

RELATIONSHIPS AUSTRALIA NORTHERN TERRITORY

BACK FROM THE EDGE

PROJECT EVALUATION

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A REPORT BY:



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INTRODUCTION – WHAT THIS REPORT IS ABOUT

Why do we need this report?

This is the story (the evaluation) of some work that was done in the Yirrkala and Gunyangara communities in East Arnhem in 2005. It happened because the people in these communities were going through hard times and many young people were hurting or killing themselves. Everyone was looking for ways to stop this happening.

This project was started with some money from the Department of Health and Ageing. The money was given to Relationships Australia Northern Territory to work with both the Yolngu people in Yirrkala and Gunyangara (Ski Beach) and with health and other workers in East Arnhem. The project was called *Back from the Edge*¹.

As part of the funding, Relationships Australia Northern Territory needed to find someone (an independent person) to evaluate the project, to see if what they did was useful. So Relationships Australia Northern Territory employed me to answer these questions:

- Did this project work?
- What was done well?
- What could have been done better?
- What can we learn from this project?
- What might come next?
- How could this help other groups or communities?

What was the project trying to do?

The funding agreement says that *the outcomes and objectives of the Program are to:*

- *reduce suicidal thinking/behaviour/injury, self harm and death by suicide*
- *enhance resilience, respect, resourcefulness, interconnectedness and mental health of individuals, families and communities and to reduce prevalence of risk conditions*
- *increase support available to individuals, families and communities who have been affected by suicidal behaviours*

¹ They called it this because finding ways to stop people killing themselves is like putting up warning signs before the edge of a cliff, to stop people falling over - keeping people back from the cliff edge.

- *extend and enhance community and scientific understanding of suicide and its prevention.*

The agreement between Relationships Australia Northern Territory and the Dulwich Centre says they will:

provide culturally appropriate, culturally secure, sustainable and enduring strategies for suicide prevention to those Aboriginal people working in the field in the communities of Yirrkala and Gunyangara.

What does this report look at?

An evaluator looks at a project to see how well it did what it set out to do. To do this, the evaluator can look at lots of different things like:

- efficiency (did they do the right thing?)
- effectiveness (did it work? did they do it in the best possible way?)
- cost-effectiveness (did they get the best possible value for money?)
- appropriateness (did the project match what the community needed?)
- outcomes (did they achieve what they set out to achieve?)

Evaluations also usually contain facts and figures (quantitative information), as well as what people thought about the project and how things were done (qualitative information).

Because this was a short-term project, it wasn't possible to look at all of these things – for example there wasn't much data. It was also hard to look at some of the long-term stuff - it would be pretty hard to say if this work stopped people killing themselves. How could you prove that any drop in the number of deaths was just because of this project?

So from the start it was decided that this evaluation would be based mostly on feedback from people and on looking at the how things were done, particularly:

- the match between what they planned to do and what the community needed
- what was achieved and how well.

It was decided that the evaluation would not consider:

- long-term outcomes (like if the project had prevented suicides)
- if it was value for money (there just wasn't enough information to do this)
- how good the narrative approach is (only looked at how well it worked in this case).

What were the problems?

The other important point to note about this evaluation is that it wasn't done the way it was originally planned. Relationships Australia Northern Territory had planned for the evaluator to attend some of the final sessions of the project, to meet participants and to observe the project in action. They were also keen to have someone from Nhulunbuy do the job, so that it would be easier to talk to people and get their input to the report.

Unfortunately, this was not possible, as the person who was going to do the job originally had to pull out. So the evaluation had to happen after the project was over, and be done by a non-Indigenous person from Darwin. Fortunately I received a lot of support from some people in government agencies and in the communities - particularly from Andrea Collins from the ICC and Djapirri Munungguritj from the Yirkala Women's Resource Centre.

The other problem was that I wasn't able to talk to all the people that I wanted to. This was because I was only in town for a short time. It was also because the phone lines and email were affected by Cyclone Monica so it was hard to organise my visit from Darwin – I just couldn't get hold of people.

So when I got to East Arnhem, some people were out of town on other business, there were some important ceremonies happening in the community, and sometimes it was just difficult to catch people. There were also a few people that I kept looking for and missing.

I couldn't speak with everyone while I was there, but I tried to speak with as many people as I could, and contact the other people by phone afterwards. I have put the names of the people I spoke with at the back of this report.

Because I couldn't talk with everyone, I sent this document to some of the people I spoke with in Nhulunbuy and on the communities. I asked them to show it to the other people I spoke to as well, to see if they agree with what was said. I also asked them to show it to the people that I didn't get to meet and to see if there are more things that I need to know. Their comments back will be included as an attachment, when I get them.

What is in the report?

The first part of the report tells the story of how the project started, what the project did and what else was happening at the time. It also talks about what has been going on in the communities since the project ended.

The next section gives the feedback from different groups of people who were involved in the *Back from the Edge* Project. This includes Yolngu people from both communities, non-

Yolngu people in East Arnhem, and the staff from Relationships Australia Northern Territory and the Dulwich Centre who conducted the project.

The Findings says what I think about this project after looking at the information and talking with lots of people. It says whether I think this project worked, and what could be done better or differently next time. *The Recommendations* section gives some ideas about what could happen next and how to make this happen.

In the *Attachments* there is a list of the people who spoke with me, and some other background information.

What will happen with this evaluation?

My hope is that this evaluation will go to many different people and will be useful to them. I know that it will definitely go to:

- Relationships Australia Northern Territory and the Dulwich Centre
 - so that they know what was good about what they did, and what could be done better if they are asked to do something like this again
- The Department of Health and Ageing
 - so that they know how their money was spent, whether it was spent well, and to give them some ideas of what could happen in the future if they are looking at continuing to fund this or similar projects

It should also go to:

- the people from the Yirrkala and Gunyangara communities and the other groups and organisations in East Arnhem who participated in the project
 - as a reminder of what has happened and as a help if they want to find ways to keep the work going
- many others – like other communities who are going through the same problems, other government departments, non-government agencies and so on
 - to tell them what has happened here, so that they can think about whether working this way might be useful for them too.

Mostly this evaluation is a record of what has been done but it also shows what could be done in the future to continue this work and to expand it into other areas and regions.

THE STORY OF THE *BACK FROM THE EDGE* PROJECT

What is this story about?

This story tells:

- why this work happened
- who did it and how
- what was done
- what happened after it was over.

How did the project start?

Why was the project needed?

This project started because there was a real concern among both Yolngu and non-Yolngu people about the number of deaths and suicide attempts. Both the Gunyangara and Yirrkala communities had been going through bad times, as Djuwalpi Marika says in his story *Dreams and visions for Yirrkala*.

We have had too many deaths, too many suicides. There has been so much sadness and loss. There is too much alcohol and other drugs. At night we hear fighting and breaking glass. It is like a nightmare.

Other people were also worried about the number of young people who were trying to kill themselves. Senior Sergeant Tony Fuller from the Nhulunbuy Police Station wrote a report about it because he wanted to make sure people knew how bad the situation was and he also wanted people to work together to stop the deaths.

Some government people – from the Office of Indigenous Policy Co-ordination and from the Department of Health and Ageing – felt that they needed to do something to help. The Department of Health and Ageing found some money that could be spent on working to prevent suicides in the two communities.

Originally, the Department were planning for this money to be spent training people from the area in suicide prevention skills. Barry Sullivan from Relationships Australia Northern Territory (RANT) had delivered some training on Groote Eylandt on developing these skills, and the idea was to do something similar in East Arnhem, but for more people. So RANT was asked if they would be able to do this work and they agreed.

But the more the people at Relationships Australia Northern Territory thought about it, the more they felt that just doing training would not be the best approach. They wanted to build

on the skills and knowledge of all the different groups of people living in these communities – old people, young people, mothers, men. As stated in the report to the Department:

A response to an issue as complex and traumatic as high suicide rates requires a whole-of community approach which maximises the use of local knowledge and skills.

They were worried that the only ones who would be likely to go to the training would be either the Yolngu people who are already really busy - like the clinic staff, Council workers, and teachers - or the workers who have come from outside the community and who may not stay for long.

Why was it done this way – a narrative approach?

So Relationships Australia Northern Territory talked with people from the Dulwich Centre in South Australia. They knew that this group were already working in partnership with Indigenous communities and that the people from the Dulwich Centre use a special approach to their work with individuals, families and communities – called a narrative approach.

Relationships Australia Northern Territory felt that this way of working with the two communities might be more effective and more suited to Indigenous people. As David Denborough from the Dulwich Centre said:

We want to work with people in ways that honour their skills and knowledge. We don't presume that we as outsiders know the answers, or know what is important to them.

I have attached at the back of this report some information about the narrative approach to community. There is also more information about this way of working on the Dulwich Centre website.

Who were the workers?

The work on the project was done by a team of people. Barry Sullivan was the main person from Relationships Australia Northern Territory. The team member from the Port Augusta Aboriginal Community was Carolyn Koolmatrie. The team from Dulwich Centre included:

David Denborough
Cheryl White
Barbara Wingard
Shona Russell
Sue Mitchell

What did the project do?

This section tells briefly what the team did in East Arnhem. It doesn't give lots of detail - just what the different bits of the project were and how they happened.

Initial consultation

In the past, the Dulwich Centre has only gone in to work with Indigenous communities when they have been asked by people from those communities. This project was different because the request came from the Department, not the community.

So the two organisations felt that they needed to consult thoroughly with the communities, to make sure that the community members were willing to be part of the project and happy with the approach that the team were planning to take.

The first stage of the project was to spend some time talking with important groups in the region, as well as with local professionals and the members of the Yirrkala and Gunyangara communities. They spoke with individuals and with groups. This was done so that the team would:

- understand the issues and problems facing East Arnhem in general and Yirrkala and Gunyangara in particular
- find out what services and programs were already being provided
- make sure that Yolngu people were happy with the consultation process
- find out what the community wanted from the project
- work with the community to find out how best to achieve this.

After talking with lots of different people, two larger consultation meetings were held to get community agreement on what should happen next. At these meetings, the two communities asked the team to continue their work.

Effect of consultation

The consultations resulted in some changes to the way the project was going to work. The feedback from people in the community team was that:

- The team should involve as many community members as possible in the narrative approach rather than employing just one Indigenous Project Officer.
- By doing this the people in the community would have a chance to learn about the narrative approach by watching and helping instead of through formal training.

