Measuring the Health and Wellbeing Impacts of Reclaiming Indigenous Languages

Lowitja Institute International Indigenous Health and Wellbeing Conference

Darwin, 18-20 June 2019
We acknowledge and respect the traditional custodians whose ancestral lands we are meeting upon here today, the Larrakia people. We acknowledge the deep feelings of attachment and relationship Larrakia people have to their Country. We honour and pay our respects to Larrakia Elders, both past and present, and all generations of Larrakia people, now and into the future.

We also pay respects to the cultural authority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from other areas of Australia, and other Indigenous people present here today.
Wardliparingga – Aboriginal Health Equity Theme

Aboriginal Health Equity Theme - SAHMRI

Theme Leader - Professor Alex Brown

Wardliparingga’s focus of research is improving health equity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Two programs:

- **Cardiometabolic Disease** – Professor Alex Brown
- **Sexual Health and Wellbeing** – A/Professor James Ward

Four platforms:
1. **Population Health** – Dr. Odette Pearson
2. **Implementation Science** – Dr. Natasha Howard
3. **Health Systems** – Ms. Kim Morey
4. **Capacity Building and Development** (in development)
Indigenous Rights

**Article 13**

1. Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons.

**Article 14**

1. Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.
Global Language Loss

Source: The Guardian
https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/jun/08/why-we-are-losing-a-world-of-languages
Australian Language Loss

250 distinct indigenous languages were spoken at the time of European colonisation.

145 indigenous languages are still actively spoken.

110 indigenous languages are considered severely or critically endangered.

32% of indigenous people living in major cities speak their traditional language.

33% of indigenous children living in remote areas speak an indigenous language as their main language at home.

Above: Australian Geographic

Right: Australian Aboriginal Language Map AIATSIS
AIM:
Systematically assess social and emotional wellbeing impacts of reclaiming an Indigenous language (Barngarla)

GOVERNANCE: Barngarla Language Advisory Committee (BLAC)

PARTNERS: Wardliparingga Aboriginal Health Equity (SAHMRI), University of Adelaide

FUNDING: National Health & Medical Research Council – Five year Project Grant (2017-2021)
Barngarla Country

Map available at:
Study Team

Alex Brown (Chief Investigator-A)
Ghil’ad Zuckermann* (CI-B – Linguist, UoA)
Ngiare Brown (CI-C – Child & Adolescent)
Graham Gee (CI-D – Psychology)
Emma Richards (Associate Investigator, BLAC)
Stephen Atkinson (Associate Investigator, BLAC)
Alan Rosen* (AI – Psychiatry, UniWollongong)
Michael Wright (AI – Psychology, Curtin Uni)
Michael Walsh* (AI – Linguist, UniSyd)
Natasha Howard* (Senior Research Fellow)
Leda Sivak* (Study Coordinator)
Seth Westhead (Research Assistant)
Four Study Objectives

2017-2021: (1) Continue supporting language reclamation activities with Barngarla

Year ONE

(2) Explore the impacts of pilot language activities

Year TWO

(3) Develop methods for measuring the impacts of language reclamation

Year THREE

(4) Assess language use and wellbeing

Year THREE

(Barngarla Language Group: Before and After = 100 people)

Year FOUR

(Comparato Group = 300 Aboriginal people, Eyre Peninsula)

Year FIVE
Semi-structured interviews
Seth and Leda talked with 16 people in total
- Port Lincoln (26-28 October 2017)
- Port Augusta (2-4 November 2017)
Offered participants the opportunity to talk with young/older, female/male, Aboriginal/non-Indigenous – most interviews together

Demographic details
- 10 people from Port Augusta
- 6 people from Port Lincoln
- 10 females
- 6 males
- 6 people aged 15-30 years of age
- 7 people aged 30-50 years of age
- 3 senior Elders

Member checking – verbatim transcripts
Consensus meetings in communities
Qualitative Results: Impacts on Wellbeing

Source: Gee, Dudgeon, Schultz, Hart and Kelly (2013)
Connection to Culture

Cultural Knowledge Transfer

“The reason why we want keep on doing it is because we want our children to learn, our grandchildren to learn. I want to learn myself because that’s my language and I feel, like, I’ve got to learn it first before my kids and my grandkids, you know what I mean? But, I’m really happy that we’re all doing it together as a family. That’s the best thing about it, that I’m doing it with my children, I’m sharing it with my children, and my grandchildren.”

