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Unveiling injustice: Disrupting child removal policies and upholding breastfeeding: An emancipatory framework

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Abstract

Before colonization, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities had nurturing, holistic, and communitarian approaches that promoted extended and healthy lives for their children. Colonization, marked by policies of genocide and assimilation, has resulted in an alarming overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children under the care of child protection agencies, resulting in compromised health outcomes and reduced life expectancies. We are conducting a study designed to enhance positive developmental outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children by articulating and enabling the rights of mothers and children to breastfeed in the context of a child protection intervention and child removal. To understand and address this problem, it is critical to implement culturally safe, de-colonized, emancipatory research that is guided by and benefits Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. This article presents an emancipatory framework that we are applying to our study using an Aboriginal participatory action research approach, that serves as a guide for non-Indigenous researchers seeking to conduct research with Indigenous communities. We emphasize the importance of incorporating an Aboriginal participatory action research framework, using community consultation and codesign; culturally secure data collection methods, and paying attention to Indigenous data sovereignty. Developing trusting respectful relationships is conducive to knowledge acquisition, exchange, and use, when research approaches deeply rooted in community involvement are applied. A call to action by the critical midwifery studies collective, urges non-Indigenous researchers to become accountable allies that demonstrates respect for community leadership while actively striving to ensure research does not perpetuate further harm, and produces effective change. This article provides an overview of ways to conduct ethical emancipatory research with Indigenous participants, that is, of benefit to midwifery practitioners and is applicable to many areas of research, policy, and practice.

KEYWORDS
Aboriginal, Aboriginal participatory action research, emancipatory research, Indigenous methodologies, knowledge acquisition, yarning

1 | INTRODUCTION

Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (hereafter, respectfully referred to as Aboriginal) families have been intensively scrutinized by the state since colonization. Child protection policies and practices saw the indiscriminate removal of Aboriginal children, resulting in what is known as the "Stolen Generations."[1] From the mid-1800s to the 1970s, government policies in Australia dictated the forced removal of thousands of Aboriginal children from their families.[2] Children were placed in over 480 institutions, adopted, or fostered by non-Indigenous people and often subject to abuse.[1,2] Aboriginal children were disconnected from kin, community, culture, language, and traditional lands, central components of identity, belonging, and wellbeing.[1] Traditionally, the Australian Aboriginal family unit was not restricted to the nuclear family but an all-inclusive network of reciprocal obligations of giving and receiving, which reinforce family and community connections.[1] Aboriginal children are born into a web of connectedness that is crucial to their cultural identity and place in community and when they are removed this is lost.[3] When many children are removed, such as happened with the historical Stolen Generations, this complex social fabric breaks down, threatening social order and cultural survival.[4]

The impact of these child removal policies has caused significant social and health harms for Aboriginal families and communities across multiple generations. Compared with non-Indigenous Australians, Aboriginal adults have higher rates of cardiovascular disease,[5] diabetes,[6] chronic kidney disease,[7] and cancer[8]; are more likely to live in poverty, have low employment, and low educational attainment[9]; are over-represented in adult and youth justice systems[9] and out of home care[10]; and are more likely to use alcohol or drugs, and to self-harm or suicide.[9,11,12] Almost 40% of youth who attended a health care practitioner for self-harm were engaged with child protection and/or police.[12] Aboriginal infants are nearly twice as likely to be born with a low-birthweight and 2.1 times more likely to die than non-Indigenous infants.[9,13]

Intergenerational trauma has led to a fear of institutionalization, disempowerment, distrust of, and low engagement with services, which compound the poorer health outcomes experienced by Aboriginal people.[14] Systemic and interpersonal racism accounts for 47% of the health disparity between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous Australians.[15] Systemic racism in maternity settings is prolific, and care is often based on racialized assumptions[16] which can be a contributing factor to the removal of infants and risks such as higher infant death rates. Racial profiling can increase the risk of child removal, one midwife detailed her experience of witnessing racial profiling,

