Journal of Occupational Science

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rocc20

Listen, look & learn: Exploring cultural obligations of Elders and older Aboriginal people

Chontel Gibson , Pat Dudgeon & Judith Crockett

To cite this article: Chontel Gibson , Pat Dudgeon & Judith Crockett (2020) Listen, look & learn: Exploring cultural obligations of Elders and older Aboriginal people, Journal of Occupational Science, 27:2, 193-203, DOI: 10.1080/14427591.2020.1732228

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14427591.2020.1732228

JOURNAL OF OCCUPATIONAL SCIENCE
2020, VOL. 27, NO. 2, 193–203
https://doi.org/10.1080/14427591.2020.1732228

Listen, look & learn: Exploring cultural obligations of Elders and older Aboriginal people

Chontel Gibson [a], Pat Dudgeon[b] & Judith Crockett[c]

[a]National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Occupational Therapy Network, Sydney, Australia; [b]University of Western Australia, Perth, Australia; [c]School of Community Health, Charles Sturt University, Orange, Australia

ABSTRACT

Introduction: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders' social and emotional well-being provides a strength-based framework to discuss social and emotional well-being. This paper focuses on Elders' and older Aboriginal people's experiences of social and emotional well-being and their cultural obligations relating to social and emotional well-being. These cultural obligations, along with social and emotional well-being experiences, inform and/or are influenced by Elders and older people's occupations.

Methods: An Indigenous Standpoint Theory guided this research and supported yarning as a research method. In total, 16 older Aboriginal people participated in this research. A modified version of an existing thematic analysis process was used to organise the data, which enabled research yarning members to participate and engage in all stages of data analysis.

Results: Three key themes were identified: 1). Every day you will learn something; 2). It all comes back to culture; 3). The old wings, they used to be flyin', are just lying beside them. These themes highlight the importance of older Aboriginal people participating in learning activities and fulfilling cultural obligations that support social and emotional well-being. Factors like disrespect, poor health and/or well-being, broken cultural connections, and geography negatively influence participation in roles, responsibilities, and occupations.

Conclusion: Elders and older people are integral in maintaining the cultural well-being of family, community, and country. This social and emotional well-being framework provides a respectful foundation to discuss Elders' and older Aboriginal people's cultural obligations, with the cultural domain providing a solid foundation for exploring Elders' and older people's occupations.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Accepted 16 February 2020

KEYWORDS
Occupational science; Health; Aging; Indigenous peoples; Social and emotional well-being; Cultural well-being

A holistic definition of Aboriginal health integrates the physical, social, emotional, and cultural well-being of the individual and community. The focus on the cultural nuances, including the collective well-being of the community, is reflective of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's health philosophies. Extensive consultation with communities have confirmed and extended this definition of Aboriginal health. For example, Swan and Raphael's (1995) *Ways Forward: National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mental Health Policy Consultation Report* highlighted the nine guiding principles of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and emotional well-being. The first of the guiding principles expands on the Aboriginal holistic definition of health by emphasising the inter-relations that underpin cultural well-being (Swan & Raphael,

CONTACT Chontel Gibson chontel.gibson@uq.edu.au

1995, p. X). The remaining principles include focussing on human rights and therefore, self-determination; acknowledging widespread experiences of grief, loss, and trauma; realising the prominent experiences of racism and social inequalities; understanding strong family and kinship arrangements; recognising strengths including creativity; and, recognising diversity and cultural fluidity (Swan & Raphael, 1995). These guiding principles not only continue to influence the Australian health policy and practice context, but they can provide context to understanding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's occupations, including occupational engagement.

Using these principles as a foundation, Gee, Dudgeon, Schultz, Hart, and Kelly (2014) developed the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social and Emotional Wellbeing Framework, which highlights seven domains central to achieving positive social and emotional well-being, namely: 1) family and kin, 2) community, 3) spirit, spirituality, and ancestors, 4) body, 5) mind and emotions, 6) country, and 7) culture. This strength-based framework provides service providers and their organisations with a tool to unpack the holistic nature of social and emotional well-being, as integral phenomena that inform the definition of Aboriginal health. This paper focusses on connections to culture, which encapsulates cultural well-being. Although culture, and therefore cultural well-being, is considered a separate domain, it is integrated and interlinked with the other domains.

Cultural well-being refers to the ability to maintain cultural ties and obligations, including the ability to participate in occupations that support identity and cultural values (Gee et al., 2014). Given the relationship between cultural well-being and cultural ties/obligations, it is reasonable to infer that cultural well-being relies on what Swan and Raphael (1995) referred to as respectful relationships with all factors influencing health and well-being. These factors, in part, refer to the social and cultural determinants of health.

