Reclaiming Our Stories, Reclaiming Our Lives

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Aboriginal Health Council of South Australia

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This Newsletter outlines a report of a counselling project initiated by the Aboriginal Health Council of South Australia, which was conducted from June through to September 1994. This counselling project implemented one of the recommendations made by the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (November 1987 to 31st December 1990).

Reclaiming Our Stories, Reclaiming Our Lives

Part I: Aboriginal Deaths in Custody: Placing Counselling in a Social Justice Framework

Part II: Towards Culturally Appropriate Services

PART I
ABORIGINAL DEATHS IN CUSTODY: PLACING COUNSELLING IN A SOCIAL JUSTICE FRAMEWORK

INTRODUCTION

The Reclaiming Our Stories, Reclaiming Our Lives *project was an initiative of the Aboriginal Health Council of South Australia, and Dulwich Centre, and was supported by Nunkuwarrin Yunti (formerly the Aboriginal Community Recreation and Health Services Centre of South Australia), the Adelaide Central Mission, Dale Street Women's Health Centre, and Eastern Community Health Service.*

Many Aboriginal families throughout Australia have experienced profound grief and pain due to the death in custody of a relative. The *Reclaiming Our Stories, Reclaiming Our Lives* project was a recognition of the immediate and ongoing need for culturally sensitive and appropriate counselling responses to the needs of Aboriginal families and communities suffering from the effects of such losses, and from the effects of the many injustices that provide the context for these losses.

Over the period of these losses, Aboriginal knowledges about ways of responding to the grief and pain in their community have been dishonoured and disqualified. And, at present, there are serious questions about the ability of mainstream services to respond to these issues in culturally sensitive and appropriate ways - ways that would contribute to the resurrection and honouring of the Aboriginal knowledges and skills that would contribute to healing experiences within the Aboriginal community.

The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (November 1987 - 31st December 1990) recognised, in its recommendations, that counselling was urgently needed by families who had experienced these losses. Although a considerable time had passed, no action had been taken to implement this recommendation until the establishment of this project, and the Camp Coorong gathering (described shortly) was the first support received by these families.

Philosophy

The guiding philosophy of this project was based upon several principles:

1. The project acknowledged that it was not the place of people from outside of the Aboriginal community to provide answers. Rather, the project's task was to work with Aboriginal people so that:

   (a) they could more fully honour and embrace the special knowledges and skills, relevant to healing, that they already possess;

   (b) these special knowledges and skills might be more fully developed and made more widely available to the whole Aboriginal community; and,

   (c) ways could be explored in which these knowledges and skills might be taken up in the development and provision of appropriate counselling services.

2. The project workers were committed to accountability to the Aboriginal community in all aspects and stages of the project. In addition, all of the information that was

gathered from the consultations, and all materials produced in the course of the project, continue to be the property of the Aboriginal community through the Aboriginal Health Council.

3. The project proceeded on an understanding that the development and provision of counselling services in regard to deaths in custody cannot be divorced from issues of social justice. The grief experienced by Aboriginal families cannot be understood or addressed without an acknowledgement of the extraordinary injustices to which Aboriginal people have been subjected, and which they continue to live with in their day-to-day lives. This project recognises the extent to which health and welfare services have been historically complicit with, and agents of, the oppression of Aboriginal people.

Approach

In its various activities, the project was informed by the narrative metaphor. This included the development of culturally sensitive and culturally appropriate approaches to counselling. Approaches to counselling based on this narrative metaphor have been identified by Aboriginal health workers in different parts of Australia as more appropriate to Aboriginal culture than the more conventional Western mental health approaches. The ideas and the practices of the narrative approach are considered to be more honouring and re-empowering of Aboriginal ways of being on a number of levels, including the level of spirituality.

A brief account of the narrative approach to counselling is outlined at the end of Part I of this report.

Structure

The project was made up of several elements:

1. Preliminary consultation with Aboriginal families affected by deaths in custody.

2. A gathering of these families at Camp Coorong (approx. 160 kms south-east of Adelaide).

3. Follow-up consultations with camp participants.

4. A study of the cultural sensitivity, appropriateness, and accessibility of mainstream services in the health area.

5. The development of recommendations concerning the provision of culturally sensitive and appropriate counselling services for the Aboriginal community.

Preliminary consultation

The initial stage of the project involved extensive consultation with the families and relatives of Aboriginal people who have died in custody. Thirty-three people were visited, either individually or in family groups, by teams made up of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal counsellors trained in narrative therapy. Some of the more specific aims of these consultations had to do with the identification of:

(a) Aboriginal people's experiences of deaths in custody;

(b) the real effects of these experiences on family members and others in the Aboriginal community;

(c) the knowledges, skills and resources of a healing nature that Aboriginal people are bringing to these experiences;

(d) the historical foundations of these knowledges, skills and resources, including their specific relation to Aboriginal culture and tradition;

(e) how these knowledges, skills and resources might be elaborated, and how they might be taken up to inform service provision; and,

(f) what part, if any, families wanted the team of counsellors to play during the gathering at

Camp Coorong.

These consultations also contributed to preparations for Camp Coorong. Those families who had experienced loss through a death in custody, were consulted about:

(a) how they wished to be welcomed at Camp Coorong;
(b) the nature of processes that would be honouring of their communities and traditions;

(c) what knowledges, skills and resources with regard to healing they might be interested in sharing with other Aboriginal families at Camp Coorong;

(d) how they would like to structure this sharing; and,

(e) the context that would be most appropriate for further discussion which would inform recommendations about future service provision for Aboriginal people.

In all of these preliminary consultations, it was emphasised that the shape of the project's activities generally, and Camp Coorong more specifically, would be determined by the information that was gathered. The consultation process was a way of hearing Aboriginal people's stories so that a structure could be found for the camp that reflected their wishes, knowledges and experience.

In the follow-up interviews after the camp, a number of people commented on how significant the consultation process had been to them. It had been important to know beforehand what was going to happen.

The information, recommendations, and stories gathered during the preliminary consultations are included in the main body of this report.