> It was night shift, and this young Aboriginal girl came up through Emergency. She was wheelchaired up, and she was basically ready to push. She was quite vocal, and they rushed her into a birth suite. All I could then hear was them yelling at her, and asking what drugs she has taken, they assumed she was on something and that's why she couldn't sit still and was jerking. And she kept saying she hadn't taken anything.[17]
>
> (p.7)

In this instance, birth was imminent. Instances such as this can be minimized through access to culturally safe maternity care, early, and regularly throughout pregnancy.[18]

Effective cultural education and significant changes in maternity systems are needed to embed culturally safe models of care as a means of addressing this racism.[16] Aboriginal led models of care centered on culturally safe continuity of care are providing improved experiences, and have the potential to improve outcomes for Aboriginal women and babies,[19] potentially preventing infant removal.

Aboriginal children make up around 5% of the populations, yet represent nearly 40% of all children removed from their families and placed in state care; 12 times the rate of their non-Indigenous peers,[10] and there is increasing concern about the rising removal rates of Aboriginal infants from their mothers.[20] Infant removal is highly disruptive at multiple levels including breastfeeding, resulting in a significant impact on attachment between mothers and infants,[21,22] and there are additional challenges to establishing or maintaining breastfeeding.[23] Child protection practices that facilitate mother and baby connections to allow the multifaceted benefits of breastfeeding to be realized, are required.[24]

2 | RESEARCH AIMS

We are currently conducting research in Australia to examine the experiences of breastfeeding Aboriginal women who have had or are at risk of having their infant removed. To understand and successfully address this problem, it is critical to implement culturally secure emancipatory research that is guided by and benefits Aboriginal people and communities. The aims of the research are:

1. To articulate the importance of breastfeeding for maternal and child wellbeing.
2. To advocate for the rights of mothers and children to breastfeed in the context of child removal.
3. To contribute ways to advance recovery and healing from intergenerational trauma and enhancing positive developmental outcomes for Aboriginal children involved with child protection services.

This article will not report on this research. Rather, we examine four critical elements for informing emancipatory research: participatory action research; knowledge acquisition, exchange, and use; culturally secure data collection methods; and Indigenous data sovereignty. We discuss how we use these elements in this research, highlighting how they can assist non-Indigenous researchers when conducting research with Indigenous peoples and communities, particularly where the potential for harm from research is high and the topic is sensitive.[14,15] We argue, that developing placed-based, culturally relevant, and community involved emancipatory research frameworks could assist non-Indigenous researchers to optimize their engagement with Indigenous peoples and communities and inform research translation opportunities that challenge the social and policy structures that lead to injustices that contribute to harm and intergenerational trauma in Indigenous communities.

2.1 | Breastfeeding in the context of child removal

The World Health Organization identifies breastfeeding as the most effective preventative intervention to positively affect child health.[25] According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, a child has the right to the highest attainable standard of health and nutrition that includes breastfeeding.[26] Ideally infants breastfeed exclusively for the first 6 months of life, and continue to be breastfed in combination with nutritious food until 2 years of age or beyond.[25] The first 2000 days of life are when the foundations of optimal health, growth, and neurodevelopment across the lifespan are established.[27] The significance of exclusive breastfeeding is supported by the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund Sustainable Development Goals that identify breastfeeding as a human right for both mother and child.[28] At an individual level, the lost opportunities for breastfeeding may hinder mother–child attachment, negatively affect maternal responsiveness, and affect the quality of caregiving by the mother.[21,22] Breastfeeding holds many benefits for the mother; reduced risk of breast cancer, ovarian cancer, and type II diabetes, and the child; protection against diabetes, otitis media, respiratory infection, obesity, and sudden infant death syndrome, and so for Aboriginal mothers and infants, is an important preventative measure.[29–32]