Some examples of social determinants that negatively influence Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's health and well-being include poor access to education, poor housing and housing infrastructure, financial stresses, experiences of colonisation, and poor health service access (Zubrick et al., 2014). Unlike social determinants, cultural determinants are not yet as developed or visible in the public discourse. Cultural determinants emphasise the cultural factors that interact and influence the broader context of the social determinants of health and well-being, centring on cultural survival; Lore/knowledge, spirituality, and kinship (Lovett, 2014). These determinants are linked to individual and community obligations. In Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, cultural obligations manifest in cultural roles and responsibilities, including kinship.

Some obligations include being an Elder, an older person, a traditional owner, a family member, and a community member (NSW Department of Health, 2010; Warburton & McLaughlin, 2005). Roles within family and kin, country, spirituality and culture, all intersect with each other (Warburton & Chambers, 2007). Examples of intersecting roles and responsibilities include obligations relating to family and kin; transmission of culture, including knowledge transmission and cultural activities; leadership; and caring for country. These roles and responsibilities inform everyday activities, which can be viewed as occupations. Occupations not only give meaning to life; they can also be used to make a statement about or directly reflect identity.

Pertinent to this paper is understanding the relatively new concept of decolonising occupations, which highlights how colonisation negatively impacts on Indigenous people's ability to participate in everyday occupations that reflect their (cultural) way of knowing, being, and doing (Emery-Whittington & Te Maro, 2018). Also pertinent is the concept of occupational consciousness, which highlights how power imbalances result in some occupations being valued and supported, while other occupations are not (Ramugondo, 2015). Although the concept of occupations continues to evolve and be informed by pluralistic cultural paradigms, the perspectives of occupations in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people remain largely unexplored. In this research, the overall aim was to explore older Aboriginal people's perspectives of social and emotional well-being. In this paper, we seek to explore Elders' and older Aboriginal people's

Table 1. Six stages of the research method.

Stage	Description
1.	• Involved the first author connecting with Elder Groups and Aboriginal organisations to seek in-principle support from communities to plan, implement and evaluate this research • Relationships with community were paramount and were maintained through regular meetings and research updates • More pressing priorities were honoured, thus offering a flexible research process • The first author continues to meet with Elders and older people. Together, they discussed and decided what was written in this article
2.	• Developing the research design and implementation strategy in consultation with communities and key stakeholders • Involved activities like developing research questions, negotiating the design, and planning for implementation • Evaluation of the research process and outcomes continues. If necessary, other priorities and commitments are adjusted
3.	• Obtaining ethical clearance (highly pertinent in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities given the over-consultation, misrepresentation and misguided research conducted in many of these communities (Smith, 2012)) • Ethical approval obtained from two human Research Ethics Committees, one specialising in Aboriginal health. The Aboriginal health ethics process required demonstration of: ◦ How Aboriginal governance would be maintained ◦ The benefits for Aboriginal people, including their health and well-being ◦ How the cultural safety of Aboriginal communities would be maintained ◦ How Aboriginal skills and knowledge would be enhanced (Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council of NSW, 1999)
4.	• Opportunities to share the voices in the 'research yarn' (known in Western research as data collection) • Yarning occurred with individuals and in groups • Sessions lasted 1-4 hours, and sometimes there were multiple yarning sessions • Although a set of yarning topics was developed, in most sessions the researcher only raised the first topic and yarning members guided the rest of the session • Longer sessions often involved unravelling experiences grief, loss and trauma, via therapeutic yarning. It was essential to allow this therapeutic yarning so that the research yarn could eventually continue • Anyone who considered themselves an older person in the community was invited to participate • Some older people also identified as being Elders • Elders and older people were invited to participate by the researcher, through community yarning sessions and via word of mouth from other Elders, older people and/organisations
5.	• Honoured the voices through a thematic analysis process (adapted to include the involvement of research yarning members) • Gibson et al. (2018) illustrates the extra two steps that this research added to Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis ◦ Before data collection began, Elders and older people identified key themes they thought were relevant ◦ The researcher shared initial interpretations with yarning members. In this sharing activity and the other steps, the yarning members confirmed the themes • Initial data analysis involved the researcher coding the transcripts and/or notes from the yarning sessions and then grouping the codes in a way that reflected the domains Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social and Emotional Wellbeing Framework (Gee et al., 2014), because the many other ways of grouping the codes, including the knowing, being, and doing framework for understanding occupations, ultimately reflected the domains in this framework
6.	• Evaluation of the research process • Rigour and trustworthiness achieved through activities like member checking, peer debriefing, code-recoding, providing a clear audit trail • Methodological rigour focusses on the congruency between the topic, questions, methodology and method, similar to Stanley and Nayar's approach (2014) • The evaluation process occurred through ongoing yarning sessions with Elders and older people, during which members asked important questions (such as what value a publication would have), or assisted in framing the paper to better reflect community aspirations

cultural obligations and in doing so, provide insight into both social and emotional well-being, with the focus on cultural well-being and occupations.