CAMP COORONG

The Family Forum at Camp Coorong was for the families who had experienced the loss of a member through death in custody, and for the extended kin of these families. In all, 26 adults attended the five-day camp, together with some of their children and grandchildren.

Purpose

The primary purpose of the camp was to provide a context for:

(a) Aboriginal people to express and address their grief in relation to the loss of their loved ones;

(b) appropriate healing ceremonies to take place;

(c) the honouring and re-empowering of special knowledges and skills related to healing that were available to these families as part of their culture and their traditions;

(d) the provision of forums for the sharing of these knowledges and skills;

(e) the exploration of how such knowledges and skills might be taken up in service provision;

(f) the further clarification of recommendations for future service provision; and

(g) some determination of how such services might play a significant role in the prevention of further deaths of Aboriginal people in custody, and in the prevention of "mental health" problems within the Aboriginal community.

Opening address

The Family Forum began with an opening address by Daisy Rankine:
I would like everyone here to accept my opening address for this week's Family Forum through the Aboriginal Health Council of South Australia here at Camp Coorong via Meningie. We all know why we are here. It is a chance for all family members to unite who had lost a family member through death in custody. We must heal together to ease the pain of grief and hurt that was left behind for the families,

and all that we have is precious memories of our late loved ones.

A special thank-you to everyone who had taken a part in organising this Family Forum for family members who are still fighting in their struggle for the rightful justice.

Let our voices be heard for our future generations, for the rightful justice of all Aboriginal people. The time has come for family members to be united in unison and heal together. Let it be said they died with dignity, and we are proud of who they were. Let us be free within ourselves.

Please forgive me if I am talking out of line with my opening address. It is my spiritual way of speaking. It is the only way I can express myself, of my feelings towards my experience of grief and hurt going it alone.

I cannot heal alone. The time has come for us all to be in harmony, to set our loved ones' spirits free from the places that our family members' lives had come to an end. May God guide their spirits to their resting places and their souls resting in peace.

I dedicate this Family Forum to the family members in remembrance of all our late loved ones whose lives came to an end in death in custody, and to the families who had suffered the pains of grief and hurt, of these terrible fatal traumas that we had to accept throughout the years of our lives, now being together in unison, to heal together.

I would like to mention the memory of a courageous Aboriginal woman, the late Mrs Alice Dixon, nee Newchurch, who gave up her life in fighting for the rightful justice. She and others had no fear in letting their voices be heard in their struggle. They fought so hard. They were fighters in their own right and for the rightful justice.

Thanks also go to Chirpy Campbell, who is an activist Aboriginal man, for his struggle for his mother, one of our elders, Auntie Stella Campbell nee McHughes, and family.

May God's blessings be with us all and glory to God.

I, being a Ngarrindjeri Aboriginal Elder of Meningie, our Sacred Law on Death, a sacred traditional custom which we had believed in, was told to us as children. We must all respect our people who had passed on to their resting places, never to mention their names, to respect death at all times, but to lose a family member in this way, we could not accept the way their lives came to an end.

A new generation started a new era in the 1970s, those who had no fear in speaking out for their loved ones who died in custody. In the 1980s we became a rock by healing together, to ease the pains of grief. In the 1990s we became a solid rock for letting our voices be heard in our struggle for the rightful justice.

We are like the kangaroo, we can only go forward and not go backwards for our future generations. Help our young men, women and teenagers. This is a role for all parents and relatives to give advice to them on life, and they must learn to have respect for their parents and relatives. Violence, alcohol and drugs, jealousy and greed, is not the answer at this time of living. Our children are the future, they are our future generations beyond 2000 years.

With God's blessings, let us stand and hold hands with the person next to you, and remember always healing hands are wonderfully gifted. Let us bow our heads in a silent prayer in memory of all our late loved ones resting in peace.

Bind us together, Lord,
Bind us together, Lord,
With cord that cannot be broken.
Bind us together with love.

Counsellors

A team of counsellors trained in narrative therapy was available at the camp to provide a service on request. These counsellors had been engaged in a process of training and consultation for several months before the camp to enable them to respond appropriately to people who were experiencing profound grief, and to act as facilitators for the small group forums that addressed the above aims. This team was accountable to the Aboriginal counsellors.

Meetings

A programme of meetings was developed for the camp on the basis of the information and ideas gathered during the preliminary consultations, and participants at the camp were invited to join

meetings as they saw fit. People from the project team joined each meeting to help set them up and share some thoughts about the organisation of the special meetings. It was made clear that members of the project team were present only to assist, and that it was fine to ask them to leave.

Themes

The camp was structured around the following themes:

- *Naming Injustice*
- *Caring and Sharing*
- *Healing Ways*
- *Remembering*
- *Journeys*
- *Talking to Our Young People*
- *Issues and Ideas to be Followed Up*
- *Special Listening Groups.*

These themes were generated during the preliminary consultations, and were continued in the followup consultations. Some of these themes are discussed in detail in the following sections.

NAMING INJUSTICE

A major theme of the whole project was the importance of naming injustice and its effects. From the Camp Coorong programme:

Many of the deaths of Aboriginal people are connected to past and present injustices. This makes it harder for relatives and friends to get through the grief. This can leave people with self-blame, self-hate, self-neglect, confusion, depression, and stress. Getting through the grief is very important because this frees people from all of these negative experiences.

When grief is made worse by injustices, it is very important to name these injustices, and to name how these injustices were done - to name the methods of these injustices. This naming helps people to get through the grief.

To break free of the self-blame, self-hate, self-neglect, confusion, depression, and stress, it is very important to name these injustices and methods in ways that are heard by other people. For other people to be there at this time makes a very big difference.

You are invited to join in the work on grief by coming to one of these Naming Injustice *groups ...*

Throughout the consultation process, it was very clear that the loss of loved ones through death in custody was one of many injustices experienced by Aboriginal people in their daily lives. Appropriate and effective counselling practices need to incorporate an understanding of this context of injustice in dealing with issues of grief and loss in Aboriginal people's lives. A number of people spoke about the impossibility of even starting to deal with their grief until their anger and outrage had been addressed. At the camp, the process of publicly naming the injustices was experienced by many participants as profoundly freeing.

