

# Relationships are essential but not always easy: The role of methodology in embedding Aboriginal community and Country in academic research

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## Abstract

This article is told as a story about how a project, *Strong culture, healthier lifestyles*, took steps towards decolonisation as an evolving methodological journey with Country. The story is primarily about how our methodology moved from a Western model of 'doing' research, to the research team being part of the research process, as team members *with* Country and the participating local community members: a methodology of partnership. First, we provide a general overview of the initial project to set up how we came to understand its disconnection to community and Country. Second, we unpack the storying approach as methodology that is bound with the local Country: Yuin on the South Coast of New South Wales, Australia. Third, using the storying approach, we reflect through Country and the community to discover ways forward in Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal knowledge partnerships. We share our story in an attempt to limit colonial practice (decolonisation) and replace it with a re-culturalising approach; the re-connecting of Country as a source of interconnectedness into the research process. Country includes all the living communities of nature, and we explore how this relationship in the human element (community) impacted and developed our methodology of partnership.

## KEYWORDS

Aboriginal health, community, Country, methodology, partnerships, relationships

There is a living entity that can unite Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people:

Mother Earth.

Mother Earth, Father Sky, Grandmother Moon and Grandfather Sun are living breathing entities that are our primary carers<sup>1</sup> and ingrained in the Aboriginal English term known as Country. Kwaymullina<sup>2</sup> articulates Country as being 'loved, needed, and cared for, and country loves, needs, and cares for her peoples in turn. Country is family, culture,

Yuin Country, School of Yuin Country, from southern Sydney down to the Snowy River and out to the Great Dividing Range.

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identity. Country is self' (p. 12), it is an entity that can bring Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people together. We share this article as a story. In our story, we, share how we came to work with and be guided by Yuin Country in the context of a Western academic environment. We share our combined story of our thinking and approaches within the context of an afterschool cultural program. In an attempt to not separate our team into Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal the use of 'We' is used in the context of a learning journey together in this space with the lead Aboriginal author guiding the non-Aboriginal team members.

Through our story (as purpose), we encourage researchers to identify their own reflective and respectful approach towards decolonisation and reculturalisation<sup>3</sup> with their community that may be aided by various Indigenous approaches, such as oneness,<sup>3</sup> co-becoming,<sup>4</sup> relationality,<sup>5</sup> relatedness<sup>6</sup> (Aboriginal Relational Research Methodology [ARRM]; Australian New Zealand Clinical Trials Register Ref no. ACTRN 12619001224112). This article challenges the Western context of research to convey the unnecessary burden that is often placed on Aboriginal people in the research processes. In our project as story 'we', initially engaged in contributing to colonisation and then shifted towards a practice of decolonisation. 'We', the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal researchers, cannot become or continue to be the coloniser and/or colonised. Therefore, the reference to 'we' used throughout this article highlights our connected relationship between the Aboriginal community, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal academics and knowledge systems, including Country. The word 'we' is the first author who is an Aboriginal man, sharing an interconnecting story on how the non-Aboriginal team members experienced Country and community as methodology.

## 1 | THE PURPOSE OF THE ARTICLE

A purpose of this article is to contribute to the Aboriginal methodological space by putting our current Indigenous storytelling approach into academic publication—as part of the decolonising ~ reculturalising process. Decolonisation, which includes critical reflection, in this article is placing Country at the centre to reduce/replace colonisation, which McKnight<sup>7</sup> refers to as 'reculturalisation' in research practice. This was initiated by observing Country as a team member and the use of storytelling in our research practise. We understand in implementing Aboriginal methodology that a 'one size fits all' approach is not appropriate and different projects will have different relationships. A crucial purpose of our article is to provide an example on how researchers can respectfully engage in such a methodological space with Country and the Aboriginal community who are also Country. In doing so, first we provide an overview of the original project to set up how we came to understand its disconnection to community and Country. Second, we unpack the storytelling approach as methodology that is bound with the local Country: Yuin on the South Coast of New South Wales, Australia. Third, using the storytelling approach we reflect through Country and the community to discover our way forward in Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal knowledge partnerships. This story has helped us to continually reflect on self through Country to strive towards a balanced knowledge relationship between Academia and Country.