Method

Indigenous Standpoint Theory (IST) provides a cornerstone for Indigenous researchers to privilege and reflect important relationships, knowledge, and experiences (Gibson et al., 2018). The first and last authors of this paper, who are Aboriginal women, drew on IST to guide this study. IST supports a research design process and outcome that reflects genuine and meaningful social and cultural perspectives in a way that respects the connections between people, ancestors, culture, and spirituality

(Moreton-Robinson, 2013). In this study, we focused on local relationships, knowledge, and experiences reflecting a decolonising approach to research (Gilroy et al., 2018). Decolonisation and IST are similar in that they both privilege Indigenous people's voices, promote a space to heal, and understand the ongoing and cumulative effect of power imbalances in colonised countries. Given the importance of cultural connections and privileging Indigenous voices, yarning, as opposed to many other western approaches, was the preferred research method.

Yarning is a flexible communication tool used in many Aboriginal communities (Dean, 2010). Yarning encourages individual members to share their lived experiences and stories, as well as spiritually (and therefore, culturally) connect with other yarning members (Walker et al., 2014). In this research, Bessarab and Ng'andu's (2010) four types of research yarning were used: social, research, therapeutic, and collaborative, as were Walker et al.'s (2013) two types: familial yarning and cross-cultural yarning. These yarning types were used in the six stages of this research method. See Table 1.

The study was conducted with 16 older Aboriginal people, 8 men and 8 women. An older person was anyone who considered themselves older or if their community considered them as being older. Age is often an arbitrary number when considering an Aboriginal person's identity as an older person, with factors such as spirituality, social contexts, and physical traits, and their complex relationships, determining whether someone identified as being an older person (Gibson et al., 2018). Therefore, the participants were not asked their age. Some older people identified as being an Elder, while others did not. This research was conducted in an urban area, located on Wiradjuri country. The area is a resettlement area; some older Aboriginal people were re-located here when they were younger, whilst others are from Wiradjuri country or voluntary moved here from other nations and/or temporarily stayed on Wiradjuri country.

Sharing the Voices of the Research Yarns

Three key themes were identified from the thematic analysis of the interviews and are as follows.

Theme 1: Every day you will learn something

Learning can be viewed as an essential occupation for Elders and older Aboriginal people. Learning is a part of one's life journey, whereby life experiences provide daily opportunities to learn. As one member said, "*every day you will learn something*". Life without learning was viewed as having no meaning. One member explained that "*the day that you learn everything is the day that you die*". Another member observed that although life can be difficult, it can still be enriching: "*there is too much out there to see and do, rather than going around circles and digging trenches*". Learning was viewed as being an important role, responsibility, and occupation for Elders and older Aboriginal people that has a positive impact on social and emotional well-being, including cultural well-being. The following sub-themes highlight how Elders and older Aboriginal people participated in learning.

Learning in cultural ways

Many members identified that an important aspect of culture was to *"look, listen and learn*". For Aboriginal people, this means to be still; observe environments, including cultural connection; listen to people, country, ancestors, and spirituality; and finally reflect on what one can see and hear and then learn. It is also important to learn knowledge gradually. One member stated that Elders and older people "*give you enough to make you hungry, to make you come back and want more*". In this instance, learning created opportunities for members involved in learning activities to grow and/or maintain connections with each other and over time. Another member explained the need for patience, persistence, and humility. He said no matter how many times one "*falls over*" or makes a mistake, individuals must "*keep on trying*".

Members acknowledged learning practices had changed over time. One member explained, "*a black fella could live off the land at that time in the Depression. Now they can't do that anymore. The lands are all cleared. The animals that we used to kill and eat, they're all gone*". However, many of the cultural aspects of learning remained intact. For example, gender was an

important aspect in learning and comments relating to separating "*men's business*" and "*women's business*" were highlighted. One member shared, "*we are sort of oral society where you know word of mouth and that sort of thing and that is how we shared information*". Sharing information through word of mouth is a cultural phenomenon, which underpins the learning activities described below.