General Injustices

Some of the injustices named occur in the general context of Australian society:

1. The history of genocide, loss of land, removal of children from their parents and families, and the forcible destruction of community and family traditions lives on in an immediate way in the lives of the Aboriginal people participating in this project. The question of injustice is not just a matter of things that have happened in these people's own lifetime, but also what happened to their grandparents and great-grandparents. Injustices experienced by past generations are carried actively in the form of shame and sadness by the present generation, and have real effects on their lives.

2. White Australians have historically instituted a range of policies and practices that have divided Aboriginal people among themselves. The effects of these policies and practices were reported in the lives of individuals and communities today. One of the most frequently mentioned was the historical definition of what constituted an Aboriginal person. Government policies distinguishing between people on the basis of how much Aboriginal "blood" they had

continue to have significant effects.

3. The actions and policies of government agencies, including welfare services, are overwhelmingly experienced as unjust. High levels of intervention in Aboriginal families are seen as contributing to the destruction of family ties. Aboriginal people felt that mainstream government agencies have no understanding of Aboriginal ways or Aboriginal experience, and that their actions are based on, and contribute to, a definition of Aboriginal women as incapable of providing good mothering. In addition, it was felt that present policies make it impossible for Aboriginal parents to raise, discipline and care for their children in Aboriginal ways, resulting in the loss of culture. The absence of follow-up and support services for Aboriginal children when they leave institutional or foster care was seen as particularly unjust.

4. High levels of unemployment, poverty, homelessness and imprisonment were clearly experienced as the product of racism and injustice. Aboriginal people routinely experience arrest and imprisonment for offences associated with alcohol, and for which non-Aboriginal people are not usually jailed.

5. Inadequate funding of Aboriginal organisations and services. Aboriginal people regularly said that they have a clear vision of what is needed to deal with the problems experienced by their communities. However, they are unable to put this knowledge into practice because of the absence of funding. As well as this, not enough notice is taken by government of the knowledge and experience of Aboriginal workers in planning services.

6. The treatment of Aboriginal children within schools is seen as racist and unjust.

   There's still a lot of name-calling in schools. I think your school years are your worst years. There's still a lot of kids being called a lot of names, and I think that's why a lot of our kids are leaving school because they can't hack that. I know that there's a lot of cultural awareness coming into our schools now - but the fact that a lot of our kids aren't getting through their education is a worry. The school system is still not right. And I think that proves itself when you look at the number of kids that are completing year 12 - very few, very few. (Aboriginal health counsellor)

7. Police harassment was reported by many Aboriginal people as an ever-present injustice in their lives. Harassment of Aboriginal children, who were regularly stopped and questioned for no particular reason other than their race, was a particular concern. Reports were given of adolescent girls being strip-searched by male police without anybody else being present. It was felt to be a very high priority that more Aboriginal people - and particularly Aboriginal women - be appointed as police aides.

Injustices related to deaths in custody

Other injustices named are specifically related to deaths in custody:

1. *Lack of action on Royal Commission findings*

   The consultations were an opportunity for some people to express outrage at the interval between the death of their family member and any action from the Royal Commission - particularly the lack of any consultation with them about what they needed and wanted.

2. *Negligence on the part of police*

   Many people indicated how difficult it is to come to terms with the deaths because of the feeling that negligence was involved. A number of people spoke about family members being arrested and not being given proper medical treatment.

   ___ died in jail of a haemorrhage in the head. When he went into jail he was complaining of a headache. The doctor checked him over and gave him some panadol or something. But during that

night he died - he was screaming out for help in the cell, but the first watch constable just ignored him, just told him to go back to sleep. Then, when they changed shift that night, another officer came on and found him dead in the cell. I feel guilty about it sometimes when I remember it - if I would have been there nothing would have happened - but you can't be everywhere at once. (camp participant)

3. *On-going police harassment*

Several people talked about the continual police harassment experienced by families who had lost members in deaths in custody. These people feel that they and their children are being victimised to keep them quiet.

4. *Lack of information about deaths in custody available to relatives of the deceased*

Several people talked about the difficulty of obtaining information about what had happened to their loved ones. They had many unanswered questions and a sense of hopelessness at ever being able to find out the truth. One man said:

I have had no justice, not for the death of my son who was shot, and not for my grandson who was found hanging in McNally's. We have had no answers, we couldn't ask questions in the Coroner's Court. ___'s body was never identified by a family member, they wouldn't let us do it. They had excuses, they weren't open, the morgue, or they were doing the autopsy. When you work it out, we will never win any of those cases - all those doing investigation, our legal aid lawyer, those pathologists, they are all paid by the government. Only if you've got money, that's the only way you will win. These are the injustices we have to live with. I would want to make all this public. (camp participant)

Not knowing what happened was described as a major barrier to being able to grieve and come to terms with the deaths. One woman reported asking the police if she could see the cell in which her brother had died, because she needed to do this in order to be able to put his spirit to rest. When this was refused, she committed an offence so that she would be arrested. She was then able to personally experience what her brother had been through - having her pockets emptied, her belongings taken away, and she was actually put in the cell where her brother had died. She felt that, by doing this, she was able to get a much better sense of what may have happened to her brother, and to release his spirit so that it was at peace.

5. *Lack of sensitivity on the part of police and coronial staff towards the relatives of a deceased person*

There were numerous stories of official insensitivity, particularly regarding the way the body of the deceased person was handled in the presence of relatives. One woman related the following story of being taken to identify the body of her brother. She was taken into a room where he was laid out. He had died of a brain haemorrhage and had then been taken to hospital. They had left all the tubes up his nose and down his throat. They just asked her, "Is this your brother?" and then whisked him away, and she wasn't allowed any other contact. She found this most upsetting, and felt that they could at least have removed the tubes beforehand, and allowed her some time to be with him.

