

Title: The Other One

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Abstract

In 2007, the list of what doesn't work in relation to effective and appropriate service delivery for Aboriginal people is both exhaustive and repetitive. Also repetitive is the sense of inevitability which accompanies this perceived 'problem', one that is transmitted through and embedded within localised practices of individuals, organizations and government. This seemingly unchanging process is informed by a framing that privileges 'the (non-Aboriginal) one' and casts 'the (Aboriginal) other' as problematic; where responsibility is placed upon 'the other' and yet, directed by 'the one'. Within this framing, political strategies and acts of appeasement, no matter how well intended, deny and reproduce embodied acts of racism. To achieve equitable and socially just outcomes requires ways of knowing and being which disrupt this binary and shift the problematising gaze from 'the other' to 'the one'.

This paper explores the author's lived experience of this 'disruption', through the re-telling of practice narratives within the context of the community-based support service, Moorditj Yarning. The narratives describe ways of working when 'familiar' reference points and conceptual arrangements become unsettled and challenged, and where work becomes accountable to community evaluation and aspiration.

Introduction

I would like to acknowledge Noongar people as the first custodians of this land and acknowledge elders present here today. I would also like to emphasize that the following paper reflects my experiences of working within a particular and localised Aboriginal community and does not presume to speak for or about all Aboriginal people.

My name is Jan woodland and I am attending this conference in my capacity as manager of RAWA's Aboriginal specific service 'Moorditj Yarning'. I would like to

share some of my experiences, learning's and reflections on what has been, and still is a steep learning curve.

As context and background I will start with what I suppose is an irony; that is, me- a non-Aboriginal woman- developing and managing an Aboriginal specific service. While *Relationships Australia* (RA) is recognized for successfully delivering services to many white Australians and to a large extent people from a variety of diverse cultural backgrounds, Aboriginal people have rarely engaged with or accessed the services offered by RA (WA). Feedback from many agencies and organisations suggest that this is not 'news', but all too often this outcome is used to reinforce negative stereotypes in relation to engagement and service recipients. Lack of engagement is not seen as a service delivery problem but instead a framing where the absent clients, in this case Aboriginal clients, are blamed for their absence.

Learning to 'consult'

In February 2005 I began working for RAWA and was asked;

1. to explore this perceived lack of engagement and
2. to determine the feasibility of developing an alternative and perhaps more culturally appropriate way of offering service provision and delivery.

As a post graduate research student I considered myself aware of the historical context *and* the impact of colonisation contributing to marginalisation. The term marginalised, often attributed to Aboriginal people, always already sets up expectations and particular constructs. The term also suggests that to be 'not-marginalised' you need to be mainstream, or what is perceived as mainstream, as in values, norms, aspirations and so on. I also acknowledge that Aboriginal people have been and are marginalised and experience the disadvantages that marginalisation via racism brings. The term does not however allow for the multiple strengths, resilience and resistance that are part of Aboriginal communities in all levels of society.

I approached the initial exploration process from the position of someone who wanted to learn rather than an 'authority', although upon reflection, layers of implicit assumptions kept surfacing and crashing against what was to me, a new way of seeing

and knowing. This process has been at times excruciatingly uncomfortable and at other times exhilarating, but most importantly a process that has been transformative. I knew no-one in the designated area I was to initiate the potential service and had no real idea where to start in the creation of a successful new Aboriginal service. I had prepared myself, I thought, by reading literature around Indigenous research protocols and cultural awareness. I possessed vigour, born of optimism and a belief that given the lack of restraints RAWA had placed upon me that a service could be created that would reflect inter-cultural integrity. I started with consultation after being given the name of an Aboriginal company who delivered cultural training.

The consulting process surprised me; it was easy. Who ever I spoke with would give me the names of several other people I should speak with. In this way I was referred to the relevant people, relevant to community that is. I was also surprised at the length and way the consultations took place. In the initial consultation stage I spoke with 41 people: I spoke with Indigenous academics, agency managers and workers and local government project officers. Indigenous liaison officers from schools, Centrelink, the police and community health, DCD workers, local Aboriginal community members, refuge workers. I also attended any relevant lectures or seminars.

The first few consultations taught me that I needed to listen and modify my ideas about time. My idea of just how the format of a conversation to discuss this potential new service should take place became irrelevant. I wasn't getting the answers to my questions; I was being told seemingly random stories. Fortunately for me I started to listen. I found myself hearing stories of resilience, persistence and dignity alongside stories that revealed the extent and impact of systematic and legitimised oppression and racism - colonisation.