2.2 | Positionality: conducting ethical, emancipatory research

Emancipatory research is an umbrella term based on feminist and transformative paradigms, and critical race theory.[33] Central to emancipatory research is the production of knowledge that is of benefit to disadvantaged people resulting in outcomes that transform the lives of the participants.[33] Emancipatory research requires researcher reflexivity; to recognize power imbalance between the researcher and participants, and ensure the voice of participants are heard.[34] The transformative paradigm, as a Western science approach, is most suitable to research with Indigenous communities as it addresses power relations, is more inclusive of Indigenous epistemologies and is focused on social justice and human rights.[35]

Emancipatory research requires non-Indigenous researchers to consider positionality and influence on the research process and outcomes. The author(Peek) has a midwifery background, and is trained to provide holistic, respectful care that values lived experience, and draws on her training in relational approaches embedded in principles of self-determination, justice, equity, and respect.[36] This is important for addressing the ongoing and systemic injustices in maternity care and child protection research that are yet to be fully conceptualized and articulated.[37]

Transformative paradigms center the experiences of Indigenous communities, examines the disparities of power that create marginalization, and connects findings of the research to actions that will mitigate those disparities. Transformative paradigms are important for decolonizing research and addressing inequities in power between researchers and participants given that it is well established that Western research has cause significant harm to Indigenous communities.[38]

Historically, research in Aboriginal communities has been unethical, exploitative, with no beneficial outcomes. Rather, research has apportioned blame for current circumstances on Aboriginal people, while reinforcing racist assumptions.[39] Research has often been conducted 'on' Aboriginal communities rather than "with" community, resulting in a loss of voice and misrepresentation of cultural practices. The misrepresentation of Aboriginal people by researchers furthermore erodes trust between Aboriginal communities and research institutions.[40] As a non-Indigenous researcher, the author (Peek) is critically aware of the power they hold which has the potential to cause harm. As a non-Indigenous researcher the author (Peek) considers power imbalance using a community centered, participatory research action approach, with continual reflections on their position within the research and the research relationships.[34]

3 | PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

When research does not directly benefit the participants, it has little ethical justification[41] and so, to optimize research benefit for Indigenous peoples, participatory action research approaches[42] are required. Aboriginal participatory action research (APAR) frameworks have been developed in Australia.[43] Consistent with transformative research approaches, these frameworks use cyclical, dynamic, and reflective processes, and the iterative nature of its design and implementation enables community-driven solutions.[43] APAR processes support forums for combining postcolonial and hybrid knowledge in ways that inform interventions, theories, and advocacy.[45] Applying an APAR process shifts power, shares resources, and establishes Aboriginal community ownership over research outcomes. APAR approaches, are effective in program implementation,[19] centering communities in the research and providing opportunities for consultation on the design, implementation, conduct, and translation of research.[40] Using participatory action research approaches respects Indigenous knowledge and ensures that research translation and outcomes are sustainable and enabled through continued partnerships.[43,44] In this research, we use this approach in a continuum of collaboration and consultation (see Figure 1).

Community collaboration on program design and implementation, such as "birthing on country"[11] models of care that support self-determination, produce positive outcomes for Aboriginal women.[16,19] Bringing together Aboriginal and non-Indigenous researchers, stakeholders and the community in this research, we recognize that views can be conflicting, complex, and contain multiple different sets of knowledge, yet it is critical to maintaining authentic collaborations when research is being