6. *Lack of notice taken by authorities of Aboriginal people's evidence*

Aboriginal people often felt that their evidence was not taken seriously, or not sought out at all, in official enquiries into deaths in custody. One man in particular claimed to have important information that he had never had an opportunity to present, and wanted the coronial enquiry re-opened.

7. *General absence of counselling and support services*

Aboriginal people were well aware of how much they needed to talk about these issues of loss, as the deaths in custody were seen as having devastating effects on many people's

lives. The opportunity to do so, however, had been almost totally lacking. Many people said that this project was the first time that anyone had visited them to discuss their grief and loss. The existing mental health services were generally seen as intimidating, inappropriate or inaccessible and there was particular concern about the lack of counselling for young Aboriginal men in gaol.

Effects of injustices on Aboriginal people's lives

The following effects of injustices were identified by Aboriginal people in the course of the preliminary consultations, and at Camp Coorong. Some are specifically related to the deaths in custody:

1. *Guilt and shame*

   Everyone faced with the death of a loved one felt that they could and should have done more to prevent it. This guilt is a very heavy load and gets in the way of being able to talk about the sadness with other people. There is an additional guilt at not having "gotten over" it.

   One woman described the great sadness that she felt, four years after the death of her son. She felt guilty that she was not there, that perhaps if she had been there, or gone to the police station, or if she'd been more closely involved with her son at the time of his death, she might have been able to prevent it. She felt shame at her sadness, and felt that to talk about it would be a sign of not being sorted out, or not being O.K. The consultation interview was the first time since her son's death that she had talked about it, and the Camp Coorong meeting provided the first opportunity to deal with the shame and sadness.

2. *Anger*

   Many people spoke about the impossibility of paying any attention to the grieving because they were still so angry and bitter about the injustice of the experience, and said that, for them, fighting to have the injustice recognised was their way of responding to the loss.

3. *Self-hate*

   Some people turn their guilt and anger in upon themselves. One camp participant spoke of himself as a "totally poisoned person". He said: *Oh well, there's no point, there's no hope for me in the world, my future is always going to be limited, because I am a totally poisoned person.* This was despite his being very active in the community in a variety of ways. He had spent all of his childhood in a boys' home, and spoke at length about the ways in which this had affected his sense of who he was as a person.

4. *Sense of powerlessness*

   The experience of having loved ones in police custody contributes to a sense of being part of a system within which Aboriginal people are completely powerless. The difficulty in getting answers about the deaths in custody of family members reinforces this feeling of powerlessness, resulting in a hopelessness that compounds the feelings of grief and loss.

5. *The spirits are not at rest*

   Because of the injustices associated with these deaths, there was a feeling that the spirits of the deceased are not at rest. This, in turn, made it impossible for those left behind to move on in their lives, and filled them with a sense of turmoil and an inability to ever feel at peace. Some people spoke of the absence of proper burials and headstones for those who had died in custody, and that because of this their spirits could not be free. This compounded the grief of the death itself, and made it impossible to deal with.

Aboriginal people are surrounded by the presence of death - not only from deaths in custody, but also from a variety of other causes, including suicide and poor health. Many people spoke of the large number of deaths in their families and communities in the period immediately prior to this

project. The experience of so many deaths has a variety of effects:

6. *No more tears*

Many people spoke about their lives being so full of sadness and loss that they literally had no more tears to cry. This makes it particularly difficult to talk about the grief with other people.

7. *Fear and depression*

Several people talked about the sense of "death lurking". One family which had lost several brothers in a short period of time talked about looking at the other brothers and wondering who was going to be next. There was so much death in their lives that there was never enough time to get over one before another occurred, resulting in an overwhelming depression.

8. *Fear of genocide*

A number of people spoke of these deaths in terms of genocide. They stressed that the Aboriginal community simply cannot afford any more deaths. The size of the community is so small already that each death is an irreplaceable loss to the community, and people have a fear that the very existence of the Aboriginal people is under threat. This is particularly the case where the deaths of young people are concerned.

The effects of injustices related to the deaths in custody are compounded by other effects of injustice commonly experienced by Aboriginal people:

9. *Isolation*

Many Aboriginal people spoke about their isolation and the difficulty this caused in dealing with their grief. Many people live long distances from their relatives, and cannot afford to own a car and don't have a telephone. Poor health and poverty mean that Aboriginal people are often very isolated, and this means that they don't have access to the strengths, stories and knowledges that the community as a whole possesses. Often, the only time people meet is in the context of a funeral, and that makes it more difficult to talk freely. Camp Coorong provided the first opportunity that many people had had to get together with members of their extended families to talk about the deaths.

10. *Break-up of families*

There are a range of factors that Aboriginal people see as contributing to a break-up of their families. This break-up has devastating effects on people's lives, contributing to further deaths, and making it more difficult to deal with the effects of loss. Factors identified include:

(a) *Lack of employment*

Employment takes our family members away in various communities because there's no work, and if there's no work around they have to go away and look for jobs.

(b) *Alcohol and drugs*

The grog and the yamdi [drugs] and all that stuff, you know, destroys our families. The prevalence of alcohol and drug abuse was itself seen as an effect of the injustices experienced by Aboriginal people in their lives.

The consultation team was asked by one family to meet with a man whose wife had died in custody. After her death, his life had been taken over by alcohol, and he now moves around continually. After considerable efforts he was finally located in gaol, for an offence associated with drunkenness. He was thus unable to attend Camp Coorong.

There was particular concern that substance abuse by young people was making it impossible for adults to communicate with their children, and contributing to the loss of respect for elders.

(c) *Child welfare policies*

A number of Aboriginal women spoke of how difficult it is to convince child-welfare authorities that they are fit mothers when many injustices, such as poverty and

homelessness, contribute to their being labelled "unfit". They felt that, by taking their children away, the state is cheating them of what is most important to them in their lives - their relationships with their children. One woman spoke of this as "mother death".

