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REVIEW ARTICLE

What does the term childhood behavioural disorders mean in the context of Aboriginal culture within Australia? Part 1: 'Not just using the words'

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The meaning of childhood behavioural disorders (CBD) shifts in different settings. This article is the 3 first in a series of two that explores this concept and how culture shapes its meaning. This first article 4 is a conversation. A yarn with Aboriginal community leaders about what behavioural problems mean 5 to them. The second article discusses how the concept of CBD originated.

Key words: Aboriginal social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB); childhood behavioural disorders.

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Uncle Terry (Terry Denzil), Aunty Deb (Deborah Daley) and Vanessa (Vanessa Edwige) are proud Aboriginal community members from the Redfern/Waterloo community of inner Sydney. Aunty Deb is an Aboriginal Education Officer at a local school and Vanessa is a Senior School Psychologist. Here they share with us the importance of understanding Aboriginal culture and history before making diagnoses of behavioural disorders and why partnerships with the community are integral to the healing process.

Let us begin by acknowledging the traditional custodians of Australia:

> The author acknowledges the Cadigal, Wangal and Bediagal people as the traditional owners and custodians of the land on which we serve.
>
> We pay respect to the Elders past, present and future for they hold the memories, traditions, cultures and hopes of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in our community.
>
> We acknowledge that their story began long before ours and we thank them for generously sharing their lands, culture and knowledge with us.
>
> We accept that it is our responsibility to ensure that their voices are heard.

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Having a Yarn: Just Change One Thing…

FACILITATOR: Growing up, what was childhood like for you?
AUNTY DEB: Well, we all had a job to do. You know, when you're all in the family, you always had a job to do. I'm the second oldest out of 11 children, you know? And my job is that I always helped my mother. And that was at a young age.
UNCLE TERRY: We relied on family.
AUNTY DEB: Yeah, family. You know, yes, we did work, you know, and we had to work. You had to help your mum and you dad. You helped – because my dad helped all of these uncles and aunts as well, and I didn't notice until later in life that he always helped. Yeah, as an Aboriginal person, you have a lot of responsibility. If you're elders in your community, you've got a lot of responsibility.
UNCLE TERRY: Yeah. I think what's happened over a long period of time with colonisation and things like that, the actual fact of what Aboriginal people did with their families and their communities has changed a hell of a lot.
AUNTY DEB: Yeah, that's right.
UNCLE TERRY: As a child, I was raised by a single parent. But look, I did have a grandfather and three – or two aunties and a couple of uncles. It wouldn't have been possible for my mum to go to work, right? Now, I'll give you an example of that. She was born in 1920, left school, could've gone to Sydney Girls High but no one had a florin, which was 20 cents a week to help her get there. So, for a half penny in the tram she went to Maroubra Junction. We lived in Surry Hills. When she applied for a job, she was told, in no uncertain terms, she wouldn't be educated enough because she lived in Surry Hills and the fact that she was Aboriginal, right? But when she retired from work, she was the manageress of the Health Commission's Credit Union.

And the reason she got her first job was that they said, where do you live? She said, Coogee and she was South American. So, you have to lie to get to the position where you want to be. And that in itself says to you, this is wrong. That has changed a lot. Of course, in New South Wales more and more children and adults are identifying today with Aboriginality. But there was a case where you denied it otherwise you never got on in life. Too many people that I know, said, no, I'm not Indigenous at all. So again, that begins the trauma of the younger people because they don't know who to identify with from the very beginning.

VANESSA: My thoughts – you know, in my experience, we're just seeing a lot of diagnoses of Aboriginal kids, particularly with ADHD (attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder), which…

UNCLE TERRY: Yeah, they'll over diagnose, won't they?

VANESSA: Oh yeah, totally, which really concerns me. I mean the trauma symptoms look very similar to the symptoms that meets the diagnostic criteria for ADHD. So, I think a lot of that gets misdiagnosed. But also, I wonder why pretty much every Aboriginal child can end up with a diagnosis of ADHD. And I question whether we're understanding the concept of, you know, of parenting. That we are not acknowledging the different parenting styles and the different ways that Aboriginal children are brought up. And that it's not that kind of, sit down, learn your times tables, way of learning. It's more of an exploratory style of learning and following, being in the context of the community and being allowed to run around and do things knowing that the community is looking after you.

So, I worry about those kind of – we're missing the sociological aspects of what it means to be an Aboriginal child in the context of an Aboriginal community. And in education, we're expecting kids to be sitting down and doing this and doing that. But we're not playing to the strengths of Aboriginal kids and how they've been brought up. And you know, that concerns me because I think historically, Aboriginal kids were living in communities. They were going out with their mums and dads doing various things. There wasn't that confinement. Now we find that their confinement is being looked at from a behavioural point of view.

I mean, you know, because we're always looking at the deficit, isn't it? Your kid can't sit still, your kid can't hold a pencil. I mean, it's about what the family values, isn't it? And those values are potentially not the values of a lot of Aboriginal households. And maybe they don't have access to sitting at a desk …

UNCLE TERRY: No, they don't.