Learning through yarning and storytelling

Sharing information through yarning and storytelling was a prominent activity undertaken by members. This was seen as a form of healing. One member said, "*we're really good friends, you know and we share our problems and people, when you get older you need someone to talk to people like that*". Sharing stories offers the person sharing knowledge an opportunity to learn, with one member explaining, "*I've learned … off little kids. Kids will say something about this, that, or the other; that when you think about it, it makes sense. But it never comes to your mind because you've passed that stage in life*". In many ways storytelling and yarning facilitate a positive cultural well-being because it is about sharing cultural knowledge, connecting with others, and creating opportunities for growth and/or shared understandings of a situation.

Learning through loss, grief and trauma

Learning through loss, grief, and trauma was prominent in this research, as providing an opportunity to heal and grow oneself, families, and communities. One member observed that he used to carry the grief, loss, and trauma of his father, but has now worked through this experience:

> *I told him what I thought about things and he said 'Well I don't' and he said 'You shouldn't either'. I said, 'I would just love to put them all in a big basket and sink the bastards' and he said, 'No, look, just get on with your life', he said 'I have gotten on with mine, I am happy doing what I am doing' and he was. So, I thought 'Well, fair enough, if he's happy then I should be happy too'.*

Some members learnt new ways of coping with social and emotional well-being issues, including loss, grief, and trauma, through formal education opportunities like the Aboriginal Mental Health First Aid Course. One member explained that after this course, they could better "*see signs of it*" (social and emotional well-being issues) and then could "*sit down and talk to*" family. Some coping strategies were learnt through training and becoming a "*professional*". In the professional space, it was important to address issues in "*a way that is clever*" and "*taking something that is negative and turning it into something that is positive*". Healing was also an important activity, undertaken in relation to loss, grief, and trauma. One member explained that the healing process was more than talking when he said, "*you can't just sit there and talk about it*". However, for some members, being with other Elders provided an opportunity to share their daily experiences: "*we share our problems and people, when you get older you need someone to talk to, people like that*". Finally, experiences of grief, loss, and trauma, including strategies for coping, were passed on to other community members.

Learning through activism and advocating

Many Elders and older people remain activists and advocates for Aboriginal rights. This activism and advocacy addressed, and continues to address, social injustices and inequities relating to issues like land rights and out of care arrangements for Aboriginal children. Participation in activism and advocacy, and hearing stories about the same, is important. These experiences and stories grow cultural knowledge and/or awareness of important issues in families and communities, with one member explaining that "*honouring*" the activism and advocacy of family members and community members provided an opportunity to understand not only family history but Aboriginal history.

Learning through spiritual connections

Learning from and on country was viewed as a spiritual occupation. One member explained that in context of learning and being on country with his peers and younger generations, and that the lessons could be sacred in nature, which means you cannot share that information, or you can only share it via an appropriate process:

> *So, we're sort of getting closer and closer to country. You know, to land. Learning to read it. And the most important thing, learning to listen. We gotta listen, listen to country and it will reveal itself. So, we are trying to get that connection back … There is a lot of stuff there you can't share.*

Learning from animals provided further opportunities to learn about oneself, culture, and country. One member reported, "*we look at traits of animals and, you know, you get to know some meaning from them*". Learning from ancestors or the older fellas and their experiences of spirituality and other business is another important aspect of cultural well-being. Ceremonial business, such as men's business or Elder initiations, provides further opportunities for learning.

Learning through ceremonial events or cultural business

Ceremonial events and ceremonial business were linked with a positive social and emotional well-being, as they passed on knowledge, supported identity, and supported connections to family, community, country, ancestors, and culture. Learning from passing through life stages and the associated lived experiences was important. As people grow older and/or enter into Eldership roles and responsibilities, cultural connections grow, as does the person's need to share, maintain, learn, develop, and restore knowledge. Research yarning members acknowledged the role of the older person to pass on knowledge to other members, or shared stories to show this was a part of their role.

Learning through the experience of growing older

The experience of growing older provides opportunity for growth, change, and development. One member explained he no longer reacts to health and land injustices; instead, he takes the time to think about them and then responds in a considered and well thought out approach, following consultation with other significant members in the community. Some members expressed how growing older can be physically challenging, but many adapted in a variety of ways, so they could continue to fulfil the family and community responsibilities of growing older, such as spending time with family and passing on knowledge. Growing older changes the way that individuals view life and therefore the way in which they participate in learning.