- They should still provide training for health professionals in the region but the training should help the workers support the narrative approach to community work as well as being a chance to learn new skills.

The team discussed these changes with the Department of Health and Ageing and they agreed that instead of just training, the project would include both a narrative approach to community work, and some training for professional staff.

The other major change that happened was that, at the two large consultation meetings at Yirrkala and Gunyangara, the team from the Dulwich Centre read out the stories from Port Augusta. This document was *warmly embraced* by the Yolngu people, and seems to be one major reason why people were keen to continue with the narrative approach.

It was always intended that there would be some sort of reflection back from another group at the end of the process. However, what happened was that a linkage between Port Augusta and the two East Arnhem communities started right at the beginning. Listening and responding to the skills, knowledge and experiences of the other community became a core part of the project.

Training

There were two streams to the training part of the project. The first stream was an opportunity for the Yolngu people to learn through being part of the work done by the team. This way of working meant that the team could help the community to become more aware of the skills and knowledge that already exist within individuals and groups. As the Dulwich Centre put it:

In stressful times such as both Yirrkala and Ski Beach Communities are currently experiencing, these skills can often be hidden from the wider community and even from the individuals and groups who possess the skills.

Community members learned about the special way of listening and responding, the narrative approach, by helping develop the stories and seeing what happened at the Gatherings. They re-learned their own skills and knowledge through the process of the telling and re-telling of their stories; they learned of their ability to help others, through listening to the responses from Port Augusta. As stated in the Final Report to the Department, the team believes that this type of learning:

...enables a community to be less vulnerable to the effects of grief, loss and trauma by allowing a re-invigoration of the community's sense of having an influence over its future.

The second stream was the presentation of four formal training sessions for local health and related workers. The sessions were:

– **Telling our stories in ways that make us stronger**

This introductory workshop was conducted twice, to a total of twenty-five participants, and dealt with responding to grief, loss and trauma using a narrative approach. A major emphasis was on assisting people to tell their stories in ways that make them stronger.

– **Narrative responses to Grief, Trauma and Loss**

This was a full-day follow-up to the introductory workshop and was attended by four people. It covered Internal and Intentional States, Externalising Practices and Statement of Position Map, Re-Membering Practices and Mapping Re-Membering Conversations.

– **Responding to people's stories: the use of Outsider Witness Practices**

The final workshop was attended by twelve people, and focussed on developing particular skills in ways of responding to people's stories. It was also a preparation for the Community Gatherings, so that this group could participate in these events in a significant way.

Involving local professionals by focusing the training around the narrative approach to community work meant that the two streams of work would come together and hopefully strengthen each other. The training was seen as a good way to:

- increase skills in helping people who are thinking of killing themselves
- prepare the workers to take a part in the Community Gatherings
- make sure that there were people who would continue this work in partnership with the community afterwards.

Working with the community – the narrative approach

You can't really separate out the training, consultation and gatherings from the narrative approach to community work. They are all part of the same process. The narrative approach started with the initial consultations and informal discussions with people on the community. From that, themes began to emerge through careful listening to the stories of community members. These stories were told and re-told informally, with individuals and with *small groups under trees, or outside cafes or at people's homes.*

At the same time, the stories and responses from the people of Port Augusta were also being brought to the people of the community and messages were going back, often from one section of the community to another (like young men to young men).

The important things to mention about the way the team worked are:

- the focus was on the skills and knowledge of the community
- people could participate when and where they liked and just as much as they were comfortable with
- they tried to involve all the different groups in the community – elders, young men, young women, women, families who had lost members to suicide
- everyone got their story back again and could change it if they wanted
- the team built on things that were already happening in the community
- they worked in partnership with local Indigenous people.

Community Gatherings

Two Community Gatherings were held – thirty people attended the one in Yirrkala on 2 February 2006 and fifteen people were at the one in Gunyangara on 3 February 2006.

The Gatherings were a chance for both Yolngu and non-Yolngu people to share what had been happening over the past six months and to listen to the different skills and knowledge they have developed for dealing with the hard times and working to make the community a better place.

This was the final formal part of the project.

At the Gatherings:

- copies of the booklet *These Stories are like a healing, like a medicine...* were given out and some of the stories were read out
- some of the responses from Port Augusta were read by a member of that community, who was also a team member
- messages from other parts of Australia and overseas were also read out
- some songs based on the stories were played
- local health and related workers read out the messages they had composed in response to the community stories.

What else was going on at the time?

Many people in East Arnhem, both in Nhulunbuy and in the indigenous communities were working to make their community a safer and better place. As three senior women put it in a letter written in 2004:

We can see that the young people are overtaking us and dying before us. It is devastating for us to bury our young people; they should be burying us. But the tide has turned: we the elders are singing and crying for our young ones....

We want to clean our places, our homes, our environment and our country so that people can live happily. All the women and men who do not accept the anti-social behaviour of the drinkers want to live in harmony with each other and in a peaceful environment.

Some of the things that are happening in the East Arnhem region include:

- The Community Harmony group (which involves people from the communities and agencies) meets regularly to work together on the issues affecting the community and has worked hard to get new services happening.
- A report was prepared for the Licensing Commission to look at ‘liquor issues and liquor control options pertaining to the Gove Peninsula.’
- Anglicare offers suicide prevention training through the Assist Program.
- A Raypirri Rom program is being sponsored through Miwatj. Raypirri Rom is a means of intervention that give uses traditionally based ways of mediation through Raypirri Rom (disciplinary law) as well as mainstream.
- A Special Care Centre was built - a sobering-up shelter and alcohol rehabilitation centre - which should open this year.
- Other services are provided such as drug and alcohol and mental health services, youth drop-in centres, counselling, crisis accommodation and so on.

Within the two communities, people had also been taking action. Some of the things they had been doing were:

- Running the Community Patrols – these patrols have been run for over ten years, mostly by Yolngu women, and have been a very strong force for change.

- Developing ways to support different groups within the community - through Sport and Recreation programs, school-based programs and other groups (like Yirrkala School Action Group and the Strong Boys Group).
- Working for change by playing a role in the Community Harmony Group, helping develop Raypirri Rom Programs and agitating for changes to the Liquor Licensing arrangements.

What has happened since the project stopped?

Since the project ended, a number of things have continued to happen. These include:

- the stories and the booklet *These Stories are like a healing, like a medicine...* have been given or presented by community members to many different groups
 - to an Indigenous Family Violence Conference in Mackay
 - at conferences in Samoa, Adelaide, and Alice Springs
 - they will be going shortly to a community in the Kimberley
- they are being used by local Yolngu people to explain their culture and the issues they face to non-Yolngu people in the local community, for example to
 - new workers attending cultural awareness training at Alcan
 - new workers coming into agencies in Nhulunbuy
- they are still being read and listened to in the communities
 - they have been played and discussed on local radio
 - they are read at some gatherings
 - they will be a big part of the Women's Conference in June; they will be used as a way of talking about difficult things
- messages are continuing to come in from other communities and other countries – for instance some were read out to a large group at a recent women's night.

There have also been some other activities associated with the project:

- Relationships Australia Northern Territory distributed the report to a number of organisations, along with a copy of the priority areas for future action, to see if more could be done
- another print run will be occurring soon.

As well as these activities, some people talked about a bigger change. They said the project has helped people to make decisions and act for the community.

There is more leadership, a strong leadership of both man and woman, making things change.

One example of this has been that a men's group (*Larrpan*) has started in Yirrkala. This group started after the Community Gathering, as a response to the stories. These are men who are working voluntarily to make things better – like sitting on the community limits at night to check cars for grog, and making sure the kids are at home by 9 o'clock. This group is working in with the Community Patrol – sometimes they do different things, and sometimes work together - but they both help to make the community a better place. They believe that this has made Yirrkala a much quieter community.

There is no question that the number of suicides or attempted suicides has dropped dramatically over the past six months or so, and that both communities are a lot quieter than they were. I was told that this may be due to a lot of different things (including the project):

- alcohol is not so easy to get on the communities since the men are policing the borders and introduced a curfew at Yirrkala
- if the drinking is in town potential suicides are less likely to have an 'audience'
- the police and night patrol are working to get to people before they are in danger
- the women at Gunyangara go (in pairs usually) and talk with people when things are getting out of hand on their community (fighting and drinking)
- it just happens that some of the 'problem people' are in jail

The police told me that one sure sign that things are going well is that the football comp is much stronger this year – *people are off the grog and competing to get on the teams!*

Why this work happened

- There had been a lot of suicides (and attempts) by young people
- Senior Sergeant Tony Fuller wrote a report to try and get help with this
- The Commonwealth gave some funding for suicide prevention training
- They asked Relationships Australia (RANT) to do this training

Who did it and how

- RANT wanted to do something that would help the whole community
- They asked the Dulwich Centre to be part of the project because they knew about their long history of working with Indigenous groups and their special way of working – a narrative approach
- They consulted thoroughly with the Yolngu and non-Yolngu people
- After talking with these groups, it was agreed they would:
 - o work with the communities, using a narrative approach
 - o provide training for the health and other workers
 - o bring both groups together through community gatherings
- The Department of Health and Ageing approved of this change

What was done

- The first stage of the project was the consultations:
 - o finding out and following the right consultation protocol
 - o discussing what was happening in the communities
 - o talking with people about their concerns and experiences
 - o finding out what community wanted and how to do this
- This included two community meetings where:
 - o the stories from Port Augusta were read
 - o the community decided what would happen
- The team continued to talk with many different people on the community, to write down their stories and to share these stories back to these people and then with other people (with permission)
- The team had both Indigenous and non-Indigenous members, and they also worked in partnership with local Yolngu people
- The team tried to work with and build on things that were already happening in the two communities – groups and programs
- At the same time, they held four training sessions for local workers to:
 - o raise awareness of ways to help people who are suicidal
 - o link the workers with what was happening in the community
 - o prepare them to participate in the Community Gatherings
- Two Community Gatherings were held (one in each community) to share what happened during the project, and to listen and respond to the special skills and knowledge of the people of the two communities

What happened afterwards

- The stories have been presented to many different groups, both locally, interstate and overseas
- Local Yolngu people are using them to explain their culture to others
- They are being read and listened to in the community and on radio
- Messages are coming in from people who have heard the stories
- Several organisations have been asked to support the next steps
- The Larrpan men have started taking action to help Yirrkala stay dry

WHAT DID PEOPLE THINK ABOUT THE PROJECT?