## 2 | BACKGROUND: THE BIRTH AND GROWTH OF THE STRONGER CULTURE, HEALTHIER LIFESTYLE PROJECT

The research project *Strong culture, healthier lifestyles* evaluating the after school cultural program entitled the Koori Kids Club, was originally developed within a Western academic methodological mindset with a view to measuring the outcomes of an after-school program. The afterschool program was designed to enhance children's health and educational outcomes, including physical activity and sedentary time; nutrition and eating behaviours; school attendance. This also included socio-emotional well-being inclusive of spirituality. The afterschool program was a 10-week program, for two afternoons per week for 2 h, delivered to Aboriginal children and their siblings, by two local Aboriginal mentors (one male and one female). Mentors were identified by the local Elders and community as role-models who held appropriate cultural knowledges and were employed through the project to deliver the program. Visiting Aboriginal Elders were also invited to share localised cultural knowledges through Country that related to the programmed activities, for example, language, dances, stories and bush tucker (traditional food sources).

The project methods to evaluate the program that had been accepted through the original funding application included measures of physical activity and sedentary time, eating behaviours and a range of surveys. The measurement tools utilised included:

- physical activity and sedentary time assessed via accelerometry;
- food and diet assessed via the 24-h food recall questionnaire;
- height and weight;
- school and home-related behaviours assessed via the strengths and difficulties questionnaire (parent and teacher versions);
- cultural connectedness survey.

At the onset of the project, examining the program, most of the research team did not understand what it meant to do research *with* Country and the Aboriginal communities *from* the community's perspective. The team recognised that a decolonised approach was required which included self-reflection on self and academic research process. Due to our reflections, we started placing Country centre, implementing Country as methodology. Through engaging a methodology of partnership, the direction of the project shifted towards decolonisation and all aspects started to better align with Aboriginal ways of knowing and practice. Therefore, we decided to share a portion of our overall story to provide a relatable framework for readers.

## 3 | THE GROWTH OF A RESPECTFUL, RECIPROCAL RELATIONSHIP/PARTNERSHIP

During the project we discovered that Country, Aboriginal participants and academics were not perceived to be the principal partners required in a balanced relationship. The necessity of working with Country and community was recognised as a result of two events. The first involved the non-Aboriginal research members engaging with

an Aboriginal academic who invited them to learn with Country and the second involved the research team participating in face-to-face meetings. These events opened the non-Aboriginal research team member's minds through recognition of their own truths and willingness to admit fault. By owning their truth, the non-Aboriginal research team members reflected upon their positioning,<sup>8</sup> positionality<sup>9</sup> and a third space<sup>3,11,15,16</sup> in their knowledge of not knowing Aboriginal people, Country, Aboriginal knowledge and lived experiences. We held yarning<sup>10</sup> meetings to examine self in relationship with Country, our relationship with the Aboriginal community and research. The openness to understanding our own (non-Aboriginal academic) positioning was important and as a team, we started to examine the obligations and responsibilities to participating in the research. This meant that all new relationships developed with the communities where the research was to take place were personal and honest, which is critical to any sustained relationships.

As a first step the original research protocols were questioned. We examined ways that our assumptions and measurement tools were antithetical to the partnerships we were establishing for the research space to become a 'contestation'<sup>11</sup> not a domination. This ownership of our behaviours was required and a required circuit breaker to research with Aboriginal peoples. In partnership with the community the Aboriginal academic helped the team to identify ways of doing research 'differently' via a respectful knowledge relationship with Country. The project's theoretical and methodological intent outcomes and processes shifted and continue to change due to the relational model<sup>3,5</sup> that was being activated.

The relational model includes Country. The Country in which the research took place is within the Yuin Nation which encompasses the South Coast of New South Wales into Victoria and out to the Great Dividing Range.<sup>1</sup> Once the inclusion of Aboriginal ways of knowing and learning through relationships had been accepted, the Aboriginal community(ies) and Country's input became essential and central to the research. From these inclusions, we learnt, that the process of becoming partners *with* the Aboriginal communities from the New South Wales South Coast that we were working with, rather than researchers *of* varying communities. Kovach<sup>12</sup> states 'the most effective allies are those who are able to respect Indigenous research frameworks on their own terms. This involves a responsibility to know what that means' (p. 481). We argue that this was and still is developing through the relationships in partnership established during the project, especially with Country. Everyone had to discover their responsibility to take on a guidance/leadership role when a certain dynamic in the partnership occurred. With the focus remaining on Country as the guiding entity we were able to reduce burdens on the community to the best of our ability. We could not expect an entitlement to be taught or told when things went wrong. We had to take responsibility to learn for ourselves, to look at our own ways of knowing, doing, and being.