Theme 2: It all comes back to culture

Connecting to culture, including all the roles, responsibilities, and activities undertaken to support social and emotional well-being, can be viewed as an occupation. One member reflected that everything we do and how we connect with our social and emotional well-being "*all comes back to culture*". This theme illustrates how cultural obligations inform roles, responsibilities, and therefore, occupations.

Cultural obligations and kinship

Kinship refers to cultural connections, which often determine roles, responsibilities, obligations (Dudgeon, Wright, et al., 2014), and therefore occupations. In this community, an Elder was seen as someone "*who held knowledge*" and "*knew about community*". Older people also held knowledge and were sometimes connected to community. Elders and older people's knowledge included, but was not confined to, contexts relating to "*culture*, *lore, country*, *ancestors*, *stories*" about kin, "*country*" and "*spirituality*". Some Elders and older people were responsible for sharing, maintaining, and restoring cultural connections, such as those between people, country, and culture. Importantly, each Elder and older person has a place and space relating to passing on knowledge. However, this place and space was not always respected and/or known by kin.

Cultural obligations and leadership

Leadership was an important role, including providing advice and support to family, communities, and service providers, including education and health. One member described how "*we have got Aboriginal health services where the Elders have taken control and are saying 'I'm sick of being unwell. I want to feel better.'*" Being an active learner, listening to younger community members, speaking up about injustices, being respectful, bringing family and community together, participating in important

decision-making processes, and applying a strength-based approach were also very important. One Elder shared, "*we are all individuals. We all have our little stories and our skills and our experiences and that comes together and links together the group*". Sometimes not doing something was just important as doing a leadership activity. One Elder explained, "*we don't believe we will compromise culture for the sake of doing, fitting into another way of doing things*".

Cultural obligation and self-determination

Elders and older people were responsible in supporting social justice and self-determination, for themselves and for other community members to heal from the consequences of injustices. One Elder explained that "*we, as a people, especially the Elders, we have a role to play. An obligation to bring about change so we don't feel it* [grief, loss and trauma from injustices] *anymore*". Furthermore, Elders and older people were "*active in fighting for our rights*" and this was demonstrated through occupations like attending rallies and advocating for services.

Cultural obligation and loss, grief and trauma

Elders and older people hold significant roles and responsibilities relating to death and dying, such as spending time with family, sharing stories and yarns, and supporting grief, loss, and trauma associated with death and dying, particularly in families and communities where there had been multiple deaths. Finally, Elders and older people were also involved in teaching and modelling coping strategies for younger generations.

Cultural obligations and employment

Some of the research yarning members were currently employed and/or seeking employment. A number of roles in the workforce reflected cultural obligations within family and community, such as connecting individuals to family, country, and culture, and providing social and emotional well-being support to Aboriginal people, such as restoration of cultural connections. Although employment was viewed as important, research yarning members reported paid employment was not easy to gain for themselves and for other community members; some attributed this to being on the receiving end of racism.

Cultural obligations of growing older

The grandparent role was considered important. As one participant explained, "*to be a grandmother … that is a pretty important role in an older Aboriginal woman's life*". Grand parenting responsibilities overlap with other responsibilities, such as passing on cultural knowledge to all children. For example, one grandmother explained she provides support to the school her grandchildren attend, stating "*we just sit around and talk and weave*". Also, during the collaborative yarning sessions, Elders and older people confirmed that cultural obligations increased with age.

Theme 3: The old wings, they used to be flyin', are just lying beside them

There were many barriers that prevented members from participating in roles, responsibilities, and therefore, their occupations relating to cultural obligations. These barriers are illustrated in the following sub-themes.

Disrespect

Elders and older Aboriginal people reported that disrespect was a barrier for participating in roles, responsibilities, and occupations. One member provided a metaphor to explain how loss of cultural connections resulted in some communities disrespecting older Aboriginal people, with subsequent negative impacts on social and emotional well-being.

> *In some communities they don't have that support for old people now. They sort of sit there and the old wings they used to be flyin', are just lying beside them. And you do see some disrespect, because people don't understand the breakdown now of our culture values and obligations.*

Members reported disrespectful decision-making processes within family and communities. One member explained:

> *They might have roles as Elders, but the way sometimes in which community*

> *interprets that can be, I think, disrespectful. Like you are an Elder and we consider you that, but you don't have any say. And we are giving you power but we are taking it away at the same time … the Elders do not get a say on much here.*

Disrespectful decision-making processes resulted in poorer cultural well-being for Elders, older people, and their communities. Finally, family and community did not always prioritise learning cultural knowledge and this also negatively impacted on older people and their kin's social and emotional well-being.