Who was consulted?

I talked to three main groups:

- Yolngu people from Yirrkala and Gunyangara who saw or participated in the project
- non-Yolngu people in East Arnhem who were aware of or involved with the project²
- the people from Relationships Australia Northern Territory and the Dulwich Centre who did the work.

What did they say?

What Yolngu people said about...

...telling and hearing the stories

The Yolngu people who live in Yirrkala and Gunyangara told me that:

- ✓ the stories were based deeply in their culture and in their lives

We are helping one another by identifying who we are to one another and to share the deepness and root of our culture.

Not just lips and skin, they come from deep down in the heart and out through our mouths.

The core of this book is Yolngu knowledge and philosophy.

- ✓ the stories helped people in these communities to share and to heal a little of their pain and grief

It was a healing process for the community. The families didn't want to talk about the deaths but because some important people shared their stories, others could too. It would've been locked in, the stories let us empty ourselves out and let healing happen.

Took out a little bit of pain and put in a little bit of healing.

- ✓ the stories reminded them of their strength to help their communities and of their dreams for their community

The stories are about our concerns and our responses to what is happening in our community.

² I use the term 'non-Yolngu' to cover both indigenous and non-indigenous people who are not part of the two communities. Where relevant I will make it clear that comments come from indigenous non-Yolngu people.

Trauma shuts your mind, shuts your heart, and you can't think but with these stories people started to see the positives, not just the negatives and get the strength to act for the future.

This project gave the mothers who have gone through this grief the guts and determination to speak out for the first time.

- × it would have been good to have more stories, particularly from the older people and the younger people

We need to hear more stories from the old people - how they lived and how their life has changed coming into the present age. Young people want to hear this; it may be there are answers there for them.

More stories and more from the kids, it would help the school children.

...other people hearing and responding to Yolngu stories

I was told that these stories are being heard and responded to by three different groups:

- Indigenous people in Australia, like those in Port Augusta who first heard the stories
- non-Indigenous people in East Arnhem and other parts of Australia
- Indigenous people from other countries all over the world.

Sharing their stories with each of these groups is important for different reasons:

- ✓ sharing these stories with the people of Port Augusta shows both groups that they are not alone and that there are ways they can be strong for themselves and give support to each other

Our stories are now a medicine for everyone.

It blew my mind away! I want this to happen North, South, East and West!

We are going through the same things, we have the same pain, and we can give each other strength.

We have shared our hearts with the people of Port Augusta and they have shared theirs with us. We need to do this with Yolngu people all over Australia to be strong together.

You are not facing these problems alone - we can feel it too. Together we can comfort each other and work to find solutions.

- ✓ sharing these stories with non-Indigenous people helps them to understand Yolngu people, their culture and to see the pain and suffering that people carry with them everyday

These people, they see the drinkers lying in the street and they think that this is all Yolngu people. They don't see the people who are struggling to make things better, they don't see the people who are not drinking and not humbugging.

This helps explain to white people - all Yolngu are not like what you think.

- ✓ hearing responses from people all over the world shows that what the Yolngu people are going through is important and what they are doing about it has a message for others – this gives a sense of pride and of self-esteem

Our stories are touching the hearts of people everywhere - even in Jerusalem Israel! - they have travelled far and wide!

The stories talk to us in our community in our ways but they also talk to people far away. It helps many people - even if many will be crying - it helps that we touch their hearts and help them to see a better way to live too.

When I heard Djapirri read the messages from across the world it made me feel good, proud that it started here in our two communities.

- × for some people there was a concern that the stories might go to the wrong people, that Yolngu people need some control over who is seeing their stories and why³

People still feel that they need to own their stories; that they won't be read by the wrong people; that others know where these stories belong.

- × many people said that they would like to have Yolngu people learn the skills to be the ones to record the stories (they stressed that this would take time and that they would still need support from professionals like the Dulwich Centre)

Learn how to hear the strong messages and the strong actions we can take, so we can continue to act for the future - both men and women need to learn this.

³ My feeling was that this was not about people sharing the stories one to another, but them being published or read out in public by people who don't have the right or permission to do so.

...the gatherings

Everyone agreed that the gatherings were a very important part of the project

- ✓ to celebrate what had been achieved and to allow the community to come together to listen to, share and respond as a group, to what had been said by individuals

This is the way it should have been years and years back - listening to each other, acting on what is in our hearts minds and spirits so we can bring it all back into line.

Sharing our stories separately and then sharing our stories with each other, this was very powerful, very emotional. We cried and we embraced.

The women from Gunyangara said that

- ✗ it would have been better if more men from that community had shared their stories and come to the gathering, but that this will take time and may happen as the men's group gets stronger
- ✓ they were very proud of what was done by the young men who did participate

...whether the project changed anything - for individuals or the communities

I was told about the many other things that were and are happening in the region, to try and fix the problems with drugs and alcohol, and to stop the deaths. Many Yolngu people told me that there are positive changes happening but it is hard to say that one thing or another is responsible for these changes.

However, some people told me that:

- ✓ The Larrpan men got started because the stories reminded them of their strengths and their dreams for Yirrkala - *the TOs (traditional owners) started going out on the trucks and doing border patrol, so the other men thought 'if they can do that, so should we' and now many men are part of Larrpan.*
- ✓ The women on the Gunyangara community patrol feel more confident and have greater self-esteem because of the stories - *we learned a lot and we are confident now that we can carry the work ourselves in this community.*
- ✓ They felt more able to deal with it when the young people start talking about killing themselves - *if I hear it, even if it is my own children saying it, I tell them straight off and deal with it straight away.*

- ✓ sharing the stories with a wider audience (in Samoa and in Mackay) had a big impact for the people who went and presented, but also for the people whose stories were shared and who heard about the way people in those places reacted.

...what it meant for the young men and women

I didn't get to speak to any of the young men or women while I was in East Arnhem although I did speak to one young man on the phone later. Also some other people told me what they thought the young people got from it.

A project like this has never happened before in this community. It brought out what people have been holding inside for many years. It was eye-opening for the young people - you could see them react to their own stories.

The young man told me:

- ✓ *it was good, and we still read these stories*
- ✓ *it was good to talk about spirits, hunting ceremony; the good and the sad stories*
- ✗ *we would like more stories, from more young people.*

The other people said that the young people:

- ✓ have asked for more stories
- ✓ found these stories inspiring, especially the young men
- ✓ felt that the stories were a way for the elders to hear about and understand the concerns and the lives of the young people, which would not normally happen.

...the team

Everyone told me how much they appreciated members of the team from Relationships Australia Northern Territory and the Dulwich Centre. No-one had any criticisms. The things they liked about them were:

- ✓ *They just sat with us and talked under the trees.*
- ✓ *They made sure that someone was with them to help understand language.*
- ✓ *Barry and David were very professional.*
- ✓ *Just sat with individuals or small groups and let people explain in their own time and in their own way.*
- ✓ *They took their time, they listened and then they gave the stories back to us to check and to change if we wanted.*

- ✓ *Didn't just fly in and fly out, and talk just to the workers; they came many times and talked to all sorts of people in the community.*
- ✓ *Someone, an Indigenous woman, came from Port Augusta, so we feel linked to that community now.*
- ✓ *We now have a good contact with Relationships Australia Northern Territory and we can keep this going, this strong relationship.*

What the non-Yolngu people said about...

...the training

I tried to contact all of the people who had attended training. Quite a few had left town, others weren't available. I ended up speaking with thirteen of the people who had attended the training, from a range of different agencies. I wanted to find out what they thought of it, what could have been done better, and whether it had helped them in any way.

The things that people liked about the training were:

- ✓ it was a good, sound introduction to these ideas
- ✓ it was very well-presented, and professional
- ✓ people liked having practice as well as theory, and liked that it lead somewhere
- ✓ many of the ideas were practical for your personal as well as your professional life
- ✓ the presenters were interesting, had a good relaxed style and used appropriate language
- ✓ the sharing was good, especially sharing our stories at the ceremony.

Everyone was positive about the training, including those who had suggestions and criticisms to offer. One person was highly critical of its appropriateness for Yolngu participants but still felt that it was well done. One person said, *the training was great - shame there's not more!!*

The suggestions that people made to improve the training included:

- × *Should have been clearer that the training was aimed at ceremonies.*
- × *Would be useful to have a post-event reflection for those on training course.*
- × *Need more opportunities to be interactive - too much watching.*
- × *Too high level language for some - much too academic for me!*
- × *It took a while to be able to pick it up and understand it - so much information in such a short space of time.*

Lots of people talked about whether more Yolngu people should have been at the training (only one Yolngu person attended⁴) and if so, how that would have worked. Some comments were:

⁴ Unfortunately, the Yolngu lady who attended the training was one of the people I didn't get to talk with, so I couldn't get her thoughts about this issue.

- × *I was disappointed that there were no Yolngu participants.*
- × *The training should be held on communities, so that Yolngu people would be more likely to attend.*
- × *This training was not appropriate for Indigenous people - although I can't speak for Yolngu myself - but felt it was more for white professionals.*
- × *The way they talked about death would not fit with Yolngu culture - I spoke with the Yolngu woman who was there and she was very uncomfortable.*

Other people didn't think this was a problem. They saw the training as something that would help them to support the work that was being done separately with the Yolngu people. Many thought that formal training would not have been the best way to go anyway:

- ✓ *Yolngu involvement? - it is not that they weren't invited, they are already very busy and the focus for them was the stories and community events.*
- ✓ *Training was the secondary layer, the primary layer was capturing the stories and building up the people and the communities, but the training was still needed and useful.*

The other thing I asked about was whether this training had made any difference in the way they worked; whether they had learned and used new skills. There were really two groups of people – those who already knew a bit or a lot about the narrative approach, and those for whom it was entirely new. So their responses were quite different.

Those with some experience said things like:

- ✓ *It was a good background and backup to existing skills.*
- ✓ *This is already part of how I work - good to be inspired again.*
- ✓ *I have had a basic grounding, and these are tools I use in day to day work.*

With the other group, when asked if they have they used the training, those who work with clients were more likely to say yes, and those who didn't have direct client contact said no.