11. *Loss of Aboriginal identity and destruction of culture*

There was a general sense that the injustices experienced in their lives directly contributed to a loss of identity and destruction of culture. There was, in particular, an overwhelming concern at Camp Coorong about where the young people in the Aboriginal community are going. There was a feeling that white structures have got in the way of traditional Aboriginal ways of being, and that there has been a huge cost due to the valuing of individuality over community.

The kids are urbanised, and they are really getting mixed up with the white man's way of living, and they are losing their culture. There needs to be a lot of time spent with our young ones in retaining their culture, they are starting to get lost. A lot of people feel that the video and television is creating a lot of bad habits and violence within Aboriginal youth now. There is a lot of frustration when we look at the Aboriginal way of disciplining kids, and how the system does not allow you to do that any more. (Aboriginal health counsellor)

12. *Effects of the absence of adequate counselling and support services - re-offending.*

Aboriginal people were very concerned that the absence of adequate counselling and support services, particularly for men coming out of gaol, resulted in high rates of re-offending and re-imprisonment.

There's nothing there at all. So that person's got no way of bettering their life. The only thing they can do is commit some worse crime so they get more time in gaol. I know a cousin of mine that came out of gaol ... He robbed a taxi driver and went to the local police station and said, "I done it ... take me back, back in gaol."

I was in a boys' home for 12 years of my life. I was institutionalised, and when I got out two years up the track I went to gaol and it was normal - I was back at home, I knew what to do. It was the only time I had a full knowledge. Other than that I was very naive.

I came out very raw, not emotional, very robotic. The first thing I wanted to do was run. I just wanted to know nobody, I wanted to be very isolated and I think that it's because I knew nothing of the outside world. I didn't know how to get a stamp from the post office at that stage - and the easiest thing was just to isolate myself and become very numb, very raw. And of course the alcohol comes into it, the numbing effects, to keep you there, keep you out of it. (camp participant)

13. *Effects of police harassment*

As described earlier, many Aboriginal people report the continued presence of police harassment. This has significant consequences for the process of grieving. Every time there is contact with the police, it reactivates memories to do with the experience of deaths in custody. It also contributes to an ongoing sense of injustice, which makes it very difficult for Aboriginal people to get on with their lives.

RECLAIMING OUR STORIES, RECLAIMING OUR LIVES

A central aspect of this project was to find out from Aboriginal people about the strengths and knowledges that have enabled them to survive in the face of overwhelming injustice, and to make these strengths and knowledges more widely available to the whole Aboriginal community. There was a recognition by Aboriginal people in this project that they have had to become very strong in order to survive at all. One of the main effects of white colonisation has been to separate Aboriginal people from a sense of, and belief in, their own strengths. Despite this, many people had drawn on a variety of strengths, knowledges and resources to hold their

families together and to reclaim their lives from the effects of these injustices.

Many of these strengths can be grouped under the interconnected themes *Caring and Sharing* and *Healing Ways*, which were the names of two of the special meeting groups at Camp Coorong.
The *Caring and Sharing* theme was presented in the camp programme in these words:
Caring and sharing has always been the Aboriginal way. This is what has made it possible for Aboriginal people to survive what has been done to them.

Non-Aboriginal ways have taken away from this important tradition. But this tradition has not been lost. These caring and sharing ways have continued and have given strength to Aboriginal people.

You might be interested in meeting to talk about these caring and sharing ways, and about how they can be respected more, and about how they can be made more available to other Aboriginal people.

To do this, you are invited to join the Caring and Sharing *groups.*

During the *Caring and Sharing* group meetings at Camp Coorong, there was a strong recognition that this was, in fact, central to Aboriginal ways of being. Although people may have become separated from these practices to some extent, caring and sharing is still a powerful part of Aboriginal people's lives, and these skills can be picked up again very quickly.

Many stories were told about how Aboriginal people have stayed strong against overwhelming odds, and about how much strength has come out of so much pain, hurt and loss. The group process, together with the "listening team" approach (described later), was identified by people as helping them recognise the existence of their own strengths.

The listening group reclaims strengths of Aboriginal culture. Aboriginal culture has always had this - this has reiterated it, rejuvenated it. That's 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 Aboriginal family unit has been damaged over the last 200 years, slowly bit by bit, and to me it has gotten worse - alcohol and drugs and politics. In this group we have had a revival - a revival of Aboriginal culture and the family unit. (camp participant)

Some of the strengths and sources of strength described by Aboriginal people during the consultations and the camp are as follows:

Humour

I think Aboriginal people's greatest strength, and it is our survival tool, is our humour. And you can ask any Black Fella and they'll tell you that. We laugh at ourselves - we get into a difficult situation and we laugh about it - it gives us strength.

I think Aboriginal people have a lot of strength, but they don't know it sometimes, or they are not being told of it. I think they are the most capable people around, but they need to be told how good they are ... And I don't mean as in "told". I mean they need to be encouraged about all their good qualities. (Aboriginal health counsellor)

Self-pride

The camp added to my self-pride. It helped a lot of people, opened people's eyes to what they could do in their lives. I learned that you just keep going with what you think is right. I am proud of my children. I always knew this. I used to take them into the kitchen, away from the TV, and talk to them. I don't know any father who talked to his children as much as me. I never gave up on them. You just keep on with what you know is right. (camp participant)

Determination and hope

Several men talked about their determination to survive while in prison and in the face of continual police harassment.

One man said that for the last six years he has kept hold of the hope that one day he would be able to talk to people who would really listen. He had tried in the past, but until the camp he had never found what he wanted. Through the group process, he was able to see that to be able to keep hold of this hope, despite all the anger, guilt and fear, spoke of considerable personal strength.

Turning negatives into positives

Several people talked about turning the negative labels they received from white society into positives of their own.