Loss, grief and trauma

Although Elders and older people provide care during bereavement, the high number of deaths mean that Elders and older people are providing an unprecedented level of care. One member reported "w*e don't ever think about how they are going with some of that stuff. Particularly, if you have three or four funerals in a row. No one is asking how that impacts, how that is affecting our Elders*". Another Elder explained that losing older members in families and communities is a barrier for passing on cultural knowledge, including obligations.

> *The sad thing for us is when those old fellas die they take their story with them. That's one of the saddest things going. So we got to look at ways of trying to capture our stories. A lot of our stories are lost.*

Through the consultation sessions to develop this paper, older Aboriginal community members reported that sometimes grief, loss, and trauma resulted in Elders and older Aboriginal people choosing not to participate in roles and responsibilities.

The following sub-themes can also cause loss, grief, and trauma. However, they are separated into sub-themes, because they give more meaning and insight.

Poor health and/or well-being

Elders', older people's, and kin's poor health and well-being can impact roles, responsibilities, and occupations. Sometimes, older people living with a mental illness find it difficult to connect with family and community. This inability to connect can result in difficulty participating in roles, responsibilities, and occupations. Sometimes, a community's poor health and/or well-being meant that Elders and older Aboriginal people's roles, responsibilities, and occupations focussed on supporting and caring for individuals and/or communities, leaving them unable to participate in other roles, responsibilities, and occupations.

Broken cultural connections

Poor connections with country and ancestors result in decreased ability to participate in cultural obligations. One member identified how "*a lot of people are disconnected from their country*" and "*language*", resulting in older members of the community being unable to participate in cultural activities such as passing on knowledge to younger generations. Some of this disconnection was associated to previous government policies, such as the relocation policy, whilst disconnection between generations in families could also present a barrier to participating in cultural activities. Some members questioned the need for Elders and older people to pick up the responsibilities of family and community. One member asked "*is this the only thing that we are left with? Is that we have got great-grandchildren; the only people that can nurture them and look after them properly are great-grandparents*". While there is a sense of burden, the importance attached to cultural, family, and community obligations usually transcended the many challenges. One member explained that if she did not look after her family, no one else would and, as such, illustrated the importance of kinship, particularly when service provision failed communities.

Geographical location and/or distance

Geography or geographical distance played a role in how or if some members participated in roles, responsibilities, and occupations. Some Elders and older people would travel back to their home communities, so they could participate in occupations relating to cultural obligations. However, other community members do not know where their home country is, significantly impacting on their ability to participate. For some members, simply getting from

one side of town to the other was a barrier to participation.

Discussion

This study explored Elders' and older Aboriginal people's cultural obligations and, in doing so, provided an insight into social and emotional well-being (specifically cultural well-being) and occupations. Elders and older people enjoyed participating in multiple learning activities. They are not just knowledge sharers, maintainers, and keepers (Warburton & Chambers, 2007), but also seek new and/or existing knowledge. This paper extended on occupational scientists' understandings of Elders' and older Aboriginal people's cultural obligations, which influence their roles, responsibilities, and occupations. These roles, responsibilities, and resulting occupations are a protective factor for cultural well-being (and more broadly social and emotional well-being). Barriers for participating in roles, responsibilities, and occupations provide an important insight for communities and can negatively impact the social and emotional well-being of individuals and communities. Finally, this research supports Indigenous conceptualisations of occupations, namely decolonising occupations and occupational consciousness.

Occupations that pass on important knowledge include, but are not limited to yarning, storytelling, and participating in ceremonial business. Elders' and older people's participation in these and other learning occupations contributed positively to the health and well-being of individuals, families, and communities. Learning cultural knowledge can encompass and/or be expressed in the following ways: existential, familial, spiritual, community, historical, and political knowledges. Learning (and sharing) of cultural knowledge remains a fluid and dynamic experience that draws on knowledge from the past and responds to the current context of learning, like grief, loss, and trauma. Learning (and sharing) knowledge is important for cultural well-being because it contributes to cultural identity, keeping culture alive and connecting with one and other.

In addition, learning and sharing knowledge contributes to the other domains of social and emotional well-being because it contributes to family, spiritual, and community connections, as well as supporting positive emotions. Passing on cultural knowledge not only protects current generations but future generations too, and although not specifically discussed in the research yarns, community consultation relating to the development of this paper revealed concerns about ensuring younger generations and older generations work together to pass on this important cultural knowledge. Conversely, the inability to learn knowledge resulted in poorer social and emotional well-being of Elders, older people, and their communities.