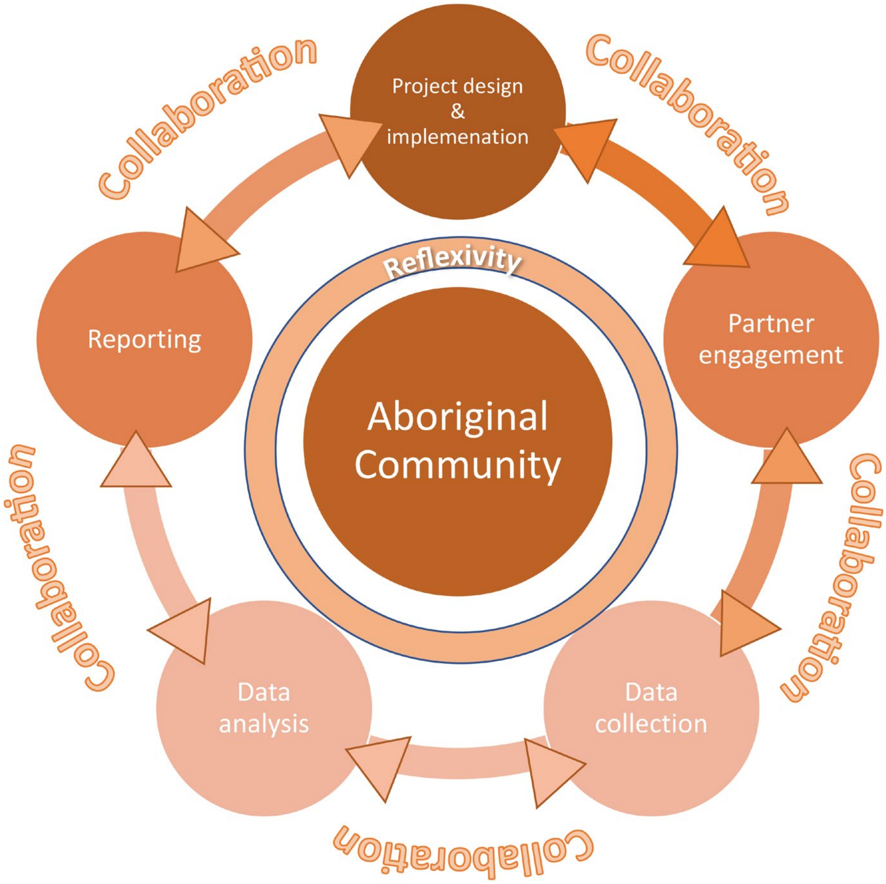

FIGURE 1 Aboriginal participatory action research. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

undertaken in the context of historical dispossession, inequity, and power imbalances.[34] An APAR framework has been applied from the beginning of this research. Initial discussions were held with the Aboriginal community to determine the research topic and design. Relationships are supported using an APAR approach and forums that support respectful knowledge sharing and discussions. The research is guided by the universities Aboriginal Elder-in Residence, a senior academic and researcher (author), who is a traditional custodian from the community where the research is being undertaken, and a cultural reference group (CRG). This will continue in a constant and iterative process across the life of the research to ensure cultural security.[40,42]

As a non-Indigenous researcher, the author (Peek) relies on the trust gained from cultural advisors to forge respectful relationships within the Aboriginal community. Reciprocal respect between the cultural advisors and the author (Peek), allows a relationship based on trust to develop, knowledge to be shared, and enable the author (Peek) to produce transformative research outcomes.[45] The CRG as co-investigators, are led by Aboriginal Elders, community leaders, representatives from state and community organizations, and provide cultural knowledge and guidance to support this research. The CRG consultations allows the author (Peek), as a non-Indigenous researcher, to be reflective and thoughtful when engaging with the data, consider positionality and ethical behavior and be reflexive of biases or assumptions.[46,47] By collaborating and co-designing this research with the CRG and the participants, trusting respectful relationships are established and the voice of those with the lived experience is given precedence.[40] This will assist with optimizing research translation and ensuring successful outcomes are sustained over time.[48]

3.1 | Knowledge: acquisition, exchange, and use

Western research has significantly developed understanding of the way research topics and subjects of research produce or result in knowledge, how we acquire knowledge, and the value placed on the knowledge we acquire. [46,35,38] Considering values and ethics is critical to emancipatory research as it requires the researcher to consider what is moral and ethical behavior when conducting research; an approach that promotes cultural respect, social justice, and human rights.