## 4 | A STORY THAT IS INCLUSIVE OF THE THEORY WHICH INFORMED OUR METHODOLOGY

We respectfully co-instigated a shared guidance role with the researchers and communities (also seen as a guiding partnership, not

exclusive leadership). This provided more opportunities for the community voice(s) to be heard in the conceptualising and conduct of the research. It is important to clarify here that the knowledge relationships of Aboriginal philosophies/peoples and the academe are in a contested ~ uncontested space.<sup>3</sup> The tilde ~ represents a mental and spiritual umbilical cord that connects and separates dualities at the same time, a tripartation.<sup>7</sup> Tripartation is the implementation of a spiritual passageway between Yuin and Western knowledge site dualities. The connective approach characterised through the tilde (~) replaces the separating slash (/) within Western dualities for a third 'knowing, doing and being' space to develop.<sup>3,7</sup>

Yuin Country is presented as a story, not a theory<sup>3</sup> because it is indented in the landscape. The methodology from Country reinforces Aboriginal approaches to research with Country as the central knowledge holder to Aboriginal knowledge systems<sup>3</sup>; thereby guiding the research team to see the methodology as living rather than a static entity. Henceforth, Yuin Country was instrumental in describing our evolving methodological journey as it is full of varying knowledge relationships, including spirit.

### 4.1 | Examining spirit within the academic context and our methodology

Traditional Aboriginal knowledge is about maintaining life through the connection of entities that are of and exist *throughout* Country; this includes the knowledge from Country. This prominent spiritual concept has minimal standing in academia, but its position is now being respectfully discussed and included. For example, David Mowaljarlai, a Ngarinyin Law man from the Kimberley region of Western Australia, talks about a profound feeling within your heart when you learn with nature that he shared within his Bush University. As Mowaljarlai explains in Reference 13, 'You have a feeling in your heart that you're going to feed your body this day, get more knowledge. You go out now, see animals moving, a tree, a river. You're looking at nature and giving it your full attention ... Your vision has opened you and you start learning' (p. 167).

The positioning of spirit from Country informs knowledge production in academia. McKnight identifies this as *inside Country methodology*, with the *Western out of Country methodology* providing openings for a side-by-side relationship: methodology of relationship.<sup>3</sup> This side-by-side relationship supported our knowledge connections to inform methodological re-adjustments and/or the need to re-think what methods were more suitable. Reducing and removing some of the deficit-based methods included in the original funding application, thereby, moving to a 'methodology of partnership', as the researchers engage with a more suitable living methodology. Once we began thinking and acting more respectfully with an understanding of how the spirit of Country teaches and informed our methodology, the experience changed the team and their relationship with Country, people and knowledge: through Story. The traditional stories from Country shared by people demonstrate how the stories are very much alive today and inform how to be and do research.

## 5 | IDENTIFYING RELATIONSHIPS TO BE CONSIDERED AND CONTINUALLY RECONSIDERED

In this section, we share a story of interrelating relationships of our journey, with the intent to evoke the richness in what we have learned and the processes by which this happened. The story provided another means by which we could identify our behaviours for reflection and the shifts in research structures and processes. Figure 1 displays a range of the relationships that we experienced. There are many more to be identified that are yet unknown, or known, such as trees and the weather.

### 5.1 | A story to demonstrate how relationships influenced our journey

This story started when a stranger who was an early career researcher (Rebecca) contacted a Yuin academic completing his PhD (Anthony) to be part of a research team around an afterschool cultural program. After a few meetings, the two formed a relationship, in which Anthony invited Rebecca to meet a strong cultural Aunty.

From this meeting, Rebecca and the research team were slowly introduced to Country and encouraged to form their own relationship. Not all were willing to attend the meetings organised to meet an Elder

(Aunty) who was supporting the team to get the project started. The team also needed to meet the community members. They too were provided with the opportunity to test us and initiate the relationship. The Aunty was very specific about the importance of Country and even though Anthony was connected to the Aunty, she had to digest the relationship that Anthony had with the University and with Rebecca. The relationship over time between Rebecca and the Aunty grew from discussions with the community. The community became interested in the project. Over time it became apparent which team members were demonstrating the right commitment to the community gatherings and in time a proposition was put forward by Anthony and Rebecca. The team was not just introduced to the community they were being introduced to Country: the methodology of the project.