Other comments they made were:

- ✓ *It has given me ideas that are useful in my work.*
- ✓ *It complements other training I have done - like Assist.*
- ✓ *I did use the training shortly afterwards when trying to talk someone down from attempting suicide - not exactly that technique but it helped.*
- ✓ *It was good to see it in action next day - could see that this had strengthened up the understanding and skills of the senior ladies in their day to day services in the community patrol.*

Some people were a bit worried that it might not be wise to try and practice these techniques, without more support or training:

- × *I would need a mentor to help me use these skills the right way.*
- × *It could be dangerous to try to use this stuff if you don't have enough knowledge.*

...the stories and the Community Gatherings

As well as the people who attended the training, I also talked to a lot of non-Yolngu people who were working in areas where they were dealing a lot with the Yirrkala and Gunyangara communities. I asked both these groups what they thought about the stories and the gatherings (for those who attended).

People felt that the stories were a very powerful tool, which has been accepted and used by the people in the two communities in a very positive way:

- ✓ *The huge reaction from people in Mackay affirmed the power of the messages.*
- ✓ *It was good that everyone got a copy of the stories - they show it to people.*
- ✓ *People are using the book - it is a useful shortcut for Yolngu - they can just give the stories and not always have to explain everything.*
- ✓ *Stories are inspiring to those who read them or hear them.*
- ✓ *People want more of it - they have asked to have stories in Yolngu Matha.*

There was also a generally positive response to the Community Gatherings at Yirrkala and Gunyangara:

- ✓ *Ceremony at Yirrkala was beautiful; I got to hear what people got out of it all.*
- ✓ *This was a very familiar way of doing things for us Indigenous people, telling stories and sharing.*
- ✓ *The gathering was positive - person separate from problem.*
- ✓ *I didn't expect so much emotion, it was beautiful but emotionally draining.*

There were only two areas of concern with the ceremonies:

- × that there weren't many people at Gunyangara: and
- × that there weren't more men involved.

...the project generally

Everyone seemed to like the same things about this project. Many people said that the narrative approach is culturally appropriate and a good model for community development. More importantly, they stressed that the team used a sound process to work with the communities and that they acted very professionally.

The things they liked about this way of working were that:

- ✓ *It values the skills and knowledge of Indigenous people.*
- ✓ *It encourages people to talk - for years they have been told to "shut up and listen" - this gives them the chance and freedom to talk.*
- ✓ *This really fitted well with the kids especially as it was not just an initial hit but a continuous dialogue.*
- ✓ *An holistic approach is important in working with Indigenous communities - instead of our usual way of focussing on just one thing.*
- ✓ *You can see that the community is proud of it and using it.*
- ✓ *They didn't focus on just the one aspect - let the kids talk about what they needed to talk about.*
- ✓ *Targeted people who never really had their say before.*
- ✓ *It was worth it, even just for the ceremony - celebrating the small wins is important.*
- ✓ *Indigenous people tend not to ask questions or take the floor - this allows them to really speak in an appropriate way.*
- ✓ *this approach would work well in other communities too.*

Other people were concerned that this project would be just another 'flash in the pan':

- × *They have good intentions - but will it stand the test of time? You can't come and fix up a community in six months!*
- × *The hard thing is to keep it alive*

If it is to succeed long-term, the suggestions were that it needs to be more integrated into the community and not just part of the *never-ending kaleidoscope of programs and interventions that come and go in communities:*

- × *Must get down to community level and become a part of daily life*
- × *Use Indigenous people more so someone local is driving it*

The other thing that came through strongly was the importance of the linkage with Port Augusta

- ✓ *Passing the information back and forth gives confidence*
- ✓ *Problems don't feel so big when you know others are having them too*
- ✓ *That link is spiritual; the sharing of suffering and their actions is positive*

However, one person expressed doubt about the value of making connections with other communities and especially with groups overseas. They felt it was not relevant and not really culturally appropriate.

What the team members said about...

...the way they did things

What came through in talking to the team members was that the way they did things was based on what people in the communities were saying to them, and on responding to things that were happening in the community.

A big concern for the team was that the idea for the project had come from the government, not directly from the community – *we didn't feel invited into the community by the community*. So they wanted to try to make sure that whatever they offered matched what the community wanted. The team wanted to make sure that they:

- asked people what they wanted
- asked the right people
- and in the right way.

Changes were made to the project and the process because of this discussion. Two important messages that the team heard were:

- It was better to work with as many community members as possible, rather than employing just one person. That person might be seen as belonging more to one community, family or clan, and working for them not the whole community.
- Providing formal training to Yolngu people was not the best way to go. There aren't many people who would attend and benefit from this, and these people are busy anyway. It would be better to teach by doing: to spend the time with Yolngu people showing them how narrative techniques and practice can help people deal with hard times. If it is seen to work, then they may want to learn more.

So they wove together the two parts to the project – training for health and other professionals and using the narrative approach with the community - with the two strands coming together at the Community Gatherings.

The team told me that they felt that the project worked because:

- they asked about and followed the right protocols in consulting
- they worked in partnership with Indigenous people
- the focus was on working in ways that suited the community, not the team
- the community members had a choice of whether they participated

- people were listened to in a powerful way – a respectful listening
- there were Yolngu people in each community who really wanted the project
- these people introduced them to the people who wanted to tell their stories.

But the team believes that the thing which made the biggest difference to the project was the story that they brought with them from the Port Augusta Aboriginal Community. This story was read in meetings in each community, as a way of explaining what the team could do. The team felt that this story was really what made people want to be involved.

The story from Port Augusta was a real gift to the people of Yirrkala and Gunyangara, it became a touchstone for the project.

People in the communities wanted to speak of their own responses to grief and their own ways of dealing with loss and they wanted to respond to the people of Port Augusta. So, although this wasn't part of the plan for the project, from the very beginning the team worked to link these communities – *the team became messengers back and forth, carrying messages of very important and spiritual cultural knowledge.*

What I also heard from the team is that they gained a lot personally by being part of this project. They told me that the time they spent in East Arnhem was very special and that this project was a very rewarding one to be involved in.

The two Indigenous women on the team said that it was really special to be able to make such a strong connection with the Yolngu people on the two communities. They felt welcomed and accepted by the Yolngu people even though their communities are far apart – not just physically but in many cultural ways. But in other ways they are very close:

Wow, we have a real link. We are so far apart, the whole of Australia, but we are connected through our beliefs and values, and our experience of grief and loss.

We are different, I come from an urban area, but we are facing the same issues and telling the same stories.

Both women also felt that they took something back to their own communities as a result of the project. Carolyn from the Port Augusta Aboriginal Community says that she stills gets comments from people in the street about the stories and messages. She has also recently started a course in narrative therapy. Barbara has been inspired to work more with the young people in her own community, to make sure that these things don't happen there.

...what was achieved

When David Denborough from the Dulwich Centre spoke to me, he listed the things that he thought were significant about the project. When I compared his list with what other people had to say, it covered everything they thought as well so this is his list. David said that the project:

- ✓ built on the skills and knowledge of the community and on the things that the community were already doing for themselves
- ✓ didn't just focus on the professionals/workers who are often transient: it engaged primarily with the people in the communities
- ✓ is continuing to have an effect – it has left a resource which is still being used by the community in many different ways
- ✓ engaged with all the different groups in the community – women, men, young people, all were part of the project
- ✓ created a strong link between the East Arnhem and Port Augusta communities
- ✓ provided an audience for the special skills and knowledge of these people
- ✓ has had effects that are broader than these communities, particularly on the outside people who hear the stories, such as those attending the Mackay Conference
- ✓ allowed for a response to grief, loss and trauma that fit with the local ways and with cultural practices
- ✓ the joining of the two streams – the training and the stories – at the Community Gathering created links between the community members and the workers
- ✓ was done through a partnership between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, both within the team, and in working with the communities
- ✓ responded to families affected by, or at risk of being affected by suicides
- ✓ responded to young people (particularly young men) who are potentially at risk of committing suicide.

The team seemed to feel that their biggest achievement was the growth they saw in the people they worked with – a growth in their personal feelings of self-worth and self-esteem - but also a growth in the community as a whole. They sensed new hope and confidence emerging in their ability to make a change and a real pride that other people were hearing, valuing and learning from their stories.

You see a sense of life come back into people when you work with them this way. Hope and energy come back, even if the problems are still hard and difficult.

The one thing that the team felt they couldn't talk about with any certainty as an achievement was suicide prevention. The team members said that they were very aware that they were there to try to work with the communities to prevent suicides. They made sure that they kept this in mind all the way through and that it was a main focus. They worked on this through:

- the material in the training
- the topics discussed in the consultation and in the stories-telling
- spending as much time as they could with the young men (as the main target group)
- supporting the people (teachers, night patrol and so on) who are working with the young people every day.

But they have no real way of knowing what impact this had. Yes, there has been a dramatic drop in the number of suicides. But how do you measure what hasn't happened and why it hasn't happened? In the end they concluded that they have made a contribution to suicide prevention by:

- ✓ reminding people of the skills they already have
- ✓ honouring their struggles and their initiatives
- ✓ helping them identify how they can deal best with a crisis
- ✓ working with people to find how they can deal best with grief, loss and trauma.

...what was not achieved

There were a number of things that team members would have liked to have done or to have done better. With more money the teams would have liked to:

- × improve the resources
 - make the book more user-friendly
 - produce material in Yolngu Matha
 - produce a DVD/Video
- × provide more extensive training for both Yolngu and non-Yolngu people

With more time they could have:

- × involved the Yolngu people from the homelands and out-stations
- × spent more time with target groups, particularly the young women
- × done more with the young men – maybe go out bush with them
- × be able to organise the Community Gatherings more effectively
- × create stronger links with and give more support to agencies and workers.

These things would have added to the project, but team members couldn't think of ways they would change the project - *I'd like to do **more**, not do it differently.*

What did people think should happen next?

Below are the ideas that I was given by Yolngu people, as well as the suggestions they made at the Gatherings. I have included separately the suggestions made by non-Yolngu.

What suggestions have been made by the communities?