VANESSA: All those social determinants, like inadequate housing, poverty and not having the right equipment you know? And I think Aboriginal parents feeling very ostracised from schools because they think that they're not meeting the children's needs, but they really are…

AUNTY DEB: Yeah, that's right.

UNCLE TERRY: Ness, how many parents over the years have said to you, I've had a bad experience at school?

VANESSA: Oh, I'd be a billionaire.

UNCLE TERRY: Because unless we help them fix that problem in the beginning, then we have very little chance of fixing it with the next generation. Because it's a mindset that's implanted within the family, and it's very difficult to overcome it.

VANESSA: Yep, that's right.

UNCLE TERRY: Growing up in Surry Hills, we had all sorts of people from different cultures because of the end of the second world war. And the one thing that everyone had in common, were they were poor. So, that made that community lock themselves together. But outside of the suburb, most of those people were all ostracised because they come from a certain area. Those people got damaged badly and we're still dealing with that sort of problem that happened, you know, like 60 years ago.

VANESSA: Yeah, those historical legacies live on, and they live well.

And I think the problem with diagnoses is that there tends a bit of blame attached to it. Like Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. It really deposits the blame on the parent and yet we know that's not true. Their experiences, social exclusion and all those kind of things, the list is endless. So, I think when you kind of diagnose kids with, like, conduct disorder the blame is on the parent, and that's how they internalise it. I think there needs to be a shift away from this. Unpacking it to take the blame off the parent and centring the parent as the expert in the child's life and that they are part of the treatment plan to, you know, improve outcomes for their own child.

UNCLE TERRY: Well, when they're making a diagnosis on a child, one of the first things they should ask the parent is, can you give us a bit of a history about the family life. You know, just a simple thing like just – a little short history of your family life.

VANESSA: Yep.

UNCLE TERRY: And then that doctor could say, well, you've obviously had a lot of trauma in your life, so it's impacted on your child so we can look at it in a different angle. But time and time again, the child is looked at, a diagnosis is made but there's no looking into the past of what's happened to that child.

AUNTY DEB: Well, it all goes back to colonisation- it'll always go back to colonisation.

UNCLE TERRY: Yeah, that's right.

AUNTY DEB: It's from the beginning, you know? We got – we're still not even recognised in this country. And – you know, and it's easy to put a label on a kid. We can see a lot of kids now that's coming to school, and we know their families. And how they want Aboriginal people to be like white fellas to rear their children up in a white society, you know? Instead of saying, you can still be Aboriginal and continue culture practice and everything. Like to be proud of who you are as an Aboriginal person, as an Aboriginal parent, you know?

UNCLE TERRY: I'll give you an example. There was one young bloke, and he was diagnosed and he was on pills for ADHD. And I sat down with him on about half a dozen occasions, and I said to the boss at the time, I said, mate, this kid hasn't got a problem with ADHD, he's the greatest con man I've ever seen in my life. And I said, what we should be doing is find something that he's going to like. So, I got him work experience with a real-estate agent. When he left that school in year 10, Ray White employed him, all right? He's still there and what, 2 years ago, he got the real estate award for the young improver for selling so many. And I said, it's identifying his position in life. He was a con man, and he had to be dealt with.

VANESSA: But, you know, all the evidence shows we are not intervening early enough– in terms of a therapeutic wrap around support. Whereby, you know, parents are assisted with all aspects of their life. Talking about the cost to society of out-of-home care. And then the trajectory into the juvenile criminal justice system. Like, the cost is billions, you know? And yet, we can't seem to

manage to put the money into preventative culturally responsive and culturally safe ways of working with Aboriginal families. It just makes no sense to me at all.

Because not only is it cost effective, but it's also about the maintenance of cultural integrity, you know? And so, it's about decolonising the systems that are putting these Aboriginal kids in those placements and in, you know, those juvenile justice settings. And I think, I hope it happens in my lifetime, but you know…

FACILITATOR: Are there any ways you would describe behavioural issues in children?

AUNTY DEB: Well, that's how education identifies. You have to say behaviour. The way I always say to all the teachers at school, just think about what child has come from– before he got here. And you can't say that's behaviour. And you gotta change people's mindsets so they're not just thinking about using the words all the time. Using the words, think about something else that we can use.

VANESSA: But it comes down – again, it comes down to this system, you know, it's systemic racism…

AUNTY DEB: That's right. Yep.

VANESSA: Schools have no other choice but to potentially refer a child to a behavioural school because they don't have the financial resources. So, that goes back to this economic situation whereby we're not investing in that preventative and therapeutic web of support for kids. And so again, in our system, the only way to get a child funding is if you've got a diagnosis.

AUNTY DEB: Yes, that's exactly right.