Respect is one protocol in the community that is important across all cultures. Rebecca, in her learning journey, was finding her way around protocols and the tensions between a number of Aboriginal communities and Academic protocols. One day, Anthony was in his office and realised he had not heard from Bec (Rebecca- note change in the relationship) for a while. He walked over to see Bec, who was meeting with her research supervisor. Anthony could feel the tension, saw the discomfort. The two were discussing the possibility of walking away from the project. Bec had been 'yelled at' by another Elder from the community. She had received her first 'growling'. 'Mmm, are ya going to walk away from a compliment, I see', Anthony said.



**FIGURE 1** Connected relationships to and from Country.

'A COMPLIMENT?' Bec and the supervisor said, then Anthony said, 'yep a compliment'. This is part of the process of self-discovery via some in-direct guidance from Anthony to work with community, especially after receiving your first 'growling'. This (possible) compliment was important, and Anthony explained why. The Aunty had recognised the existence of a strong relationship to share verbally what she was truly thinking. How Bec responded to the growling was to make or break the research project. Bec found one of her biggest supporters and critics that day when she went back to the Aunty for a yarn. One aspect, which was reinforced in the resolution meeting, was how both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people became aware that the research is ultimately all about the children. The methodology shifted to include the children as active contributors.

## 5.2 | Reflection

The example of the growl was very important, because the Aunty identified issues that needed to be resolved: remove a burden placed upon her from the research process. The tension had to be discussed calmly to maintain the relationship/partnership. At the time of the growl, an issue about funding and time constraints arose. In response to Rebecca's actions after the growl, the Aunty made it clear she wanted to help resolve the issues. This took time and patience: a willing or chosen burden to help the children. Working with communities and funding bodies within a space of recognition and contestation is hard. However, to work respectfully in a number of these contested ~ uncontested spaces with the community and academic institutions, became an important realisation to the team. Furthermore, with many people and especially Country involved, the relational aspect had its own timeframe for respect and responsibilities to be learnt: a challenge and shared burden. Meanwhile Anthony experienced the tension of being in the middle of the contested ~ uncontested space of two knowledge systems. Placing Country at the centre to reduce the messy human only relationship which bought joy ~ frustration.

## 6 | THE SHIFT TO FIND METHOD CONNECTIONS WITH THE ORIGINAL INTENT FOR THE PROJECT

Through the shift outlined above, as with most relationships between Country and people, also represented between people and people; there were shifting emotions including joy, kindness, sharing, tears, misunderstandings, anger, frustrations, anxiety, relief and accomplishment. To find a meaning and identify the relationships that were taking place in the afterschool cultural programs, yarning with people<sup>10</sup> and non-human entities<sup>3,4,6</sup> were utilised (and essential). When yarning is practiced in a spiritual context the truth of self in a relationship with Country and the themes being communicated is galvanised. If untruthful, and/or not connected to Country, the spiritual element is negated and thereby persists as a logical discussion not yarning.<sup>7</sup>

Observation was another example of a connection between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal methods in the methodological approach adopted for the project. The researchers were learning to be informed by the culture being researched and the observation was of the cultural interaction between people of 'different' cultures—Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal with Country. This led to an observation of self and in turn identification of which Western methods were appropriate and not, creating a methodological partnership open to tension, flexibility, change and calm. At the early stage of the project, the partnership with the local Aboriginal community members involved stories shared, and generated the need to ask questions about what needed to change to enhance a positive relationship journey between knowledge systems.

## 6.1 | Awakening of the researchers: Discovering what methods were appropriate

We acknowledge now that a significant amount of the initial methodology and methods brought to the communities were inappropriate. The non-Indigenous research team had engaged in limited reflection on the implications of conducting research on programs involving Aboriginal children. From Scheurich and Young's<sup>14</sup> perspective, this blindness to Aboriginal ways of knowing is an example of epistemological racism. However, their blindness was not sustained when the researchers, in a relational approach, were directly and in-directly guided to see the conundrum of not knowing. Overtime the methods were modified, about eight times, with at least six adaptations to the ethical approaches that had been approved.

Initially, the research team were introduced to Country and conciliation through the Aboriginal researcher and an Elder. Briefly, conciliation entails learning from and taking care of Country because Mother Earth provides all that is needed to survive. The research team applied what they learnt. Furthermore, time was allocated for the team to have reflective yarns. The research team started to utilise Aboriginal methodology in this reflective process. Oberndorfer et al.<sup>15</sup> state, 'Because Indigenous ways of knowing are rooted in specific places, engaging with Indigenous methodologies is not a prescriptive research approach; research practices must adapt to and reflect the local context' (p. 463). To localise the context, the team had to go to Country and the community, contribute to the relationship and learn how to work in partnership with the community and Country. Not all members of the research team embraced this different way of knowing where community and Country were equals and eventually left the project. Those who remained were open to learning and agreed that if the original protocols were used then irrelevant data and resolutions would be identified. We developed the following statement based on our readings from References 5,16 and 17: 'Let us not do research just for the sake of doing research.'