Words like racism and oppression are not popular, and there is a tendency to relegate any such acts and behaviour to an 'uninformed few'. The stories I heard and continue to hear contradict this understanding and present racism as an everyday lived experience to be negotiated.

I soon lost my “I’m here to offer something new and great’ when I realised that I wasn’t the first, and certainly would not be the last person who had walked this path. I also realised that the considerable time, patience and energy expended with every consultation meant time taken away from someone’s already overwhelming work load. The consultations took on a new meaning for me and a sense of urgency replaced my earlier enthusiasm. I felt a profound sense of accountability. The consultation process had unsettled the limitations of my ways of knowing. Lester-Irabinna Rigney (1999 **reference**) confirms that “Indigenous people think and interpret the world and its realities in differing ways to non-Indigenous peoples because of their experiences, histories, cultures and values”. Engaging with this ‘unsettling’ feeling meant navigating a different framework. Negotiating an Indigenous world view challenged the familiar reference points and the order of things as I knew them.

Unpacking Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal service

So how does this relate to service provision and delivery? The interactions and understandings I gained, and continue to gain from ongoing consultation has alerted me to the discrepancies that exist within the expectations of dominant white cultural systems, particularly systems involved in community service provision, and Indigenous communities prioritising self determination. A superficial reading of this would suggest an absolute incompatibility. This is nihilistic however and does not acknowledge or validate the good will and perseverance that can be present within both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities.

How to enact the learning from the consultation processes requires attributes not often valued in systems that on one hand demand inclusive practice but on the other constrict or restrain this process, by imposing narrow and inappropriate mandates to work within - the dictates of government administration and Aboriginal cultural life. The concept of what constitutes ‘work’ and ‘outcome’ within the confines of community support services appears to be driven by a definitive white discourse and unrelated to how mainstream services might initiate useful and productive non Indigenous/Indigenous partnerships. Negotiating effective partnerships presupposes trust and co-operation. Trust and cooperation takes time and a willingness to engage with difference and as Taylor (2003, 45) suggests, encompasses mutuality;

a meeting of **two distinct** cultures through processes and interactions which retain the distinctive integrity and differences of both cultures and which may involve a blending of elements of both cultures but never the domination of one over the other. **I'm posting this article with this email!**

The 'how to' of this process has been and continues to be the journey and learning curve that I am undertaking. I have immersed myself in a culture different from the one I have grown up in and am familiar with. This has meant getting out into the community, being involved, listening to peoples stories, attending meetings and events, getting to know people, and allowing people to get to know me in a social and personal as well as a professional sense- 'hardly a legitimate white way to work'. This has particular relevance for the interpretation of the concept of boundaries. I have come to understand the value and importance of Aboriginal networks and family. I have utilised my professional skills in numerous situations, rarely in a traditional manner or setting. The story below refers to the 'blurring of boundaries' when interpreting 'professional' and 'client' relationships from a traditional or conventional perspective.

I have facilitated young peoples groups and this is where opportunistic counselling can happen. I worked with a group of young women 14 to 16 years old. They weren't attending school, but religiously turned up twice a week to practice dance, hip-hop. They choreographed the dance and mixed their own music. They were asked to perform at several NAIDOC events which led to them increasing their times of practice. They demonstrated commitment, persistency, talent, cooperation and initiative. Driving the girls to and from the community centre where they practiced became the time and space for talking about anything and everything that was concerning them. This also became an intense learning time, and an exchange of learning I think for myself and the girls. With the growing sense of trust the girls placed in me, came a sense of obligation. Obligation can imply duty, and this has connotations of having to do something, and I certainly don't mean obligation like that. I don't quite know how to explain this. I keep thinking of boundaries and how conventional understandings of boundaries make no sense in this context. I

accompanied the girls to their school on several occasions in an attempt to re-engage them in school. Retention rates for Aboriginal kids in secondary schools are abysmal. 'No commitment, no perseverance, need to show independence, need to apply themselves and so on'; the list of negatives which I suppose the principal felt he had to detail sounded to me like he thought the girls were useless and while I believe he was reading them the riot act to ensure they understood the gravity of not turning up to school, his spiel had the effect of them feeling like they weren't wanted. These girls had attended the local primary together along with other Noongar children who they were mostly related to. The transition from primary to secondary education meant the kids were separated, engendering a sense of loss and alienation in the bigger system. There appeared to be no acknowledgement of the cultural aspects of belonging that would or could stimulate school retention, or perhaps this was outside of white educative experience and understanding.