A global belief held by Indigenous peoples is that outsiders are not inherently entitled to knowledge belonging to Indigenous communities.[49] For Aboriginal people, the concept of 'knowing, being and doing'[50] is intertwined. What is known and ways of knowing influence ways of being; relationships and obligations to kin, community, and traditional lands, and ways of doing, or how people live. When Western and Indigenous knowledge systems come together, rather than merging, perspectives are interwoven to achieve a scope that is "wider, deeper, and more generative" than a singular perspective alone.[51]

There are numerous concepts that bring together sets of Western and Indigenous knowledge, including two-eyed seeing,[48] Ganma,[52] the two-toolbox approach,[53] and two ways,[52] to name a few. Creating lenses by weaving back and forth between the different world views,[51,54] the central premise of these concepts is to encourage and motivate action and use the collective knowledge for change. The concepts are congruent with emancipatory research and a transformative paradigm.

How we come to acquire knowledge, the concepts we use, and the value we attach to things vastly differs between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, and as such, culturally secure data collection methods will influence the type of knowledge we collect and are an important vehicle through which the knowledge and values important to Indigenous participants can be prioritized in research.[55]

4 | CULTURALLY SECURE DATA COLLECTION METHODS

Globally, methodologically sound approaches for undertaking qualitative research with vulnerable populations, such as Aboriginal families facing child removal, are continually developing, including both conventional interviewing techniques and research techniques that are population specific.[56] This is important for respectful engagement, sharing information, and the use of the information collected, particularly for Aboriginal people, whose voices have previously been silenced, and for which the potential for research harm is high.[56] Conventional qualitative techniques such as structured, semi-structured, and unstructured interviewing[57] are data collection methods broadly understood to extract information from a participant about a research topic, and do not engage Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing. Power differentials in these traditional techniques have contributed to suspicion and distrust of research and researchers in Indigenous communities, resulting in little to no beneficial research outcomes.[56]

Over time methodologies have been developed to allow more relational engagements when undertaking qualitative research, particularly with Indigenous peoples. One such data collection method is yarning which allows for the knowledge and values important to Indigenous participants to be prioritized in research.[55] Yarning is an established Indigenous research method, described as "an Indigenous cultural form of conversation." The essence of a yarn is listening and exchange, with each side being willing to give information and show genuine connection to, empathy with and interest in the other.[56] The suitability of yarning, for Indigenous people however, stems from its everydayness—drawing as it does on long standing oral storytelling and cultural practices used by families and communities.[56]

Control in a yarning conversation is shared, with more emphasis on connection, mutual respect, and knowledge exchange. Yarning is a data collection method that respects the stories participants want to share as opposed to giving the researcher what they want to hear, and so the researcher is an active participant and learner as opposed to the possessor of knowledge.[55,56] Yarning can be approached in four ways: social yarning, research-topic yarning, collaborative yarning, and therapeutic yarning.[55] In this research, yarning is used as a data collection method and four yarning components: social yarning, research topic yarning, collaborative yarning, and therapeutic yarning[55] will be employed. Therapeutic yarning is particularly important. Providing forums for listening and supporting participants to safely share their story without judgment and to make sense of their experiences, is a process that can be cathartic.[55]

Closely connected to the concept of yarning, is that of Dadirri, a spiritual form of trust and rapport building. Dadirri is a concept of the Ngangikurungkurr people, meaning inner, deep listening, and quiet still awareness, and allows respectful, trusting relationships to develop.[58] Using a yarning approach represents an opportunity for two-way learning and knowledge-sharing that is not dependent on an unequal power relationship in which the researcher maintains control.[56]

