



Decolonising child protection discourses using narrative practices

by Janneen Wanganeen



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Abstract

The 'child protection' system has been a key site of colonisation in Australia. This paper describes some of the decolonising initiatives of a First Nations practitioner working within the child protection system. This includes resisting dominant discourses such as those embedded in assessment policies and processes that sometimes have long-lasting and intergenerational effects: First Nations workers collaborated to develop an alternative rubric for considering the 'needs' of Indigenous families. The paper also describes the use of practices of welcome and yarning to show respect and elicit strong stories. In addition, the paper introduces the use of 'narrative vision boards', which use images to thicken preferred stories. In these ways, the paper seeks to contribute to the ongoing resistance of Aboriginal people to colonisation and the resurgence of Indigenous knowledge and culture.

Key words: *child protection; Aboriginal; Maslow's hierarchy of needs; narrative vision board; narrative practice*

Wanganeen, J. (2022). Decolonising child protection discourses using narrative practices. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, (2), 9–17. <https://doi.org/10.4320/OIT18153>
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Aboriginal children have been taken from families for more than 200 years, and sadly this continues today. The 'child protection' system dominates how we live and how we must present in a colonised society. The First Nations peoples of Australia have continually resisted colonisation. However, resistance to child protection systems has often led to the removal of a child. Now, the seasons are changing. Resistance to colonial ways is getting louder and more determined. Aboriginal culture is stronger than ever: we are not a dying race; we have survived the worst and we are here with our songs, our ceremonies, our language and our people (Dulwich Centre, 2020; Wingard et al., 2015).

This paper seeks to contribute in a small way to this resistance and rebirth. It shows how I work to counter the colonising practices of the child protection system through resisting dominant discourses, engaging in practices of welcome, and using yarning as a way to connect with preferred identities. The paper also introduces the narrative vision boards that I use to uncover strong stories that have been hidden from view by the problem-saturated accounts that dominate families' experiences of the child protection system.

Decolonising child protection discourses

Most welfare recipient organisations refer to Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs to guide their practice. In this hierarchy (see Figure 1), the lowest levels of the pyramid describe what are seen to be the most basic needs. According to this model, when the lower-level needs have been met, you can then address the higher-level needs. This generally shapes workers' assessments of families' needs and wellbeing according to a discourse, which has little relevance to Indigenous families.

I collaborated with other First Nations community members in an attempt to decolonise this discourse of needs, which had no meaning for our people. Everyone agreed that this hierarchy did not correspond with the needs or preferences of the Indigenous families we work with.

We yarned about each level of Maslow's hierarchy and worked towards creating our own model that would reflect what needs mean to us as First Nations people.