Cultural obligations influenced roles and responsibilities and therefore occupations. Roles and responsibilities centred on cultural connections, like family, culture, and country. Responsibilities in this research reflected the literature and included passing on knowledge and maintaining gender responsibilities, and caring for cultural connections, be that family, culture, or community (Waugh & Mackenzie, 2011). Occupations reflected these cultural obligations, such as yarning, participating in ceremonial business, being with famly and/or community, and being on country. When Elders and older people are able to enact their cultural obligations, it was likely to result in positive social and emotional well-being for themselves, families, and communities. For example, Elders and older people also had responsibilities in relation to caring for others during sorry business, leading and participating in healing activities and learning, and passing on coping strategies. Although previous studies highlighted Elders and older people have a responsibility for passing on cultural knowledge (NSW Department of Health, 2010; Warburton & Chambers, 2007), research members illustrated through their occupations that this responsibility extends to cultural survival, which supports the cultural well-being of individuals, families, and communities.

The known barriers for participating in cultural obligations and occupations include a physical decline and kinship structures not being intact (Waugh & Mackenzie, 2011). These barriers were unpacked in this research and highlighted the disconnection with culture, like geographical distance and failing to listen to our Elders and older people. These barriers negatively affect the ability to undertake cultural obligations and/or fully appreciate cultural

obligations. Importantly, during the collaborative yarning sessions to develop this paper, the issue of Elders and older Aboriginal not fulfilling their cultural obligation of sharing knowledge had a significant and negative impact on cultural survival and the general well-being of community. In these instances, community need to undertake healing activities to support any loss, grief, and trauma experiences and/or to restore connections between Elders and older people with families and communities. Finally, although geographical contexts, such as Elders and older people not living on country, can be a problem, it can also be a strength within the community. The increased number of Elders and older people mean that there are more diverse roles and responsibilities for sharing cultural roles and responsibilities.

Indigenous occupational therapy scholarship, like the development of occupational consciousness and decolonising occupations, is diversifying occupational science. This research supported the application of both concepts when working with Elders and older Aboriginal people. For example, research yarning members spoke about how they are unable to participate in occupations in the same way as they did earlier in their lives, as the way in which the land is used and occupied prevents access to occupations, such as hunting animals. This statement illustrates how the Aboriginal people's way of life is compromised for non-Indigenous people's way of life. Similarly, both occupational consciousness and decolonising occupations discuss how colonisers/non-Indigenous people's occupations are valued over Indigenous people's occupations (Emery-Whittington & Te Maro, 2018; Ramugondo, 2015). More scholarly work can help to explore the relevance of these Indigenous concepts of occupations, not just in Australia but elsewhere.

Limitations

Members who shared their voices in this research may not represent the remainder of the community or the broader Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. The sensitive and sacred nature of social and emotional well-being restricts information that is shared or can be shared in public, and this should be considered. Furthermore, social and emotional well-being has a spiritual component linked with land and culture, which makes it difficult to capture all necessary components via yarning and a research process. Finally, it is likely the experiences, knowledge, and stories of social and emotional well-being in relation to community, services, and government care arrangements will change over time, as they did over the duration of this research journey. The outcomes of this research study should be viewed as contributing to the story, with the aim of deepening the understanding of older Aboriginal people in relation to social and emotional well-being.

Conclusion

Social and emotional well-being can be a suitable concept to use when considering the roles, responsibilities, and occupations of Elders and older Aboriginal people. The level of participation or the desired level of participation in roles and responsibilities reflected cultural connections and informed their participation in occupations. Elders and older people have important roles and responsibilities in relation to participating and/or leading cultural occupations. Elders and older people continue to pass on knowledge to family and community, and continue to learn in these and other processes. Barriers preventing participation in these roles and responsibilities should be urgently addressed.

Acknowledgement

We pay our respects and acknowledge the traditional and rightful owners of the country on which this research was conducted, Wiradjuri. We pay our respects to Elders, past, present and future. We acknowledge that, although Aboriginal people shared their voices in this research, they still belong to the individuals and/or the communities from which they came.

ORCID

Chontel Gibson
http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9783-1489

References

Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council of NSW. (1999). *AH&MRC Guidelines for research into Aboriginal health: Key principles* (Updated February

2013). Sydney, Australia: Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council of NSW.