These suggestions follow on from the project, and most need funds to make them happen:

- ✓ Ensuring that the stories from the Project are translated into Yolngu Matha
Then all Yolngu Matha speaking people could listen to the stories.
- ✓ Making of a video/DVD of the stories in Yolngu Matha with English sub-titles
This would also be a good tool to use in school or to play to non-Yolngu people.
- ✓ Produce more stories
Add more stories - of the young men and women who are at risk, of the elders before they pass, and of other communities in the region (homelands as well).
- ✓ Yolngu people learning the special ways to listen to and record the stories
Now that people have seen how this works, they are keen to learn some of these skills so that they can work alongside, or with support from, the trained people.
- ✓ Make this way of working part of other things that are happening on the community
Help the young people, make it part of their education. Make it part of the drug and alcohol program - help drinkers refresh their cultural knowledge after they dry out.
- ✓ Share the stories of the skills and knowledge of the Yolngu people more widely
Continue passing messages between these communities and other Indigenous communities in Australia and overseas.
- ✓ Hold Community Gatherings at the 2006 Garma Festival
A wider Community Gathering featuring re-tellings of skills and knowledge could be held at the Festival, as this is a time when people already gather.
- ✓ Arrange visits between Port Augusta and East Arnhem
Carefully structured meetings would enable a rich sharing of local knowledge.
- ✓ Community Remembrance Days
Hold these at the same time and on the same day in different communities so that a sense of solidarity in grief and remembrance could be maintained and built upon.

There were other suggestions that were more about action the community could take, with support from local services:

- ✓ Responding to issues surrounding alcohol use/abuse, particularly among men was important for Yirrkala community. This included things they could do themselves, things they could do with support and things that will need to come through government (for example through the Liquor Commission Inquiry).
- ✓ Gnyangara Community want to form a Women's Group to meet regularly and offer mutual support to each other, as well as acting as a vehicle for keeping alive the stories from the Project.
- ✓ Continuing the already existing groups in both communities, but particularly the Gnyangara Men's Group with its focus on providing bush camping opportunities for young Yolngu men.

Other suggestions

Many of the suggestions that were made by other people were pretty much the same as those made by the Yolngu people. They fell into three main groups:

- ✓ to succeed it needs to have some continuity, perhaps by
 - having Yolngu champions who keep it alive
 - having Yolngu people trained to continue the process with good support
 - scholarships for Yolngu to have training in narrative approaches
- ✓ put more of a focus on prevention
 - put it into schools – ideal grounding for younger people
 - train teenagers – infiltrate it into their way of thinking
- ✓ make sure it is one strategy amongst a suite of services
 - making it part of other programs – men's groups, youth groups
 - use it as part of the new rehabilitation centre program, with Yolngu running it

The overall message was that any initial success will only continue if the work becomes part of other things that are happening, and that it is given time to develop:

*Like a battery - it has got to be re-charged
Time, time and more time!
It is just one string to the bow.*

Are these things possible?

I also spoke with some other people (like the Department that funded the project and other NT government people) who could tell me how this project fits in with other things that are happening in the NT and in the East Arnhem region.

I wasn't asking them for money, just to get an idea of whether this type of project would be something that would fit into their programs, and their way of doing business. This is my summary of what they said:

- This is a good model for community development as it
 - allows people to identify their own responses
 - includes important cultural knowledge in those responses
 - similar things have worked elsewhere.
- It could fit with both national and Northern Territory policy as a way of
 - building the ability and strength of individuals
 - helping communities to decide to take action
 - helping them decide what action to take
- There were some things they would be cautious about
 - can't just roll this out everywhere
 - the communities would have to want it and support it
 - it would need careful management and proper training to make sure it doesn't contribute to harm in any way
- to succeed properly it would need to be
 - one part of a bigger plan tackling other issues
 - seen to be a stepping stone to something else
 - more than a one-off exercise.

The government people said that there are programs in both the Commonwealth and Northern Territory departments that might be able provide funding for some of the initiatives mentioned above, but this approach is *not necessarily a neat fit* with the guidelines for these programs. But these may be an option if the communities wish to continue the project in some way, or other communities would like to do something similar.

What was good about this project?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ The project was done well; the people who did it were professional and respectful of people and of culture ✓ The process was good especially the way: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ the team consulted and developed the project ○ the stories were collected and told ○ it built on things that were already happening ○ they included all sorts of different people within the communities ✓ The link with the Port Augusta community was very special ✓ The stories and the gatherings were very powerful and healing, and they had an impact on how people in the community viewed themselves and their ability and strength to make change ✓ The stories are owned by the community and they are using them: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ within the community ○ to explain their culture to others especially non-Indigenous people ○ to create links with other Indigenous communities, within Australia and overseas ✓ The project made a difference in the community and some things changed as a result of it ✓ The project is still going and there are lots of ways that people can see the stories being used again and again ✓ People from outside are still hearing the stories and responding
What could be better next time?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ More time, so that more people can participate, especially men ✗ More stories from the young ones and from the elders ✗ A plan for what can happen next and how it fits with other services ✗ Perhaps some way of controlling where the stories go?
What about the training?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Professional, well-run, and well-presented ✓ Practical and useful for many ✓ An opportunity to share, especially when attending the gathering ✓ Great to have two strands for two groups and then bring them together at the Community Gathering ✗ Should have a post-celebration reflection on what happened ✗ Some had experience and some didn't - so a little too simple for some and a little too advanced for others ✗ Some concern about lack of Yolngu participants and queries whether it would be appropriate for them anyway
What should happen next?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Yolngu people telling Yolngu stories on CD and DVD in Yolngu Matha ✓ Produce more stories, from a wider group at regular intervals ✓ Yolngu people trained to listen to and record the stories ✓ Share the stories more widely ✓ Have Community Gatherings to share the stories at the Garma Festival ✓ Keep up the contact with Port Augusta by visiting ✓ Hold Community Remembrance Days in all three communities ✓ Put more focus on prevention - do this with kids before they are at risk ✓ Make it one part of other things that are happening

THE FINDINGS – ANSWERING THE QUESTIONS

Did this project work?

To decide if the team did what they set out to do I needed to look at what the team were asked to do by the government, and what they wanted to do themselves. So I have turned the outcomes they set (see the introduction) into questions and have tried to answer them.

Did the project reduce suicidal thinking/behaviour/injury, self harm and death by suicide?

Many people have told me that there haven't been any suicides for nearly six months and that there have been very few suicide attempts. There may be lots of reasons for this, not just this project, but it is clear that something has been working.

Young men are the group most likely to think about killing themselves (as shown in the report *Aboriginal Suicides in North East Arnhem Land 2003- 2004*). They are also a group that it is really hard to get involved in this sort of project (I certainly found it very difficult to get feedback from young people for the evaluation).

It would be easy to say that more could or should have been done with the young people. But I am not sure that it would have been possible to do more. You need time to build trust and for the young people to see that what you are doing is worthwhile. I think that what the project has done has been to lay a foundation, which can be built on. The young men and women have seen the stories, seen the reaction to them and are now asking for more.

What I can say for sure is that:

- The team worked really hard to reach the people who were likely to be thinking about killing themselves, and to work with them in a positive way.
- They did this by helping people to know their own strengths and abilities and how they can deal with grief, loss, trauma and suicidal thoughts.
- Lots of people told me that this made a difference to the young men, and was one of the reasons the deaths have stopped.

Did the project enhance resilience, respect, resourcefulness, interconnectedness and mental health of individuals, families and communities and reduce prevalence of risk conditions?

Yolngu people who were part of the project talked about feeling more able to deal with hard times. What helped was:

- The project helped people rediscover their own skills and special knowledge and to feel stronger personally as a result.

- Other people got to see and hear about these skills and knowledge. They knew that that other people saw what they were doing and why and valued it.
- The people who heard the stories could then link it back to their own skills, and the community's own cultural way of dealing with things, so that the whole community felt strengthened.
- Sharing the stories with the Port Augusta community was powerful and spiritual. They felt that they weren't facing his alone. It gave the East Arnhem people strength and hope.
- Sharing the stories with people in other places has been an amazing boost to people in the communities. They are proud that others are hearing and responding to their stories, and that other people are learning from them, from the ways they have dealt with their hard times and their pain.

Things are still happening as a result of the project, but over time they could easily be lost again in the day to day struggle and many problems people face. Someone needs to keep these activities going.

Did the project increase support available to individuals, families and communities who have been affected by suicidal behaviours?

The project did this in three ways:

- through the training provided to the health and other workers
- through ensuring that they worked with important groups in the community, such as the ladies from the community patrol, teachers and Council members, so that they felt more able to deal with these situations
- by working directly with a number of people and families in this situation.

Did the project extend and enhance community and scientific understanding of suicide and its prevention?

This question is less easy to answer. I suspect that if the team had stuck with the original plan (training delivery) then this would have been easier – I could have looked at the training material, feedback sheets and interviewed training participants to get an answer.

As it is, the project was less about teaching people how to stop suicides, and more about working with people to help them find their own ways of dealing with this, and to reinforce their belief in their own abilities. Even the training didn't give a set way of working, or explain the scientific side of preventing suicide.

What the project did was to allow people to:

- talk about these issues one-on-one, in groups or in formal training
- focus on how they have dealt with it in the past and might deal with it in the future
- hear and respond to the experiences of others in dealing with these issues.

Did the project provide culturally appropriate, culturally secure, sustainable and enduring strategies for suicide prevention to those Aboriginal people working in the field in the communities of Yirrkala and Gunyangara?

I am not Yolngu so I can't say for sure that the project was culturally appropriate or culturally secure. I can say that I was told by both Yolngu and non-Yolngu that this was a really good way of working that fits in with traditional Yolngu ways. I was also told that the team were respectful and careful to ask whether things were OK before they did them.

It was a short-term project run by a team from Darwin and from South Australia so there were limits to what they could do to make sure that things would continue after they left. I think that they did everything they possibly could to try and make sure that the community would gain something in the longer term from the project. The team:

- worked in partnership with local Indigenous people
- left a resource that could be and is being used by the communities
- tried to link local health and other workers into what was happening
- have helped Yolngu people to take the stories to other places and peoples
- supported the community to try and get money for the things they want to do next.

That said, it was a short-term project and there is a limit to how sustainable the outcomes of the project can be, unless this work can become part of something that is on-going.