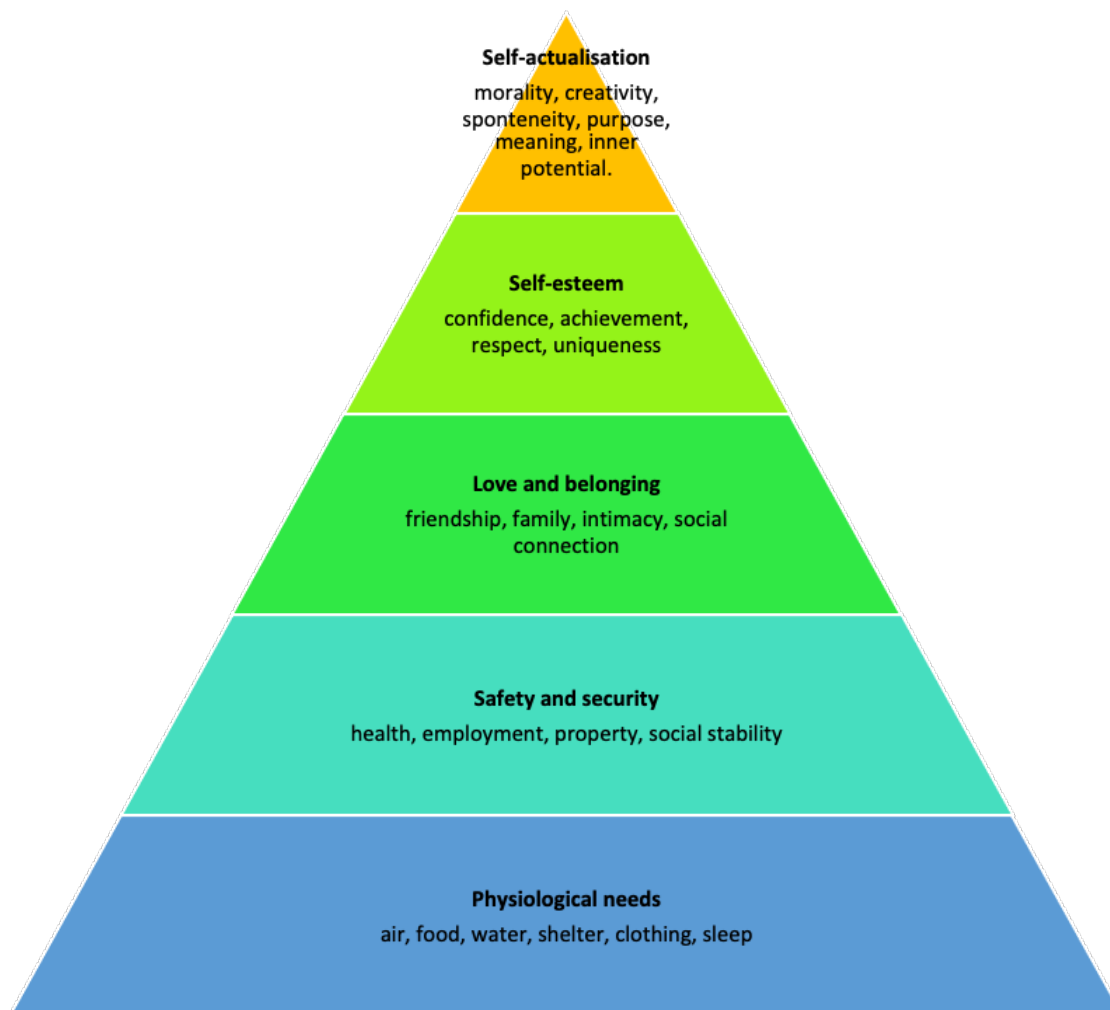


Figure 1. Maslow's hierarchy of needs

We named our model 'First Nations System of Needs'. It was important for us workers to focus on defining our basic needs and to create a framework that fit our experience, values and understanding.

The model we developed has no hierarchy. Each element intertwines with the others and there is no prescription about the order in which these needs should be met (see Figure 2). Each person and/or family is assessed in relation to the needs that they identify as being most important to them at the time.

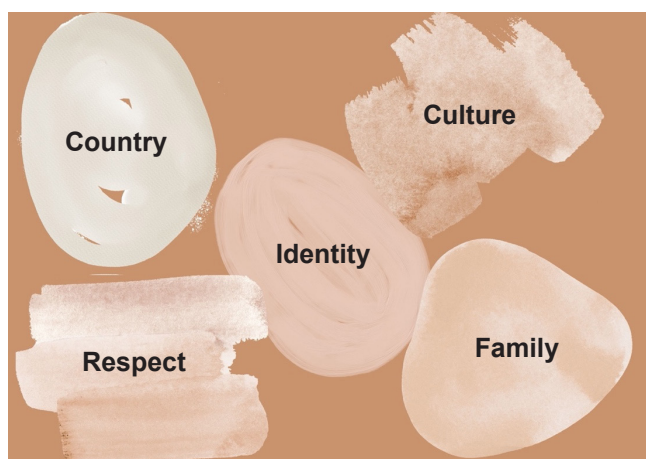


Figure 2. First Nations System of Needs

The needs we defined are described below.

- **Culture:** as First Nations people, we need connection: connection to culture, to family and to community. Culture is a way of life. It is ideals, values and customs. Culture is passed through the generations, and it is the way we do things our way like funerals, weddings and the food we eat.
- **Country:** as First Nations people, Country for us means all living things. Country is family, a profound spiritual connection to land. We go by our own languages. We have our own Songlines and there is a deep relationship between people and the land, which is often described as connection to Country.
- **Family:** as First Nations people, we have strong kinship ties, strong family values and an extended family structure in which you belong in relation to others. We have cultural authority over the care of children, and family members are the ones responsible for deciding who is considered kin to a child.
- **Respect:** as First Nations people, we are shown how to respect our culture, respect the land,

respect our Elders and respect significant times in a family's life such as sorry business.

- **Identity:** as First Nations people, we inherit a sense of family identity. We are taught values. Artefacts are handed down from previous generations. We observe and experience the things that make a person unique and gain a sense of self through relationships within our families.