VANESSA: So, you know, you're up against it all the time because at the end of the day, you want to get that child support. The only way to get that child support is to go through this archaic process…

AUNTY DEB: Yeah. Things only get better if you've got staff who are passionate about Aboriginal education and passionate about Aboriginal kids. Yeah, but it shouldn't be unique, it should be the normal. Every Aboriginal child in this country has a right to go to their local schools, not pawn them off to another school or a behaviour school. You know, like we have to go through the whole system like Vanessa is talking about. Access request and this and he goes off to a behaviour school. Now, have we met his needs? No, we haven't. We've already labelled him.

FACILITATOR: If you had a magic wand and you could have things exactly how you wanted it, what would you want?

UNCLE TERRY: Well, I reckon if we listened more and heard what they were saying. And then work a way around it to say, we can help you in this situation or I can send you to someone that could help. I would send you to an Aboriginal organisation – or for any culture for that matter – I would love to say that this support is going to be with you for the long term. And that on a constant thing to help you get through all these barriers they are put in front of you all your life. And I think the physical contact of someone…

AUNTY DEB: Aboriginal people like face to face.

VANESSA: But the only thing I would add to what Uncle Terry said is, the concept of a one-stop shop is really important. So, you know, we've got to recognise that a lot of Aboriginal parents don't have access to transport…

AUNTY DEB: No, that's exactly right.

VANESSA: …you know they're trawling, four kids some days or five with them. They want things fixed then and there you know?

AUNTY DEB: Not tomorrow.

UNCLE TERRY: No.

AUNTY DEB: Or yesterday.

VANESSA: Being able to access people like paediatricians on site. We need psychologists on site, social and emotional wellbeing workers and housing or Centrelink workers. We need more Aboriginal people employed as the face of the schools as well. From the canteen to teachers to principals.

UNCLE TERRY: 'Community' centres.

AUNTY DEB: Yes. But it's all about the system. The system in this country is failing Aboriginal people.

UNCLE TERRY: Yeah, so I mean, it's wrong. And so, when you start with a wrong, it's very hard to go forward all the time. It's really hard.

AUNTY DEB: And like I say to you all the time, I said, we only make up 2% of this country; we don't have a voice. We don't have a voice, they're our voice.

UNCLE TERRY: We make up 2% and yet we're – the largest percentage of our mob is in jail.

AUNTY DEB: In jail. And that's from juvenile into jail. It is a system that we're fighting all the time.

You know, people have got to feel comfortable in going to there. You've got to make a good strong communication with those families. And if you don't have that, everything is going to fail. Where Aboriginal people feel comfortable coming to, somebody's friendly face, you know?

UNCLE TERRY: It's the way you treat people. It might be in the short term, but you've got to be able to do that. And I think that if we have a one-stop shop where the people recognise the people all the time, they see wider community members around the area, it makes them feel more comfortable. And we're on a pathway to fixing some of the problems. Do you agree, mate?

AUNTY DEB: Oh, I do.

UNCLE TERRY: I mean, I wouldn't have been able to get through the last 5 years without this woman saying, how're you going, mate? Are you okay? But having that sort of nature makes it easier for you, whatever you're going through.

And people say, oh, you get over grief, never in a million years. There'd be – something will happen through every day that gives me a reminder of my family life in the past. Yeah, whether it be a song or whether someone says something …

AUNTY DEB: You always think of them.

UNCLE TERRY: Yeah, you always do. So, I mean, but without these people – and that would be what a one-stop shop can do for a lot of people.

AUNTY DEB: That's what you call a community.

UNCLE TERRY: Yeah, it would be…

So, I mean, support by community and with community involvement is so important not just to Aboriginal people, it's so important to every child. And mate, if you make one change…

AUNTY DEB: Yeah, that's right.

UNCLE TERRY: …that's one change you've made.

AUNTY DEB: Yep.

UNCLE TERRY: And that's what you got to be proud of, right?

AUNTY DEB: That's exactly right.

UNCLE TERRY: I'm right.

AUNTY DEB: You know what it is, it's about the conversations that you have with other people.

UNCLE TERRY: Yes, it is.
AUNTY DEB: That's how you bring about change. That's how you remind them, you've got to remind them, you know, all who you talk to, because it's a chain reaction. Like, how you do acknowledgement of country, you keep on doing that, wherever you go. And you just say, I'd just like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land and Aboriginal people where we're meeting here today. Just keep on doing that because you've got lots and lots of people who you see and you have conversations with. It's about your conversations, how you see Aboriginal people, you know?
UNCLE TERRY: See, by you doing that it opens up the doorway and it's – you're not asking an Aboriginal person to do it, you are accepting the Aboriginal people around you. And you're recognising…
AUNTY DEB: That Aboriginal people exist on that land wherever you are.
UNCLE TERRY: They are the custodians of our land and you're recognising that.
AUNTY DEB: Having a yarn to you.

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I love reading by Chiray Sun (aged 9) from "A Pop of Colour" art competition, Youth Arts, Children's Hospital at Westmead