Summary – what the project achieved:

- reminded people of their strength to help their communities and of their dreams for their community
- increased the self-esteem and confidence of both individuals and groups, and reinforced their ability to deal with suicide and suicidal thinking
- created an opportunity for these communities to forge links with another Indigenous community, a link which strengthens and comforts both

- provided an audience for the stories and passed on the responses - allowing people to see that their knowledge and experience is important and of value to others
- created an opportunity for the community to come together to celebrate their strengths and their abilities
- ensured that local workers were linked into and supporting this process
- left a resource that is still being used.

There have also been some activities which have happened as a result of the project – like the Larrpan men, attending conferences, using the stories as a resource. I don't see these as things the project achieved. They are things that have happened because the project worked well. Mostly, these things have happened because the people who took part in the project re-discovered their strengths and their dreams and had the energy and enthusiasm to carry them through.

What was done well? What could have been done better?

To answer these questions, we need to look at each stage of the project, to see what was done well and what could have been done better.

Project development and processes

The main negative about the idea for the project was that it didn't start in the community. Although they were aware of the problems and were asking for help, the initial plan – providing training for health and other workers in the region – did not come from community members.

However, the team dealt with this by making sure that they asked the community what they wanted. The way they did this was respectful and thorough and Yolngu people were happy with it. It is particularly good to see that as a result there were changes to the project plan and that these changes were accepted by everybody.

The clear message I got from community members was that the way this work was done was really important and was a key reason why the project worked. They said that throughout the project the team was professional, confidential, and respectful of their ways.

The other problem that people commented on (especially the government agencies) was that this was a short-term project. This would have been fine if the project had done what was originally planned - training only. The way the project ended up working, it would have been good to have some built-in follow up.

The team tried to make sure that there were links to trained workers to help make sure that there was someone who could help the community to continue the work in whatever way they wanted. There were a few people from a couple of agencies (government and non-government) who knew what was happening and were helping to keep things going. But many of the people who had attended the training weren't aware of what was going on. Some follow-up with this group would have helped to keep them linked in to the project.

Also, it would have been better if the evaluation started while the project was still going, so the evaluator could see it in action. It would have been good to have it done by a local, to make the consultation process easier, and to have more Indigenous involvement in the evaluation. This was certainly part of the original plan. Unfortunately, it was not able to happen that way, due to events outside the control of Relationships Australia Northern Territory.

Narrative approach to community work

People were very positive about the narrative approach, both the way they got to tell their stories and what happened with them. They knew that the narrative approach took special skills – the ability to listen and to retell in ways that really hear the pain, the problems and the suffering but that also bring out the positive things to help people act for the future.

What I heard over and over again was the need for this approach to continue. While everyone likes and uses the stories they felt that more could be done. This doesn't mean that people wanted the team to stay in the community for ever and a day endlessly collecting stories. But a longer lead time and a built-in follow up over time would have helped people to keep this going and to spread it further.

In particular with more time the team would probably have got more input from those most at risk of killing themselves – the men and the young people – as they saw what was happening. The more that was done with this group, the more likely they were to do what they set out to do.

Some people asked - did the project only get to the Yolngu people who are already active and already trying to deal with the problems in the community?

This group were a major part of the project, but this is not a bad thing. By being so involved, these people learned new skills and strengthened old skills to help them in their work. They also provided leadership. Having these important people on board meant that other community members were more willing to take part and allowed the team access to people they would not otherwise have met.

Training

The training was relevant, interesting, well-delivered and useful. The people who went to the training were pretty happy with both the content and the delivery. Most of those interviewed were using the skills they learned to some extent – either seeing it as a refresher for what they already do or as a pointer to new ways of thinking about their work. Those who attended the gatherings found them a positive experience.

The training stream of the project was needed. It provided support to local workers who are dealing with suicide by increasing or deepening their skills and knowledge. It was also a way to ensure that there was some awareness and on-going support for the project once the formal part stopped.

The weaknesses of the training stream of the project were:

- not many people came to some courses (because they were busy not uninterested)
- a gap in skill and knowledge level between trainees (unavoidable but unfortunate)
- some people didn't fully understand what the training was for
- the non-Yolngu workers move on regularly (so you lose people with the learning)
- not many people know of or are still involved in what has happened since.

The other thing that worried some people was that Yolngu people didn't come to the training. Others felt it wasn't suitable for Yolngu anyway.

This may have been because people in the training group didn't fully understand what else was happening and who the training was for. The target group for the training was not Yolngu, although they were more than welcome to attend. Yolngu people were mostly learning about narrative therapy through being part of the process and watching what was done. So the lack of Yolngu participants was not really a weakness of the project.

Providing other, more suitable, training for traditional Indigenous people is a possible next step. Carolyn Koolmatrie, who is doing a course at the Dulwich Centre, thinks that such courses could be adapted to make them suitable. Some things to consider are:

- being aware of the proper cultural ways of handling death and grieving
- how to deal with the distance and time involved in long courses (perhaps training should come to the people not the people to the training?)
- making sure the language is not too academic.

Providing an audience

One of the most interesting things about this project was the exchange of stories between the two East Arnhem communities and the Port Augusta Aboriginal Community. It is hard to say exactly what each group gets from this connection, but there is no doubt that it has deep significance for both groups.

One strength of this project has been the ability to be flexible and to respond to what is happening. Providing an 'outsider witness' is a part of the narrative approach. But the way the link happened wasn't planned. The team saw the value in the exchange of messages and put a lot of effort into supporting this communication at both ends.

Similarly, the responses received by Indigenous people from other countries have been really important to the success of the project. The messages are still coming and it is a source of pride for the whole community that people are hearing their stories.

Having an audience for the stories was a big part of the success of the project and has helped to keep it alive.

Community Gatherings

The Community Gatherings were very important. In practical terms they:

- brought the two streams of the project together
- were a public celebration of what had occurred
- allowed people to identify what should happen next.

They were also important symbolically and emotionally. For many people the ceremony was powerful and healing and provided an important close to the work that had been done.

Some people felt that there were bits of the Community Gatherings that could have been done better – finding a time when more people could come, attracting more Yolngu men and being a little better organised⁵.

The Community Gatherings were an integral and important part of the project, and were managed as well as was possible by the team and the community members.

Perhaps they could have attracted more people, but I suspect that this is something that will only build over time.

⁵ These comments were mostly about the Gunyangara Community Gathering.

Leaving a resource

One of the best things to come out of the project is the book of stories - *These Stories are like a healing, Like a medicine...*

This book is being used in many different ways - by people from both communities, by workers in the agencies in Nhulunbuy, by the team members, and by people in Port Augusta. The stories are also being played on the local radio.

It would have been really good if the stories had been put into Yolngu Matha - in the book on CD and on DVD - with an English language CD and subtitles on the DVD. This would make the stories more available to more local people, and given them a stronger sense of ownership of the resource. The team were keen to do this, but did not have enough money to develop these extra resources.

RECOMMENDATIONS – THE WAY TO GO

There were three things that Relationships Australia Northern Territory wanted to find out so that they would know which way to go after the project was over - what they could do better next time, what else needed to happen and whether a project like this would work with other groups.

What can we learn from this project?

Get an invitation

While this project worked very well, a lot of time and energy needed to be spent at the beginning, to make sure that the project provided what the community wanted. If a community is already asking for this type of help then it will be much easier to work with them on exactly what should happen. This doesn't mean that a project like this won't work if it is suggested by outside people, just that it will take more time and care at the start.

Use local knowledge

It was really important that the team had support and assistance from strong people in the community. If there are local influential people to guide and assist the project it will make it much easier and more useful for everyone. It would be even better if they have had some training or have seen a bit about the narrative approach before the project starts.

It is good to try to get to know the people who work in or with the community, but are not members of that community – service providers, government agencies, charities and so on. Getting them involved means that there is support there for whatever comes next. Providing training and involving them in the Gatherings are only two ways of doing this, there are likely to be many more.

Work in partnership

As well as working with local people and ensuring that they were partners in the process, the team on this project included two Indigenous women. One team member (Carolyn Koolmatrie) was from the Port Augusta Aboriginal Community, and this was important because it increased the sense of connection between the East Arnhem communities and the Port Augusta community.

It is good to have a team that is both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. If a similar project is planned and there is going to be an audience community (as Port Augusta was for this project) it would be even better to include a team member who is connected to that community.

The same is true of getting to know and include the workers. It is great having the two streams happening and for them to come together at the Community Gatherings. Even better would be finding more ways for the two groups to work in partnership on developing plans for the future.

Spend time now and plan to come back later

It takes more time to reach some groups in a community– like many of the men and young people in this project. Next time around, it would be good to have more time on the ground in the beginning, and to plan for a couple of follow up sessions in the future. This would allow more people to be part of the project. It also means that later on there is a chance to reflect on what has happened and to keep the work going.

Make sure people are heard

There are four ways in which people can be heard through a project like this.

You don't just listen, you also respond to what you hear - in this project the team asked how and to whom they should listen, they listened to what they were told, and then they made sure that what was done matched what they were asked to do. The way the project worked showed that they heard what was said.

People need to be heard properly and respectfully when they are telling their stories. The narrative approach is not just asking people to tell you their story, it needs to be learned and used properly. So a project like this needs to use the right people with the right skills. One big strength of this project was the quality and experience of the team members.

The stories need to be heard by other people in the community, in a way which celebrates the skills, knowledge, values, culture and abilities that belong to those people and to that community. The Community Gathering is vital.

Having someone from outside hear and respond to their stories is also vital and is a usual part of the process. What was different with this one was the exchange of messages. This seems like it might be a good way to go in the future too.

What might come next?

The community have already put together a list of things that they would like to do now. Some things are happening already, some may happen soon, others need funding or outside support to make them happen. All of these suggestions are worthwhile and worth supporting, and most would only require a limited amount of work and funds.

There are three main and connected things that would make a big difference and that need time and money to get going:

- Providing training for Yolngu people to learn the skills to be part of a narrative approach (in ways that are culturally appropriate).
- Trained people using these skills within existing services in the community so that they become part of their way of working.
- Making this approach part of how services work with the younger people, before they are at risk, so that it isn't a response to crisis but a way of stopping the crisis happening.

These ideas would need a lot of work, but could make really big changes in the future.

How could this help other groups or communities?

This way of working could help many other Indigenous communities. It is not the only way of dealing with suicides (or other problems). But it is an approach that:

- works with the community as a whole
- focuses on the things they want to deal with
- in a way that suits their culture and values.