Through this reframing of needs to include our culture and values, we have sought to decolonise understandings of needs and how they are assessed.

Practices of welcome

Decolonising practices can inform interactions with parents and families coming to services for the first time. There is something special about practices of welcome. Welcoming someone into your home, a shared space, a workplace or anywhere you are comfortable to welcome, creates a spiritual connection or healing bond (Towney, 2004). These are practices we all enact in our daily lives. In my culture as an Aboriginal woman, we are big on welcoming everyone, and ensuring that the space we are welcoming people into invites lots of stories. The practices I use are in my bones and have been passed down to me to continue. This is how we show respect, so I take these practices with me when working with families.

For every yarning session, I enjoy setting a welcoming scene. I prepare food to share, arrange cups for tea and coffee and position chairs to seat us together and not apart. I might set up art materials, play some music or burn incense. Most important of all, I offer a big smile to invite and welcome people in. The preparation for the welcoming is so important when setting the scene for a yarn.

I see this as part of deconstructing privilege and countering colonised ways of meeting. When people arrive, I tend my own power and privilege by helping them settle into the room – showing them where things are and where to place their belongings, and we might make a cup of coffee together. Practices of welcome allow a natural flow of energy that helps in decentring the worker and centring the family. Aunty Barb (Wingard, 2013; Wingard & Lester, 2001) has described setting the scene in ways that feel culturally appropriate to open space for sharing stories and connecting to each other through landscapes in the same ways the old people have shared their stories through the generations.

Helen's story

Helen was really hard to engage with at first. She had over 20 years' experience in child protection – the same as me. Before I even spoke, she said: 'I know what you are going to say. You want to refer me to a counsellor for depression. You want my kids to see a counsellor because of the violence. Am I right?' Helen had her script of resistance ready to go. I knew that she and I would need to join together in resistance to the system to find the right way of working.

Forming a relationship of respect and dignity, we meet people in the present moment and where their lives are at, *in that moment*. We witness people's acts of resistance, their courage and their poetic words of wisdom. Their strengths become so clearly visible (Reynolds, 2019, p. 23). Acts of resistance to colonial practices are something I am familiar with. They include resisting and challenging expert knowledge and discourses to find new ways of working. We need to psychologically unlearn colonised ways and structures to become decolonised (Smith, 2000).

The system said Helen was not taking her kids to school and that past violence had left her with mental health problems. Helen, a Barkindji woman from New South Wales, had not been home for a long time. She had been living in Queensland for the past 10 years. Violence had isolated her and the children and she'd had no access to her family back home. Helen agreed to work with me on the condition she would not be referred to any other services. She asked if we could just yarn for now. I didn't want to breathe the word 'therapy' in case I lost her. Helen expressed relief about working with an Aboriginal woman (see Fooks & Nyoni, 2020, p. 45). She shared stories of being allocated a white worker who did not really listen to her.

Like Petersen (2021), I like to set the scene before we start yarning. I invite any questions, and let the person know that if they are feeling uncomfortable, they don't need to answer any of my queries: 'this is at your pace'. Importantly, I always say: 'the information on this referral is sometimes not a true account of your family's story' (which is the case most of the time). I invite practices of care into our yarning space to ensure oppressive practices of interrogation, judgement and pathologising are not present, and to ensure the family are feeling safe and grounded.

These are practices I brought to my initial conversation with Helen. I kept an eye on Helen's body language, her words and her tone of voice to keep me informed about whether she was uncomfortable or okay to continue. Importantly, I invited Helen to actively participate in each line of enquiry:

- Do you have any questions you would like to ask me?
- Tell me about Helen? Who is Helen and where are you from?
- Who is important to you?
- Tell me about your children?
- Are there people in your life who you are close to?
- Is there anything that I haven't asked you that you would like to talk about today?