I left school when I was 13 because I wasn't learning anything in the opportunity class - a bit of sewing and cooking, you know, practical stuff, and I started working in factories and I convinced myself that there's nothing up there, but there's nothing wrong with my hands. And it was really good because I was using a ... turning negatives into positives, you know, when I look at my life now I can see it. And I was very good with my hands, so I worked. (Aboriginal health counsellor)

Pride in Aboriginal identity

A lot of people at the camp talked about their pride in belonging to Aboriginal culture, and how much strength came from that sense of pride. The camp itself was identified by many people as contributing to strengthening that pride - giving a strong feeling that *these are our ways, these are our knowledges - just look what we can do with them.* (camp participant)

I felt more closely connected to Aboriginal ways, hearing other people's stories and really feeling close to others. (camp participant)

The camp helped me to practice Aboriginal ways more. It helped me to get in touch with the caring and sharing. It's part of us and it's always been there for us. (camp participant)

One of the injustices identified by Aboriginal people was the imposition of white practices which have divided Aboriginal people against each other. Despite this, a strong sense of unity has often been maintained. This sense of unity was identified at the camp as being of the utmost importance.

I think that the fact that we had Camp Coorong shows me that people can unite. People there really did unite, and that's why there was a lot of love, a lot of caring, and a lot of sharing, a lot of tears, and a lot of laughter. This was because we united as one big family. (Aboriginal health counsellor)

Even though people came from different ways - tribal, urban, different communities, we have a strong common bond, the same sorts of experiences. I want to pass on how important being close to each other is. (camp participant)

Family connections

Aboriginal people in this project consistently indicated that their family connections were more important than anything else in their lives. Families provided the greatest source of support and strength, and the destructive effects of injustices on families were the greatest source of concern.

I've got four generations at home in my house. The family connections, the links among Aboriginal people are just so big ... We have relatives all over the place, and even though a lot of relatives don't see each other until they get together at someone's funeral, the family unit is still so important. I think that's one of the biggest troubles for our people is to keep our families together - I mean, because without it ... (Aboriginal health counsellor)

"Seeing myself in my family's eyes"

Many people identified instances in their lives when their families had been a source of strength. Seeing themselves in their families eyes - seeing themselves as loved and cared for - was of fundamental importance.

One man talked about how his family's love for him had turned around his feelings about himself. He had lost cousins through deaths in custody, and he'd been able to turn his life back from drink and getting into trouble with the police by seeing himself in his parents' eyes. He had been able to separate himself from his feelings of guilt and their love had helped him keep on track.

For some people, seeing themselves in the eyes of the person they lost was a way of keeping that person alive in their lives, and made a great difference in terms of being able to deal with the grief.

"Being strong for my family"

People also spoke about the strength they derived from their own desire to be there for their families. They know that they have to be strong if their children are going to have a future - and hope for their children's future is also a source of strength.

During the consultations, one man spoke about his experience of turning away from alcohol, which had a strong grip on his life. When his son died in custody, he looked at his wife and her experience. He saw how much was on her shoulders and how much the death had affected her, and decided on the spot to stop drinking so that he could be there for her. Rather than succumbing to despair, the loss of his son and his love for his family caused him to become much stronger. This was not an isolated incident - there were many people during the consultations and at the camp who had similar stories.

The old people

A lot of people spoke with enormous respect of the strength of the old people, particularly the old women. In the face of all the problems and injustices that are placing often intolerable pressures on families, it is often the old people who are holding the families together.

... the grog, the yamdi (drugs), and all that stuff, you know, destroys our families. There's still some elderly people out there, a lot of nannas and that, they are the ones who are trying to keep the families together. (Aboriginal health counsellor)

Reconnecting at the camp

Aboriginal people at Camp Coorong talked a great deal about how the injustices of their lives make it difficult to maintain their family connections. For many people, this camp was their first opportunity to meet members of their extended families to discuss their loss and grief caused by the deaths in custody. There were brothers and sisters who had not seen each other for 18 years - and some people who did not know that they were related discovered their family connections at the camp. This gathering provided an opportunity for these people to reconnect in a way that they found extremely significant. There was a very strong feeling that similar gatherings, providing opportunities for strengthening family and community ties, are of the utmost importance if Aboriginal people are going to be able to deal with the issues of injustice, grief and loss.

I knew one of the persons that was lost within the cell, and his daughters are my nieces. They came to the camp to meet a brother that they'd never ever met, and while that was a very sad time for them to come together, it was just magical for them girls to meet their brother. I was very close to those two girls, and for them to meet their only brother and to ask me about their father, because they don't remember him it really was a very touching time for me too, to talk about those things.

There were other families that I knew the people who had passed on, and some of the things they were asking me, too, were very sad things - like, what happens in a police cell when one took his life? And the fact that my uncle was in the next cell and heard a lot of those things, heard it, and they were actually asking me those sorts of questions, and for me it was overwhelming.

But at the same time we were able to exchange stories that were right, and that was very important, about a family member. Because they've heard this and they've heard that, so there was a lot of clearing up of false stories that were told to them. And it was really good for them, after we'd talked. But, sharing some of their stories was very sad for me because I knew quite a few of the ones that have left us. And even one lady who I've known for years and years actually came up to me and told me that she was the one that found my father in the bathroom when he passed away - and I'd known that lady for years, and I never knew that she found him. (Aboriginal health counsellor)

Spirituality

Many people talked about the importance of spirituality and religion in their lives as a source of strength. Some talked about the similarities between Christianity and traditional caring and sharing ways,

and how important their religion had been in getting them out of the grip of alcohol and drugs.

Aboriginal organisations

Some Aboriginal people talked about the importance of Aboriginal workers, services and organisations as a source of strength within their community. There was a strong feeling during the consultations that Aboriginal workers have the knowledge and abilities to really make a difference, but that their effectiveness is limited largely by lack of funding and support from government.

At the camp, numerous people commented upon what a powerful experience it was to have Aboriginal counsellors present, and what a difference it would make to Aboriginal people's strength and ability to heal, if more such counsellors were available.

The *Healing Ways* theme was described in the Camp Coorong programme like this:
Aboriginal people have always had their own special ways of healing. This includes ways of healing the pain from loss and injustice.

These healing ways have been disrespected by non-Aboriginal people, and Aboriginal people have been discouraged from using them. But the healing ways have survived and are playing an important part in Aboriginal life today.

Talking together more about the healing ways is one path to taking them back, to making them stronger, and to making them work better for you in your own lives. This is also a path to making them more widely available to Aboriginal people.

