the impact of past events on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island peoples’ collective identity?

5. How has watching this film contributed to your self-awareness in working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people?
6. What were some of the different ways prejudice and discrimination were exemplified in the film?
7. How does power influence prejudice and discrimination in the film?

Discuss your responses in pairs or groups.

**Outcome** To enhance students' cultural awareness and understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' culture and family ties.

## Activity 2

### Title Yarning Circle

**Purpose** A yarning circle (or dialogue circle) is used within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People's culture to learn from the collective group, build respectful relationships, and preserve and pass on cultural knowledge (Morseu-Diop, 2013). (You can learn more about yarning circles at ► <http://eprints.qut.edu.au/61361/7/61361.pdf> ► <https://www.qcaa.qld.edu.au/about/k-12-policies/aboriginal-torres-strait-islander-perspectives/resources/yarning-circles> and ► <https://www.qcaa.qld.edu.au/about/k-12-policies/aboriginal-torres-strait-islander-perspectives/resources/yarning-circles>).

Students are invited to respectfully form a yarning circle to focus on aspects of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and mental health.

#### ■ Process

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are among some of the longest

continuing cultures in the world. Strong culture has been identified as essential to health and wellbeing, and studies such as the Mayi Kuwayu Study are attempting to develop measures of cultural participation and expression to support this belief. (You can learn more about the Mayi Kuwayu study at ► <https://mkstudy.com.au/about-mayi-kuwayu/>). Identifying protective factors in this way would allow a shift in the sometimes negative portrayal of these groups from a deficit discourse to a strengths-based perspective. Rejecting the deficit discourse does not downplay challenges that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples face, rather it reduces the tendency to overlook diversity, capability and strength. Exploring the relationship between culture and health and wellbeing described above will inform the discussion in your yarning circle in this activity.

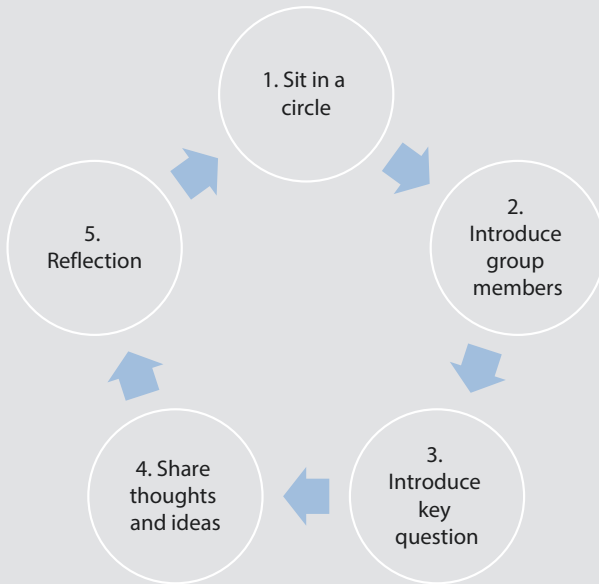
Yarning circles are hosted by an individual—teacher, student or visitor. Participants sit in a circle, and all are considered equal within the circle. The host invites participants to introduce

themselves and share a piece of information about themselves. The host introduces the focus question and encourages participants to take turns to talk. This promotes reciprocal sharing and learning. Thoughts can be written or drawn after each person speaks, using butcher’s paper, or drawn in the dirt if sitting outside. Finally, any actions or issues identified are resolved, or agreed to follow up in the next yarn-ing circle. (See image below).

■ **Questions**

Some focus questions for ongoing yarn-ing circles include:

1. How could cultural participation and expression promote wellbeing?
  - (a) Think of some specific examples from your own culture.
  - (b) Drawing on your knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, suggest and explore some examples from these cultures, and some of the things that could get in the way of full participation and expres-sion in twenty-first century Australia.
2. What are some examples of the deficit discourse about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples?
  - (a) How could these be perpetuated?
  - (b) How could these be avoided?
  - (c) What can you do about this?
3. Based on the above discussions, the group then decides on actions or issues to be followed up in the next yarn-ing circle, or actioned in stu-dents’ wider learning.





YARNING CIRCLE SEQUENCE. (Image adapted from: ► <https://www.qcaa.qld.edu.au/about/k-12-policies/aboriginal-torres-strait-islander-perspectives/resources/yarning-circles>)

**Outcome** Students experience reciprocal sharing and learning in a unique and culturally sensitive way as they explore

concepts linked to culture, health and wellbeing. Importantly, this collaborative means of learning from the collective group, building respectful relationships, and preserving and passing on cultural knowledge can be adapted to a range of situations throughout the students' education and work life.

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