The assessment phase

Helen was clear in her resistance to responding to system assessments that she gave no value to. I was pleased to be able to offer the First Nations System of Needs as a different way of conducting an assessment: a context in which Helen could give expression to her responses to the trauma she had experienced, and which might provide clues as to what she gave value to (Denborough, 2006; White, 2004, p. 28). This alternative assessment involved re-membering practices and questions about the landscapes of action and identity. Helen explained that her immediate family and especially her significant person in her life were important to her. Identity and connection to culture and her Country in NSW were also important. Through an externalising conversation about the problem story, Helen said that she had learnt skills in avoiding violence by not engaging in conversations with violence and not answering phone calls. This had kept her problem story away and safe in her mind. Helen's self-assessment using the First Nations System of Needs could be placed alongside the system's account:

First Nations System of Needs – Helen		
Helen's cultural assessment		System referral
Identity	Helen is from NSW and misses home	Helen was referred to our service for the following
Respect		22 years of violence.
Family	Helen keeps close to family, she feels safe.	The perpetrator of violence is present, comes and goes from the home
Country	Helen is away from her Country and longs to be there.	Helen has severe depression. Four of the children are not going to school.
Culture	Helen has deep connection to culture and says she does not want to see any counselling services.	Helen is isolated from mental health and other services. Helen is worried about trauma in her children. Helen has experienced coercion, financial abuse and gaslighting from the children's father.

Helen said it was her father and grandfather. She described how taking emu eggs from the mother's nest could be really hard and also funny. The old people always get the younger kids to go get the eggs because the young kids are faster. Helen then described how they were taught to get on the ground and move their bodies like snakes, slithering their way to the nest without making the dust rise up too much because the mother emu was around and kept her gaze on where her eggs were. Helen said she would be trying not to laugh at her brother who was with her. She could see how scared he was and yet running on excitement. The father and grandfather would keep an eye out while Helen was moving her way through the bush. The father and grandfather would call out, 'stop' when he holds his hand in the air. Helen said she'd keep looking back to her grandfather's hand, waiting for it to go down so she could keep moving. Sometimes he grandfather would yell out 'RUN!' because the mother emu had seen that her eggs were going to be taken. By this time Helen was laughing and crying as she remembered running as fast as she could to get to her father and grandfather on the other side of the fence with the mother emu on her tail.

Janneen: What do you think your father and grandfather were teaching you when they showed you how to hunt for emu eggs?

Helen: They were teaching us how to be patient. My grandfather was a patient man and he showed me how to survive in the bush.

Janneen: How does it make you feel when you connect back to home?

Helen: It felt warm inside and very close to home again.

Janneen: How have you influenced your own family with your stories – the story you have told me today and the many others you have?

Helen: [After a pause] I have not told my children a lot of stories because sometimes I forget, or it upsets me to talk about because we are not home.

Janneen: What would your children say if they heard the emu story you told me today? Would you say that sharing your story with your children would be you passing on your knowledge and wisdom to them?

Helen: [Through tears and a big smile] I will tell my children the emu story.

Yarning

Yarning is a powerful way in which Aboriginal people connect to each other. Helen told me a story about her home. She said she was a long way from her own Country, and she had not been back there for a long time. I'm going to tell you a story Helen shared that is significant to her preferred story, a story she later realised was a big part of her healing journey.

Helen told me that she could still smell the red dust. She said it was so strong in her mind and this made her feel connected to home. She went on talking and laughing about trying to collect the emu eggs that her grandmother wanted because she wanted to make a cake.

I asked Helen, 'Who taught you how to hunt for emu eggs in the bush?'

Janneen: What do those tears speak to?

Helen: Joy. The story has connected me with back home and how I should be telling my children these stories.

Helen had thanked me for having this yarn with her because she had forgotten about that story with her father and grandfather. As Aunty Barb (in Wingard & Lester, 2001, p. 44) said, 'sometimes just remembering one special moment can be really significant, especially if the memory can be described in detail'.

After Helen had told her story over many sessions, she agreed to take part in a narrative practice I have developed as another decolonising practice. It's called the narrative vision board process.

The narrative vision board process

The narrative vision board takes a similar approach to the 'Tree of Life' narrative approach (Johnson, 2015, p. 17). It traces a person's hopes for the future, the contribution of significant figures, reclaiming identity and finding strength. It starts with a series of questions that are used to elicit stories about the person's life and identity. These questions can be adapted for each person.

- Tell me a yarn about who you are, where are you from and your connection to Country
- Are there any stories you can tell me about your hopes and dreams for the future?
- What have you always wanted to do but never started?
- What do you value the most in your life?
- What does this value say about what you treasure?
- Is there anything that has stood out in your life that you want to share?
- What or who do you appreciate most in life?
- What do you miss the most about you?
- Who or what do you wish you had more time for?
- What are some of the things that keep you strong when times are hard?
- Who has contributed to your life and what would they say about where you are today?