Some of the words people used to describe the narrative approach to community work were - *grass-roots, bottom-up, real community development*.

The Dulwich Centre is already doing this work with different groups nationally and internationally, and has been doing so for a long time. They have a lot of knowledge about how to use the narrative approach in community work.

From my point of view, there is one vital thing that needs to be in place for this approach to work really well. It doesn't matter what the problem is that the community is dealing with - suicide or alcohol abuse, domestic violence or gangs. For this approach to work well, somebody must be doing or about to do something else to address the problem.

To me, this type of project will work best if it is supporting people as they take action, or as programs are coming in to help – the two levels come together to make both work better. It may be fine when done in isolation, but I think it will only have long-lasting benefits if it is done as part of a bigger plan.

Did this project work? (results)	<p>Yes, this project worked because it:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ reminded people of their strength and of their dreams ✓ increased the self-esteem and confidence of individuals and groups, and reinforced their ability to deal with suicide and suicidal thinking ✓ created an opportunity for these communities to forge links with another Indigenous community, a link which strengthens and comforts both ✓ provided an audience for the stories and passed on the responses - ✓ people see that their knowledge and experience is of value to others ✓ the community came together to celebrate their strengths and abilities ✓ ensured that local workers were linked into and supporting this process ✓ left a resource that is still being used
What was done well? (process)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Good, thorough consultation which resulted in changes ✓ Professional and respectful approach ✓ Project tried to link in outside workers to help the project continue ✓ The narrative approach was very successful and well accepted ✓ Connected very strongly with key leaders in each community ✓ Delivered relevant interesting and useful training ✓ Provided a learning opportunity for Yolngu people through ensuring local people were involved in the narrative approach ✓ The team were flexible and able to respond to what was needed and have maintained a connection with the communities ✓ Made sure that they left a resource for the community to use
What could be done better? (process)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Have the initial idea coming from the community. ✗ Build in a planned return after the initial project ended (e.g. a year later) ✗ A more structured approach to linking with outside workers ✗ A local evaluator, starting when the project is still going ✗ Run the project over a longer period so more people are involved ✗ Tie the training group in more closely with the project ✗ Provide a follow-up session for the training group after the Gatherings ✗ Plan to provide the resource in language and in more formats.
What can we learn from this project?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Get an invitation ✓ Use local knowledge ✓ Work in partnership ✓ Spend time now and plan to come back later ✓ Make sure people are heard
What might come next?	<p>There are many smaller options for action, but for real continuity you would:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ provide appropriate training in the narrative approach for Yolngu people ✓ ensure trained Yolngu are using these skills within existing services ✓ make this approach part of the way services work with young people
How could this help others?	<p>This is a good way to help communities who are going through hard times. To be really useful, it needs to be part of something bigger, a way of strengthening people so that they can help work for a solution.</p>

ATTACHMENTS

- A. CONSULTATION LIST**
- B. EVALUATION PROPOSAL: 'BACK FROM THE EDGE' PROJECT**
- C. EXPRESSION OF INTEREST IN CONDUCTING EVALUATION**
- D. BACKGROUND MATERIAL**
- E. *RECLAIMING OUR STORIES, RECLAIMING OUR LIVES* (Excerpt)**

CONSULTATION LIST

	Organisation/Group	Names
Project Team	Relationships Australia Northern Territory	Barry Sullivan
	Dulwich Centre Adelaide	David Denborough Sue Mitchell Shona Russell Barbara Wingard
	Port Augusta Community	Carolyn Koolmatrie
Key Agencies	Miwatj Health Service	Rebecca Mackowski Jo Manderson Marion Craig Rosalie Howard
	East Arnhem Mental Health	Georgie Wood
	Nhulunbuy Police	Senior Sergeant Tony Fuller Senior Constable Rosanna Breed
	ICC Nhulunbuy	Andrea Collins
	FACS Nhulunbuy	Sharon Holt Nick Hedstrom Anna Sebbens
	Anglicare Connect Nhulunbuy	Muriel Brown Michelle Parker Emily Connell
	Alcohol and Other Drugs	Steve Johns
	Alcan Community Affairs	Sandy Daff Craig Bonney
	Community Harmony	John Cook
	Special Care Centre	Maggie Burke
Yirrkala Community	Community Patrol	Djapirri Mununggurritj
	Yirrkala Dhanbul Council	Bakamumu Marika (Deputy Chair) Djuwalpi Marika (Town Clerk)
	Sport and Rec. officer	Beth Davies
	Yirrkala School	Raymattja Marika,
	Yirrkala Clinic	Sharon Mununggurr
	Other community members	Burrkitj (nickname Boogie) Banambi Wunungmurra (Chair, Community Harmony Group) Naminapu White (Maymuru) Djerrknu (Eunice) Marika Donald Marawili
Gunyangara Community	Community Patrol	Gulumbu Mununggurr Margaret Yunupingu Margaret Yunupingu (Aunty Margie)
	Sport and Rec. officer	Scott Beverstock
	Marn Garr Council	Suzanah Kuzio
Policy	Alcohol and Other Drugs	Jo Townsend
	Mental Health Program	Sarah O'Regan
	Racing Gaming and Licensing	Alyson Brown

EVALUATION PROPOSAL: 'BACK FROM THE EDGE' PROJECT (Thursday February 2 2006)

(A) Background Information

Relationships Australia NT (RANT) is a non-profit community organisation based in Darwin and Alice Springs which works with individuals, groups and communities to promote and enhance healthy relationships. In conjunction with the Dulwich Centre Adelaide (another non-profit community organisation), RANT has been working since August 2005 with the Yirrkala and Gunyangara communities on a specific project.

This project is a Suicide Prevention project ('Back from the Edge') funded by the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing, and has involved the use of a Narrative Approach to working with Communities. Significant stories have emerged in both Yirrkala and Gunyangara of the skills and knowledges possessed by Community members in dealing with trauma and loss. Strong links have also been established between both Communities and the Port Augusta Aboriginal Community in South Australia. The Project has also been able to offer training to 25 local workers in using a Narrative Approach to respond to trauma and loss. The Project is now moving towards its climax - a final training workshop for local Community Service workers in Nhulunbuy (WED FEB 1) and then Community Meetings in both Yirrkala (THURS FEB 2) and Gunyangara (FRI FEB 3).

One of the requirements of the funding body is that an Evaluation of the Project be completed. **This Evaluation needs to be conducted by a person who is an independent as possible from both RANT and the Dulwich Centre, and who has also had little or no direct involvement with the activities and events of the Project.**

(B) Current Situation

Because of some unforeseen hurdles in our attempts to set up the Evaluation process, this request is coming to you at quite short notice. **Basically, we are asking if it would be possible for you or one of your colleagues to be the person chiefly responsible for conducting the Evaluation** (see below for some more details of the Evaluation). This person would not need to work alone on the Evaluation, as we have already negotiated with the Indigenous Coordination Centre (ICC) Nhulunbuy for Andrea Collins (Indigenous ICC staff member) to act as a support person for the Evaluation. Andrea is familiar with the Project and has contacts with key people in both the Yirrkala and Gunyangara communities.

(C) Some Further Details about the Evaluation

1. The Evaluation needs to be completed by April 1 2006 and will be submitted to the funding body for the 'Back from the Edge' Project, the Commonwealth Dept of Health & Ageing.
2. All relevant documentation will be made available to the person conducting the Evaluation e.g. the Schedule for the Project negotiated between RANT and the Dept of Health & Ageing, the Interim Report about the Project prepared by RANT in October 2005, and the booklet prepared by the Dulwich Centre which details the consultations with Community members conducted in October and November 2005.
3. Barry Sullivan (RANT staff member) will also be preparing a Final report on the Project, again to be submitted on April 1. Progress copies of the report will be available to the person conducting the Evaluation.

More information may be obtained from Barry Sullivan (RANT staff member) on email: barry.relaustnt@octa4.net.au or phone 0428 829 485 (Fri Feb 3 only) or 89 234999 (Mon Feb 6 onwards)

Thank you for your time in considering this Proposal

EXPRESSION OF INTEREST

EVALUATION CONTEXT	
Project	'Back from the Edge' Project
Client	Relationships Australia Northern Territory
Contact Point	Mr. Barry Sullivan
Project Outline	<p>Relationships Australia NT (RANT) received funding from the Department of Health and Ageing (DoHA) to work with the East Arnhemland communities of Yirrkala and Gunyangara to enhance suicide prevention measures, including providing training to health professionals.</p> <p>The project was a response to the increasingly high levels of suicide, suicide attempts and suicide ideation in the two communities. The project commenced in September 2005 and is now completed.</p> <p>The project, as specified in the agreement between RANT and The Dulwich Centre primarily aimed to:</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>provide culturally appropriate, culturally secure, sustainable and enduring strategies for suicide prevention to those Aboriginal people working the field in the communities of Yirrkala and Gunyangara.</i></p> <p>The funding agreement states that the project was funded to deliver <i>training to local health and related workers and community members to:</i></p> <p>(i) <i>Equip trainees to effectively manage and support male community members who are experiencing relationship issues that may lead to self-harm.</i></p> <p>(ii) <i>As a result of (i), contribute to broader suicide prevention efforts in the region.</i></p>
Audience	The main audience for this evaluation is RANT and The Dulwich Centre, as the organisations that had primary carriage of the project. The evaluation and any recommendations will also be provided to the funding body as the completion of an independent evaluation was one of the requirements of the Department.

PROPOSED EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

Purpose	<p>RANT has indicated that they would like the evaluation to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · assess the quality and effectiveness of the project · identify potential areas of improvement · make recommendations for future activity <p>RANT is intending to use this evaluation to guide any future activity in this area.</p>
Scope	<p>Given the nature of the project, the evaluation would need to be qualitative and focus on the project's processes, with a particular emphasis on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · appropriateness (match between project goals and community needs) · effectiveness (how well the project achieved these goals) <p>The findings will then be used to develop recommendations for future programs and/or replication of all or part of this project.</p> <p>It is not seen as appropriate for the evaluation to consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · long-term outcomes (i.e. whether the project has had an impact on suicide prevention) · cost-effectiveness or efficiency (due to insufficient data) · any analysis of the validity of narrative therapy, only the effectiveness of the approach as a tool in this project.