Lack of acknowledgement or outside of mainstream understanding or institutional racism?

I have struggled how to articulate the processes that I consider inform racist practices, practices that I have observed, been part of, and sometimes unintentionally been complicit in. (I'm aware that unintentional is a contentious term, one that I can't think how to amend or how to prevent from perhaps sounding as a confession). The following narrative is an example of such a struggle.

I sit around a table with 4 DCP workers including a senior team manager and a young Aboriginal woman. The details of the story in this context are unimportant, and of course at the same time of enormous importance. This appears to me as one of the most revealing scenarios in terms of how convoluted and in this case disparate, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal ways of being can be. Words are used, backwards and forwards. I understand what the DCP workers are saying, I understand the language, in terms of human service jargon, I also understand the reference points used, the world view that informs the words, and I now also have an understanding of how these words maybe being heard and understood from the young woman's point of view. In this understanding the words and meanings completely bypass the young woman's history and terms of reference, as do her responses evade the DCP workers understanding. We're all using the same language, but I feel like an interpreter where

the most important understandings are lost in translation. She's angry! As a kid she was assaulted, abused, she hasn't had much nurturing, her dad's dead, her mum's on drugs, she's been a mother to her brothers, sisters and younger cousins since she's been a kid, there's been family violence, her family were constantly evicted from houses as she was growing up, children being removed in her family is the rule, not the exception, she wagged school, she stopped going to school at 13, going to court and going to gaol is also not the exception in her family. There's more and much more, but that could lead to identification, and besides, this story is all too familiar. How this has come about and how this has been allowed to continue unaddressed is what unsettles confidence in a child protection agency that appears to be unaware, uninformed or at best, out of its depth in acknowledging the ongoing impact of colonisation and racism. She's amazing, she's resilient, and she has a fighting spirit, and has no problem expressing this.....She's learnt to fight, that's how she's survived. Her children have been removed both times just days after their births. She raises her voice and swears at the workers and they stop listening and in turn become aggressive in their actions and sanctions. The situation is further compounded by introducing the concept of 'responsibility'. Whilst the young woman is called upon to prove she can be responsible, responsibility within this system, DCP, a representative of the larger system/society, proves evasive and arbitrary.

Unpacking 'The One' and the 'Other'

My experiences working with Moorditj Yarning contradict the ongoing dominant media portrayal and political campaign that mostly depict Aboriginal matters as a vast and hopeless mess, *and* that appear to ignore deny or be oblivious to the binary nature of relational context. Alongside re-telling of practice narratives I cannot disregard the need I feel to make sense of, and explore 'ways of being' that impact on what I do, the back ground and context, particularly in relation to my positioning as a non-Aboriginal woman working for a non-government organisation, working with community. Drawing on the critiques of French feminist theorists such as Irigaray and Kristeva, any dominant framing that is positioned as universal, as 'The One', considers any thing else as 'Other', **'Other to 'The One'**. Within feminism, 'The One' refers to the masculine standard that is universal and privileged, the feminine, in not being masculine, is posited as 'Other' to 'The One'. Similarly, if we take the dominant western framing where the norm or standard is 'whiteness'('The One'), as

a framing for understanding Aboriginal issues, Aboriginal people and concerns will always be reduced to a subordinated position as the 'Other', whilst the attributes of the privileged framing or measure remain unquestioned.

The final story in this paper reflects for me the significance of positioning in terms of understanding the impact of binary relationships and dominant framings.

I worked with a woman who had been a community health worker for 20 years. She knew everyone! I would accompany her on home visits. On one occasion, the woman we were visiting only opened the door when my colleague called out to her. She'd only seen me, and had thought that I was welfare. She'd had some trouble and someone had threatened to call welfare as a way of intimidating her. I was horrified that this threat could cause so much distress and horrified to think that the legacy of past actions could have so much power to cause fear today. Looking back at this now, it seems naïve and I am horrified at my initial response. The legacy of the stolen generation impacts on all family members, and the removal of Aboriginal children from their families today is being called the second stolen generation.

References

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