- How were you able to hold on to hope despite everything you have been through?
- Who has been the biggest influence in your life?

Helen told me more stories of home. She described landscapes, eating bush tucker, campfires with the old people, her children who kept her going through the hardships, and how she wanted to be a good parent. From these stories I extend the conversation by asking:

- What memories are brought by the landscape you have described?
- When sharing stories around the campfire, who do you feel connected to the most?
- Does spirituality have a meaning for you?

These questions are linked to practices of re-membering, landscapes of action and identity, externalising, the absent but implicit and the migration metaphor. In Michael White's description (in McLean, 1994, pp. 99–100), the migration metaphor gives people the opportunity to map their experiences as part of their process of separating from the problem stories, so the person becomes less at risk of turning back to their old story.

When a person is telling their story in response to these lines of questioning, many images are brought to my mind. I connect with the person's words, and I think about their story as they tell it. After our yarn, I find images that are linked to the person's story. Helen told a story about hunting for emu eggs, so I searched for pictures related to emus, eggs and the landscape to provide material for re-telling this story using images. Helen was not one for yarning about her problem story; she didn't want to. And as Aunty Barb (Wingard, 2013) says, 'we only go where we are invited' and I wasn't invited into her problem story. The 'skills of silence' (Denborough, 2008, p. 30) helped me to gather rich material for Helen's board. During our visits I had noticed Helen's caring and gentle ways towards her children, her love of family, the way she talked about 'home', her love of making food with family, her love of landscapes and of animals that connected her to Country. From these I was able to find images for our first narrative vision board session.

Working with images provides opportunities to track and link experiences. Painful moments are not ignored, but fresh experiences might be brought further to light, enabling positive change (Freedman, 2011). Working with images invites an imaginative 'meeting ground where old and new come together – what was, what is, and what could be' (Halprin, 2003, p. 87).

Janneen: What will it mean when you see your home?

Helen: I'm going to break down and cry. Connections are too strong to break. Connection has been pulling me home since I moved here, for about 10 years. I have been smelling and tasting the red dust in my mouth. My connection to Country, my home, is so strong I can smell and taste the dust. It woke me up from sleep.

Janneen: What memories does going home bring up?

Helen: Oh wow, so many good memories. My mum's cooking – we are having kangaroo on Friday when we get there and we will be sitting around the fire. My connection to mum and dad. Pieces of the jigsaw are coming together. I feel I will begin to heal, it's like I will be healing on Country.

Janneen: What did our sessions make possible for you?

Helen: It has given me confidence in myself.

Janneen: What does confidence speak to?

Helen: Feeling stronger in ways of speaking up. I haven't been able to do this at all, speaking up and standing up for me. I have a voice. I have a bit more trust in the system – you have given me that through our sessions. You work differently than the others. How can we see if we're not confronted with the problem? I love the way you have been working with me. I have been able to see myself. I feel like you have given me my identity back and I am grateful for that. I'm going to start up a women's group with my family, bring all the strong women together. All the aunties, mothers, sisters together so we can all heal together and be stronger.

Janneen: What sticks out for you on your board?

Helen: Home, the river. I can smell the muddy water. Country, mob. The landscape is calling me. But overall, it's home. When I get home, I know my healing on Country will begin. I didn't realise but my board represented what I was wanting.

Reflections

The stories of First Nations peoples have been passed down through the generations. Stories of our Dreaming reflect connection to the land, spiritually and across time. These stories are a representation of who we are. There is a profound and deep spiritual connection to all things living and a reminder that we are the original storytellers of this land. Stories, yarns, unearthing memories that may have been buried somewhere deep inside. When traditional practices are remembered, the healing and dignity starts to grow again and time moves forward (Towney, 2004).

First Nations people are not often part of designing the programs and policies which affect all of our lives. Our community ethics and Aboriginal worldview are undermined by frameworks created by the dominant group, especially in the 'child protection' system.

Like Denborough (2013) I have wondered: if we are the receivers of stories of suffering and injustice, then how can we ensure our work in some way contributes to healing and justice? White's (2011) article on 'turning points' inspired and provoked me to push the boundaries of structure in order to change the way we work by creating new forms of assessment, engaging in practices of welcome, and inviting people's strong stories. I am transported by these stories of hope – stories that capture and strike a chord deep within. Narrative practices are teaching me how to restore a person's sense of identity, community and connection to belonging, and to help transform their painful experiences into a purposeful journey.

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