If you would be interested in playing a part in putting together information about these healing ways for yourself and for other Aboriginal people, you are invited to join the Healing Ways *groups.*

A central focus of this project was to identify ways in which Aboriginal people can reclaim and strengthen their capacity to heal the effects of injustice, pain and loss. The follow-up consultations with camp participants indicate that this process has been remarkably successful, and there is a high level of enthusiasm for more such camps to be held.

One woman described feeling a sense of peace since the camp. She said that she feels the spirit of her lost brother saying, "It's okay now, you can let go now, I'm okay now". It was her brother's birthday recently, since the camp, and this has always been the worst time of the year for her. This time she actually went to work on his birthday, and this was the first time she had been able to do so since his death. She described a sense of calm - the sadness is still there, but a peaceful sadness, rather than sadness in turmoil.

The healing ways that were identified and put into practice at the camp included:

Naming injustice

As discussed earlier in this report, it is much more difficult for people to deal with the effects of grief and loss if the injustices involved are not named. During the camp it was clear that the public naming of injustice was experienced as powerfully freeing, and that it was an essential precursor to the following healing practices.

I think that came across very clear at Camp Coorong when they were in the groups, and talked a lot about the injustices due to their lost loved ones. And I think, with their experience up there at Camp Coorong for that week, I think that lessened or softened the hatred ... Some of these people have never ever talked about some of the things that they spoke about, never. And I think that's why there were so many tears, that they can actually talk about their hate and their grief, about their losses and stuff like that. There has to be more opportunities for these sorts of sessions for them, to make them feel completely well, yeah.
(Aboriginal health counsellor)

Caring and sharing

Family and community connections are of fundamental importance to Aboriginal people. Simply meeting together to provide the opportunity for strengthening these connections was seen as powerfully healing. While one-to-one counselling was seen as important in some situations, the strongest feeling was that, for Aboriginal people, culturally appropriate healing practices need to recognise the prime importance of collective,

community and family meetings. One of the most important things about Camp Coorong was that it placed counselling and healing in a community context, where people were able to share their experiences, and connect with other people with similar experiences. Small group meetings were mainly held in family groups, allowing participants to build on their existing strengths.

It was clearly stated that healing is not an individual thing - it is a family and community thing.

We may be sitting here as individuals but part of me is with my brother who is sitting in jail, and part of ___ is sitting in jail, and for us to have the freedom to come here and have healing happen, for us to be totally healed - we cannot be healed until the rest of our families are part of that process too. I don't know how we are going to do this, but we need to fight to be able to take this kind of healing into the prisons so that those that are in prison get the opportunity to be healed, because we will never be healed until they are part of that healing process too. (camp participant)

Sharing stories

Reclaiming our stories was a central theme of this project. Aboriginal people identified the ability to tell their own stories and hear other people's stories as being of vital importance to their lives and to the healing effects of the camp. This process can enable feelings of guilt, hopelessness and worthlessness to be recognised for what they are, and for new stories of strength and resistance to injustice to be told. Knowing that other people have felt the same guilts was experienced at the camp as profoundly freeing.

It was challenging to tell the story about my feelings of guilt and grief. It was rewarding being able to release and let go and have a sense of peace - also to be able to hear other people's stories. I know now that I am not on my own. I was able to get to know and hear my own strengths. I could believe it because it was related to specific examples in my life. (camp participant)

I've never been able to talk about my father, living on my own, about how I feel about my sons. I was able to begin to tell these stories. I can now talk about [son who died in custody] *without crying. I feel more secure in myself, and I am more settled in myself.* (camp participant)

I think now we're trying to get our men and young boys to start crying and start talking about things, because years ago they didn't, and there's still a lot of men out there that are bottled-up with their problems and won't share it. And it was really good at Camp Coorong to see some of the menfolk, sitting within that wider group, and talking, and talking about some of the sad things in their lives. And I'd love to see that happen much more with our men. (Aboriginal health counsellor)

Remembering

From the Camp Coorong programme:
When the deaths of Aboriginal people are connected to past and present injustices, this often clouds many important and valuable memories. When these memories are clouded, this causes low self-esteem. This is because the clouding of important memories causes people to lose sight of what it was that the lost loved one appreciated and respected about them.

Because of this, it is important to find special ways of remembering - ways of remembering that make it possible for people to see themselves through the eyes of the lost loved one. This improves self-esteem.

The *Remembering* groups were reported by Aboriginal people to be an important healing experience. They often felt that they had been allowed to remember for the first time - certainly publicly. Within the context of the camp, people felt freer to start remembering those things they wanted to remember about the people they had lost, rather than only remembering the loss and the injustice. This remembering was particularly important because it was done with people who also knew the people who had died.

Aboriginal ways and knowledges

It was recognised at the camp that Aboriginal people have their own ways and knowledges

concerning healing, and that the old people in particular still have access to these knowledges. At the beginning of the special *Healing ways* meeting, the non-Aboriginal counsellors were asked to leave the room so that Aboriginal people could deal with this in their own way. The non-Aboriginal counsellors were invited back in several hours later to listen to and witness some of the results of that meeting.

When one of the elders was asked during the consultation process about how healing should take place, she laughed and said that that knowledge went back to her ancestors and their history, that it was part of Aboriginal meaning, and she could not possibly explain it.

During the consultations and the camp, people made it quite clear that Aboriginal autonomy and control over the process of healing is of fundamental importance to that process.

NEEDS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

During the consultations and the camp, Aboriginal people identified a number of areas in which they believe urgent action is needed. These have been mentioned in the main body of this report, and are repeated, in brief, below.

1. More camps - there was a strong consensus that Aboriginal people need opportunities to meet together regularly. Financial assistance is needed to make this possible. Almost everyone said, during the follow-up consultations, that they wanted more camps so that their families could experience the healing that took place for them. People felt that they had experienced something wonderful, and their greatest desire was to be able to share it with their families. This was expressed as an urgent and immediate need, and people were very clear that they did not want to have to wait 12 months for another camp to happen.