Key Questions	<p>It is proposed that the evaluation be framed around several key questions.</p> <p>Appropriateness questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · What did the project set out to do? · What did the community want from the project? <p>Effectiveness questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · What did the project actually achieve? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How did it achieve this? - How well was it done? - What could be done better in the future? · Were there things that the project did not achieve? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - If not, why not?
Process	<p>The process for the evaluation will involve:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · review of resource material · interviews with key personnel · consultation with stakeholders · analysis.
Resources	<p>The consultant will use the following to inform the evaluation. Input from staff of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · RANT · Dulwich Centre · Indigenous Co-ordination Centre (ICC) Nhulunbuy <p>Project material including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · agreements · reports · consultation material · research/background papers
Stakeholders	<p>Input would be sought from the following stakeholders:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · participants of training and / or gatherings · key individuals in each community · other organisations with direct and / or indirect involvement such as <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Miwatj Aboriginal Health Service · Nhulunbuy Police and Night Patrol · East Arnhem Mental Health Team.
Risks	<p>The following risks have been identified for this evaluation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · engaging stakeholders (especially Indigenous people from Yirrkala and Gunyangara) for consultations · meeting the timeframe. <p>To manage these risks, the consultant will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · use the expertise of ICC staff to facilitate consultations · ensure flexibility in consultation timeframe and approach · work closely with RANT to manage any delays.
Standards of conduct	<p>All interviews and material provided to the consultant will be confidential, unless permission is provided by the interviewee to quote them directly. All interviewees will be informed of this confidentiality.</p>
Deliverables	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · An Evaluation Report, agreed with the project manager. · Final document to be provided in hard copy (three) and on CD ROM.

Background material

Aboriginal Suicides in North East Arnhem Land 2003-3004

Senior Sergeant Tony Fuller, Officer in Charge, Nhulunbuy Police Station
10 January 2005

Framework for Addressing Alcohol Issues in the Northern Territory

Office of Alcohol Policy and Coordination, Northern Territory Government

Letter from Raymattja Marika, Djerrknu Marika, Djuwandaynu Munungurr

17 November 2004

Linking stories and initiatives: A narrative approach to working with the skills and knowledge of communities

David Denborough, Carolyn Koolmatrie, Djapirri Munungirritj, Djuwalpi Marika, Wayne Dhurkay & Margaret Yunupingu
Unpublished

Liquor licensing – issues and options pertaining to the Gove Peninsula

Wearne Advisors in collaboration with the School of Australian Indigenous Knowledge Systems (Charles Darwin University)

Prepared for the Northern Territory Treasury – Racing, Gaming and Licensing Division
February 2006

Narrative practice and community assignments

Michael White, Dulwich Centre

The International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work 2003 No.2

Reclaiming our Stories, Reclaiming our Lives

Dulwich Centre Newsletter 1995 No.1

These Stories are like a healing, Like a medicine....

The special skills and knowledge of the Aboriginal communities of Port Augusta, Yirrkala & Gunyangara (Ski Beach)

Contractual Information

Page 1 and the Schedule (December 2005) to the Agreement between DoHA and RANT

Memorandum of Understanding between RANT and the Dulwich Centre

Interim and Final reports from RANT to DoHA

Websites

www.dulwichcentre.com.au Commonly asked questions about narrative therapy

Reclaiming our Stories, Reclaiming our Lives

Dulwich Centre Newsletter 1995 No.1

Extract from Pages 18-20

NARRATIVE THERAPY AND ITS ROLE IN THE PROJECT

The input of the counselling team at Camp Coorong was informed by the "narrative approach", which has been identified by Aboriginal people in a variety of contexts as offering the possibility of culturally sensitive and appropriate counselling practices. This is because it starts from the premise that the job of the counsellor is to help people identify what they want in their own lives, and to reconnect with their own knowledges and strengths.

It is based on the idea that the lives and relationships of people are shaped by the knowledges and stories that communities of people negotiate and engage in to give meaning to their experiences. These have real consequences. They are not merely reflections or representations of our lives - they actively shape, constitute and "embrace" our lives.

If the ways of living and thinking that people come into therapy with aren't working for them, for whatever reason, narrative therapy is interested in providing a context that contributes to the exploration of other ways of living and thinking. It is interested in what people themselves determine to be the preferred ways of living and interacting with themselves and each other. The role of the counsellor is to facilitate this process, not to impose his or her own story.

Our culture encourages people to think of problems as internal and demonstrating certain truths about their character, nature and purposes - their very identity as a human being. This makes it very difficult for people to experience new possibilities for action. If you are the problem, then there's not much you can do about it - except maybe act against yourself. Narrative therapy uses "externalizing conversations" - ways of talking about problems that make it possible for people to experience an identity that is distinct or separate from the problem. This opens new possibilities for action.

This approach is also vitally interested in history. It asks questions that bring forth the history of problematic "truths", like "How do you think you were recruited into this idea about who you are?" Exploring the history of a person's ways of being and thinking creates the opportunity for that person to identify the real effects of these ways of being and thinking on their life. It opens the door to critical reflection, and it is largely through this historical exploration that exceptions to the dominant and problematic stories are identified. Narrative therapy is interested in how people can be assisted to develop the exceptions to the dominant story into an alternative, preferred story and to perform the alternative understandings and meanings that these alternative stories make possible.

If people are engaged in a project of challenging the dominant stories of their lives, and creating alternative, preferred stories, then it is important that communities of people are engaged in this renegotiation of identity. Narrative therapy places a great deal of importance on finding ways in which an audience can be invited to play a part in authenticating and strengthening the preferred stories that are emerging in therapy. This can involve facilitating important reconnections in a person's life - helping them get back in contact with people who have an experience of them actually manifesting these preferred ways of being.

This approach is also vitally interested in the politics of therapy. In Western culture there is a dominant story about what it means to be a person of moral worth. This story emphasises self-possession, self-containment, self-actualisation and so on. It stresses individuality at the expense of community and independence at the expense of connection. These are culturally specific values, which are presented as universal, "human" attributes to be striven for. The attempt to live up to these dominant prescriptions can have profoundly negative consequences for people's lives.

At the outset of therapy, people often present a very negative account of themselves, and a version of the dominant story that suggests that *they* are the problem, or that they are at least complicit with the problem. This is particularly the case with people who have been the recipients of abuse and injustice. Enabling people to rename the dominant story as one about survival in the face of tyranny, injustice and exploitation can have the effect of substantially freeing them from many of the real effects of the abuse and injustice that have been perpetrated on their lives.

The problems experienced by Aboriginal people in their personal lives are overwhelmingly due to the context of oppression and injustice within which they live, and the systematic destruction and denial of their own stories, knowledges and strengths. Narrative therapy recognises the ways in which dominant cultures impose stories on people that rob them of their history and preferred ways of being. It acknowledges the importance of naming injustice and exploitation in people's lives, and the crucial importance of supportive communities in reclaiming preferred ways of being.

At Camp Coorong, several things were identified by Aboriginal people as particularly helpful:

– *Naming injustice*

Aboriginal people were able to identify the "dominant story", which was about personal guilt and inadequacy, and rename it as injustice and oppression. The freedom to use the words "murder" and "racism", and to publicly name their experiences of injustice, was experienced as profoundly freeing.

– *Listening teams*

The practice of using "listening teams" in which members of the counselling team formed an audience to Aboriginal people's stories, and then reflected upon what they heard. A number of Aboriginal people commented that hearing their own stories reflected back in this way enabled them to see themselves differently, and to reclaim a pride in who they were. It also allowed them to recognise the remarkable strengths that they had demonstrated in surviving in the face of so much injustice.

The following explanation of listening teams *appeared in the Camp Coorong programme*:

One way of making sure that people's stories get heard and listened to is by setting up a special listening group that we sometimes call a reflecting team. A person or a family meet with a counsellor and have the opportunity to speak about their lives from their hearts. The special listening group then gives their thoughts about the conversation between the family members and the counsellor. The people in this listening group do not tell people what to do, but speak respectfully about what they have heard. In this way, people get in touch with a lot of pride in themselves and in their families. The listening group can include other counsellors, other Aboriginal people, and even people from the person's own community if they want that.

– *Caring and sharing*

The emphasis placed on "caring and sharing", and the building of community connections was identified as being central to Aboriginal ways. As one participant said about the listening groups, "This reclaims the strengths of Aboriginal culture. Aboriginal culture has always had this. This has reiterated it, rejuvenated it. This is going on every day really around people's kitchen tables - so all you are doing now is going much wider and getting back to our culture."

– *The "journey" metaphor*

The narrative approach makes considerable use of the "journey" metaphor. Moving from dominant stories about one's life to preferred stories is like making a journey from one identity to another. The provision of metaphoric "maps" of the sorts of experiences, feelings and pitfalls that can happen on this journey by other people who have already made it, can play an important part in enabling people to move forward in their lives.

The following explanation of the journey metaphor appeared in the Camp Coorong programme:

Many Aboriginal people have had put on them negative stories about who they are. These stories put Aboriginal people down and can cause them to give themselves a hard time.

When Aboriginal people start to break free of these negative stories, they often go through lots of confusion and sadness, and at times feel quite lost. It helps to know that this confusion, sadness, and the feelings of being lost, can be part of a journey to a strong sense of Aboriginal identity.

When Aboriginal people have a picture of what this journey is about, it helps them to get through it with less suffering, and it helps them to arrive at a strong sense of Aboriginal identity more quickly.

A number of Aboriginal people commented on the usefulness of the journey metaphor. This was one aspect of the camp programme that was not explored in as much depth as was planned, but strong interest was expressed in following it up further.

In summary, this project recognised the importance of Aboriginal people taking the primary role in the telling of their stories, and the importance of an exploration of these stories so that their special knowledges and skills relevant to healing processes might be honoured and re-empowered. As well, the project aimed at providing support for Aboriginal people to take further steps to break free of the destructive stories that have been imposed upon them' by the dominant non-Aboriginal culture, including many of the ideas of health and well-being that are so often imposed by mainstream services.

Narrative therapy offers a way for Aboriginal counsellors to develop practices that are culturally sensitive and appropriate. This model is not fixed or rigid, and will continue to evolve for Aboriginal use in consultation with Aboriginal people.