Bessarab, D., & Ng'andu, B. (2010). Yarning about yarning as a legitimate method in Indigenous research. *International Journal of Critical Indigenous Studies*, *3* (1), 37–50.

Dean, C. (2010). A yarning place in narrative histories. *History of Education Review*, *39*(2), 6–13. https://doi.org/10.1108/08198691201000005

Emery-Whittington, I., & Te Maro, B. (2018). Decolonsing occupations causing social change to help our ancestors rest and our descendents thrive. *New Zealand Journal of Occupational Therapy*, *65* (1), 12–19.

Gee, G., Dudgeon, P., Schultz, C., Hart, A., & Kelly, K. (2014). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and emotional wellbeing. In P. Dudgeon, H. Milroy, & R. Walker (Eds.), *Working together: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health and wellbeing principles and practice* (2nd ed., pp. 55–68). Commonwealth of Australia. https://www.telethonkids.org.au/globalassets/media/documents/aboriginal-health/working-together-second-edition/working-together-aboriginal-and-wellbeing-2014.pdf

Gibson, C., Crockett, J., Dudgeon, P., Bernoth, M., & Lincoln, M. (2018). Sharing and valuing older Aboriginal people's voices about social and emotional wellbeing services: A strength-based approach for service providers. *Aging & Mental Health*, Early Online. https://doi.org/10.1080/13607863.2018.1544220

Gilroy, J., Uttjek, M., Gibson, C., & Smiler, K. (2018). Yuin, Kamilaroi, Sámi, and Maori people's reflections on experiences as "Indigenous scholars" in "disability studies" and "Decolonisation". *Disability and the Global South*, *5*(2), 1344–1364. https://dgsjournal.org/

Lovett, R. (2014). *Socio-cultural determinants of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing*. Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies. http://www.lowitja.org.au/sites/default/files/docs/Ray-Lovett.pdf

Moreton-Robinson, A. (2013). Towards an Australian Indigenous women's standpoint theory: A methodological tool. *Australian Feminist Studies*, *28*(78), 331–347. https://doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2013.876664

NSW Department of Health. (2010). *Aboriginal older peoples' mental health project report*. NSW Department of Health. http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/mentalhealth/Documents/aboriginal-mh-report-2010.pdf

Ramugondo, E. (2015). Occupational consciousness. *Journal of Occupational Science*, *22*(4), 488–501. https://doi.org/10.1080/14427591.2015.1042516

Smith, L. T. (2012). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples* (2nd ed.). Zed Books.

Stanley, M., & Nayar, S. (2014). Methodological rigour: Ensuring quality in occupational therapy qualitative research. *New Zealand Journal of Occupational Therapy*, *61*(1), 6–12.

Swan, P., & Raphael, B. (1995). "*Ways forward*": *National consultancy report on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health*. Australian Government. http://library.bsl.org.au/jspui/bitstream/123456789/353/1/Ways%20forward_vol.1%20%26%202%20_1995.pdf

Walker, M., Fredericks, B., Mills, K., & Anderson, D. (2013). "Yarning" as a method for community-based health research with indigenous women: The Indigenous Women's Wellness Research Program. *Health Care for Women International*, *35*(10), 1216–1226. https://doi.org/10.1080/07399332.2013.815754

Walker, M., Fredericks, B., Mills, K., & Anderson, D. (2014). "Yarning" as a method for community-based health research with indigenous women: The indigenous women's wellness research program. *Health Care for Women International*, *35*(10), 1216–1226. https://doi.org/10.1080/07399332.2013.815754

Warburton, J., & Chambers, B. (2007). Older indigenous Australians: Their integral role in culture and community. *Australasian Journal on Ageing*, *26*(1), 3–7. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-6612.2007.00213.x

Warburton, J., & McLaughlin, D. (2005). 'Lots of little kindnesses': Valuing the role of older Australians as informal volunteers in the community. *Ageing and Society*, *25*(5), 715–730. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X05003648

Waugh, E., & Mackenzie, L. (2011). Ageing well from an urban Indigenous Australian perspective. *Australian Occupational Therapy Journal*, *58*(1), 25–33. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1440-1630.2010.00914.x

Zubrick, S. R., Shepherd, C. C., Dudgeon, P., Gee, G., Paradies, Y., Scrine, C., & Walker, R. (2014). Social determinants of social and emotional wellbeing. In P. Dudgeon, H. Milroy, & R. Walker (Eds.), *Working together: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health and wellbeing principles and practice* (Vol. 2, pp. 93–112). Commonwealth of Australia.