2. More consultation with Aboriginal people about what services are needed.

3. Action to reclaim the wellbeing of Aboriginal young people. The specific recommendations included:

   (a) keeping families together rather than separating them in times of difficulty;

   (b) assistance to parents to enable families to stay together;

   (c) assistance to elders to enable them to be more involved in telling stories and teaching young people about their culture;

   (d) assistance to Aboriginal organisations to enable them to take a greater role in helping young people;

   (e) efforts to involve young people in the management of Aboriginal organisations, such as Camp Coorong, because having responsibility is seen as an important part of being able to withstand the negative influences of white culture;

   (f) follow-up counselling and assistance for young people and their families when children leave institutions or foster-care.

4. Special leave for Aboriginal people employed by government organisations, to attend funerals. Concern was expressed that Aboriginal people working for government organisations are not able to get sufficient leave to attend funerals of friends and relatives. It is a very important part of Aboriginal culture that people should attend these funerals to say goodbye, and healing is made much more difficult when this is prevented from happening.

5. Financial support to perform proper burial services and obtain proper grave stones for those people who have died in custody. This would enable the spirits to be properly put to rest.

6. Strategies to protect the welfare and safety of Aboriginal people in custody. The

recommendations included:

(a) Immediate counselling and support for Aboriginal people when they are arrested and imprisoned.

(b) Follow-up counselling and support for Aboriginal people when they are released from prison.

(c) A "life-line" telephone service for Aboriginal inmates. People said they would make themselves available to work in such a service.

(d) Healing events such as Camp Coorong to be made available to Aboriginal people in gaol.

7. Counselling services for Aboriginal people and training for Aboriginal counsellors. Many people talked about how much of a difference it had made at the camp that there were Aboriginal counsellors present. There was a very strong desire for this to be made a high priority.

   One Aboriginal man said that he had been waiting for six years to be able to talk about his experiences, and it was not until he met one of the Aboriginal counsellors at Camp Coorong that he knew he finally could. He emphasised that it was the presence of Aboriginal counsellors that really made the difference.

8. Employment of more Aboriginal police aides, particularly women.

9. Action to end police harassment of Aboriginal people.

10. Action to implement the findings of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody.

Camp Coorong was seen as a beginning, but only as a beginning. It re-opened the possibility of hope, but it was clear that more needed to happen, and to happen quickly.

I get the feeling that something's going to happen. I can go back to the families and tell them that something's going to happen - that there is light at the end of the tunnel. (camp participant)

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.

The following story comes from an interview with an Aboriginal counsellor who has completed the two-year narrative therapy training programme at Dulwich Centre:

Three years ago, as part of my work as an Aboriginal health worker, I came into contact with this approach and, because of my understanding of this way of working and the impact it had on my life, it made me feel sure that these ideas and this approach could be

helpful for Aboriginal people.

I now work as a counsellor at the Aboriginal Community Recreation & Health Services Centre of South Australia. Prior to this I worked as a nurse in general and psychiatric hospitals.

I went to school in a country town and soon was experiencing name-calling and the feeling of being made to feel different. This set me aside from others and made me feel as though there was something wrong with me. It certainly didn't make me feel good about myself. Instead, it left me with a sense of embarrassment and shame. The meaning I attached to these experiences was one of "not being good enough". This shaped the story I had about myself and who I was as a person. This story followed me through school to my social and working life, and it had many negative effects on my life and relationships.

For most of my life, I lived with feelings of unfairness about things that had happened on my journey, and I could never seem to make any sense of this. The more I thought about this, the more it added to the confusion I felt. The only explanation I could give was that "I must have been jinxed" or "this must be my lot in life" - explanations which were not helpful.

The narrative approach, with its ideas about stories, showed me how we can re-tell our own stories in ways that fit more helpfully with our preferred ideas about our lives and about who we are as people. There were three things that stood out clearly for me at first. These were:

1. *Things don't happen by chance. There have been events over periods of time that have influenced how a person's story has been constructed.*

2. *People are recruited by others into the ways in which they may feel or see themselves. People often have negative stories imposed on them by others.*

3. *It is when you are able to name the injustices that you get a clearer picture of what it is that has happened, and it is then that you are able to do something about it.*

These understandings helped me to make some sense of my own journey, and to have a new understanding of my own story. It brought me more in touch with myself as a person and with my preferred story about my life, and helped me challenge the negative, unhelpful story I had been coerced into believing. I found this freeing and empowering.

I was one of the counsellors who consulted with the families prior to the grief/loss workshop at Camp Coorong. I did this with apprehension at first. There were those who still needed to address the injustices, pain and loss of loved ones, and so the consultations were very intense. As we spoke with families, some said it would be no different from anything that had happened before, with nothing happening at the end. It was from my own experience of being able to re-author my own story into a more preferred way of being that gave me confidence to persist. I also felt that for the families to have their stories about the injustices, pain and loss acknowledged would allow a way for the healing to begin. Family members were able to draw strength from the camp and from the sharing that happened there. This is a way of being that fits with Aboriginal people. There was a feeling and a sense of people coming together. There were many positive effects of people being able to share their experiences and have their own stories acknowledged.

I have spoken with people since the camp and this has been an emotional experience. Some of it seems hard to put into words. It's been about people being able to let go of the pain and guilt; about how some families have been able to talk about things they weren't able to talk about before; about how it has helped them to be able to deal with other issues they are faced with. Other comments were made about realising how much strength it has taken to keep on believing that one day someone would listen. Finally being listened to at the camp was described as being like walking out of darkness into the sunshine.

Comments were also made about how empowering the listening groups were, and about how listening to the counsellors' reflections had helped people to see things differently. This process removed the burden of people having to come to up with answers, and people felt that actually hearing their own names used by the listening groups was an effective way of being acknowledged.

I believe that it is important for Aboriginal people

to be trained as counsellors to do this work. Our own experience and understanding of disempowerment, injustice and pain enables us to better understand the issues that our people are faced with daily, and this gives us an important vantage point to work from.

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