5 | INDIGENOUS DATA SOVEREIGNTY

The dominance of Western scientific knowledge systems in data creation, control, and governance has resulted in data that views Indigenous people as the problem, fails to recognize Indigenous knowledges, and does not always benefit Indigenous people and communities.[59–61] Indigenous data sovereignty is an important element of emancipatory research, specifying the rights of Indigenous communities, and organizations to maintain and control data that is collected, to protect cultural information and property, and to own, develop and use data in a way that is relevant to the community.[59] It is practiced through Indigenous data governance and describes how Indigenous data are generated and should be represented in any information collected about Indigenous people.[59] Using an APAR approach demands that Indigenous data sovereignty is adhered to throughout the research process. This ensures that Aboriginal communities control collected data so that cultural information is protected and data are used in a way that benefits the community.[59]

6 | DISCUSSION

Guiding principles for minimizing harm in Aboriginal research in Australia are well established.[14,15] These principles espouse that research which aims to benefit Australian Aboriginal people should be designed to hold at its center Aboriginal leadership and community consultation. Non-Indigenous researchers should aspire to authentic engagement with Aboriginal communities and a commitment to deep analysis of the impact of the research and its influences on Aboriginal health outcomes.[56] Our research is underpinned by the principles of social justice, human rights, and transformative research outcomes that places central importance on the lives and experiences of participants, and seeks to further social justice.[46,62]

Given the well-established harms from past child protection policies which resulted in the historical stolen generations,[1,2] along with the contemporary high rates of Aboriginal child removal[20] and related intergenerational trauma mitigating the potential for further research harm is critical.[14] When non-Indigenous researchers engage with community members respectfully, connections with Aboriginal elders and community knowledge holders can facilitate opportunities for effective knowledge exchange, culturally secure data collection strategies, research translation, advocacy, and effecting transformative change.[14] For some Aboriginal communities, knowledge, and stories related to childbirth are considered women's business and not discussed with men.[63] Therefore, for this research to be transformative and not contribute further harm, it is a critical responsibility of non-Indigenous researchers to ensure there are culturally secure forums for the respectful exchange of cultural knowledge and protocols that embrace Aboriginal ways of knowing being and doing.[44]

Using APAR[47] approaches that center consultation with Aboriginal community participation are critical elements for harm reduction.[14] The use of culturally secure Indigenous data collection methods,[34] applied in conjunction with Dadirri can assist with reducing harm.[58] Moreover, applying the principles of Indigenous data sovereignty[59] ensures that data collection is consistent with community-identified priorities for research and research outcomes and will ensure that the source of the knowledge is respected and acknowledged appropriately.[40]

Advocating research findings to inform policy and structural change that have been identified by community members using an APAR approach assists to facilitate transformative outcomes.[41] This research responds to the "call to action" to confront the systemic injustice in maternal and infant care for Aboriginal families in Australia.[64] The framework underpinning this research encourages non-Indigenous researchers to carefully consider, with cultural humility and reflexivity, models that support continuous collaboration to enhance transformative research outcomes that are of benefit to the community.[34] The outcome being just and equitable care for all Aboriginal women.

7 | CONCLUSION

This article underscores the ethical responsibilities required from non-Indigenous researchers when engaging with Indigenous communities in research settings. Ensuring reflexivity to address the potential for bias and power imbalance are central to emancipatory research.[34] Knowledge acquisition, exchange, and use is contingent on establishing trusting respectful relationship with elders and community members.

Culturally secure data collection, in conjunction with attention to Indigenous data sovereignty, fosters an environment conducive to knowledge sharing in a way that embraces and respects Indigenous ways of "knowing, being, and doing." Placing control of data with community members, ensures cultural information is protected, and the data are owned, developed, and used for the benefit of the Aboriginal community.

Recognizing the advantages of using Indigenous frameworks for non-Indigenous researcher and fostering a culturally secure research environment that allows for and empowers the voices of participants, increases the chance of transformative change. For this research, we hope for change that addresses the injustices that have persisted over generations at the intersection of maternal and health, and historical and contemporary harm from Australian child protection systems.

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