The initial consultation with the Aboriginal community was to identify the activities that they wanted to include in the programs, not in the wider project. The project had not been placed with Country. By 'not being placed' we mean first, the research, was not connected

to Country', and not placed within the significant knowledge (Story) holder (Country) of the local Aboriginal peoples. Second, the majority of the researchers had not been grounded (placed in relationship with Country) with the Aboriginal community members to learn about and from Country. The last point concerns academia's research culture/practice (knowledge). Although there has been movement towards a flexible research culture that was inclusive of Aboriginal research practice, it was not an easy or clear journey. Western knowledge structures, processes and system-maintained dominance.<sup>18</sup> However, knowledge, structures and processes have been challenged, for example, Linda Tuhiwai Smith's (1999) ground-breaking book 'Decolonising Methodologies'<sup>19</sup> and Martin Nakata's (2007) 'Disciplining the Savages, Savaging the Disciplines'.<sup>11</sup> These types of challenges have created space and have allowed individuals/groups within the university system who are open-minded and knowledgeable in Indigenous research approaches to identify and 'capture' community input and direction respectfully.

The Aboriginal communities, along with Country, have been instrumental in guiding our thinking, in some situations seen as a burden on community. Overtime, we learnt to identify many of these situations ourselves to lessen this burden. For instance, instead of the children being seen as a statistic, they were recognised as Country, Country as self, and self as Country.<sup>7</sup> This transference in practice is a substantial step in shifting the focus to the Aboriginal voice. The challenge is to continue along the methodological progression and not fall back into the 'known' Western practices. This unburdening is essential, however, we also recognise that no two-way relationship is perfect, and learning is continuous.

By starting in connectedness there was no need to pull down everything and form a wider separation. Rather, it was regarded as an opportunity to use the situation as a teaching moment for the team about the importance of knowledge connections through an in-direct approach. It was an opportunity to learn together in how to do research with the community and Country so it can be felt. Once the team started to learn how to work *with* Country, a number of questions developed. Many of these questions were very similar to the questions raised by Davis<sup>20</sup>: 'For whom are we collecting data? How do we collect the data? What should be measured? Who should control information? What are the data for?' (p. 29). These questions created a sense of excitement within the team, whilst providing a realisation that this could take time and be challenging.

## 7 | CONCLUSION

In telling our story we demonstrate how we worked to reduce the burden on the community. Our team are learning how the research and leadership in the varying aspects of the project should be done through cyclic negotiations.<sup>3</sup> We have recognised that leadership roles changed throughout the process and the project, at times we were the listeners, negotiators, contributors, leaders and implementers, however guidance was always provided by Country, the Elders, and the community. The researchers with the community created a

workable, but not beyond decolonised, third space in academia: though academia is still maintaining the power in the systematised relationship. The workable space was achieved by maintaining an eye on all the relationships with all the participants, including the persistence of colonial ways of knowing.

The varying relationships were the linchpins which shifted the methodology to a methodology of partnership which was our attempt to find a point in which both knowledge systems could be respectfully accessed and implemented. The research approach had to shift to maintain our partnerships because of our relational experiences. The stories that were shared were experienced and taken into each person's understandings of our own third space.<sup>3</sup> From the research team's reflections the methodology became a living entity that moved with our learnings.

We looked for similarities, connections<sup>3</sup> and Country to guide us to counterbalance 'colonial research hangovers'.<sup>21</sup> We cannot emphasise enough the importance of learning from Country, the community and about ourselves as researchers to enhance and maintain the established partnerships and continue to identify all relationships, their capacities and functionalities. Meanwhile, we continually try to identify and learn how we balance out (reducing unnecessary burdens) the responsibilities in the research partnership. It was imperative to recognise differences in tripartation with similarities or approaches that identify connections to utilities to benefit all participants. The examination of the relationship in the methodology helped in the creation or combination (Aboriginal and Western knowledge) of appropriate methods. Working for and with the community and Country provided a strength-based approach, while working towards decolonising the research. The entity that kept all grounded, was Country in all its forms but particularly the children. Country was always in the conversations and, therefore, it was an opportunity for the community to be teachers of the academics about the children, Country and culture.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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