“So we’d always be listening to the adults yarning, and we’d always be listening about what the local heritage and culture was, and what it meant to our parents, and what it meant to their parents and grandparents. So we were always around stories, and people yarning, and so those seeds were sewn in us really early and young. And I think it’s like what I'm doing to my kids, you know? They're so around us doing Barngarla that they're taking it all on as well.”
Connection to Family & Kinship

Connection to family and kinship

“As a family, it brings us together as far as I’m concerned. And, we’re all proud that we are speaking the language, you know.”

“I think that maybe this language is a way of bringing people together. It’s a way of talking to people. It’s a way of sharing things. It’s a way of talking about the past, talking about the future and what we have, the hope that we have for the kids that are coming.”

Gathering

“The languages have an impact on that as well because there’s this continual gathering. You know, we’re starting to gather now and we’re not sort of scattered. And I’d say that has had an impact.”

“I think the language is helping pull people together in one direction. And then just from that you’re able to get other things happening and it’s just pulling everybody together in one direction.”
Connection to Mind & Emotions

**Achievement**

“That exposure we got from starting it, getting things in the newspaper, everyone’s now realising that, ‘Geez Barngarla’s sort of kicking goals here, let’s get a piece of this somehow.’ And I think it’s all started from the language reclamation program.”

**Resilience**

“It’s taught us a lot of strength. It’s taught us a lot of resilience.”

**Empowerment/Growth**

“Because it not only allowed us to empower and teach our young fellas, but it got to the community that it wasn’t us butting heads. It’s about next generation being who they are, and where they're from, and embracing their heritage, their culture, and using their language.”

“We want it to empower us, and I think that’s another impact that it’s had on the people who have been involved, is I believe it’s empowered them more.”
Identity
“Language plays probably the most important part I believe, in me being who I am and my family being who they are I think.”

“At the end of the day, it’s our birthright, we want to learn our language and we’re bringing it back.”

Confidence
“I’d say building up confidence, especially with how we do Welcome to Country. That’s building up the confidence to talk in public as well as just being confident in talking your language and not worrying about people judging you […] so I think confidence is a big thing.”

Cultural pride
“I don’t know how to explain it. It’s like a joyful feeling. Because I’m sharing the language as well as welcoming them to the Country. And me speaking the language, like my ancestors before me, it’s like a step closer to - I don’t know how to say it. It’s like an overwhelming feeling of happiness and pride in being who I am, and being a Barngarla descendent.”
How?

Qualitative interviews

Analysis and Coding

Review of Quantitative Questionnaires

Refining the Questionnaire
### SUPPORTING QUOTES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SUPPORTING QUOTES</th>
<th>DOMAIN</th>
<th>QUESTIONNAIRES</th>
<th>PROPOSED QUESTIONNAIRE ITEMS</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“I don’t know how to explain it. It’s like a joyful feeling. Because I’m sharing the language...And me speaking the language, like my ancestors before me...It’s like an overwhelming feeling of happiness and pride in being who I am and being a Barngarla descendent.”</td>
<td>Happiness</td>
<td>GEM (Inner Peace Subscale)</td>
<td>(I) Feel very happy with my self and my life</td>
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<td>“For me to actually learn about my language and my culture...I reckon it’s just given me more courage and gave me pride to think, ‘I know who I am. I know my language’. Even if I’m not fluent...I just feel real proud to be who I am.”</td>
<td>Pride</td>
<td>ARQQ (Self-esteem Subscale)</td>
<td>I feel pride in my achievements.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Language plays probably the most important part, I believe, in me being who I am and my family being who they are...I think it’s very important that we, as Barngarla people, get to learn what’s us, what makes us, us. And that’s our language and that’s our culture and that’s our Dreaming. Those three there are interconnected with who we are as Aboriginal people.”</td>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>ARQQ (Cultural Identity Subscale)</td>
<td>Being Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander is an important part of who I am</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>ARQQ (Cultural Identity Subscale)</td>
<td>I am able to maintain my Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander identity, values and beliefs.</td>
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Assessing Wellbeing – Before and After

(4) Assess language use and wellbeing

Year THREE

Year FOUR

Year FIVE

(Barngarla Language Group: Before and After = 100 people)

Year THREE

Year FIVE

(Comparator Group = 300 Aboriginal people, Eyre Peninsula)
Assessing Language use and Wellbeing

What
We would like to ask people some general questions about:
• Who they are, where they live and their experiences in education and work
• Their experiences, thoughts and feelings towards Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander languages
• How they have been feeling lately

Why
• We hope to show communities a snapshot of language use and wellbeing in their area
• We hope that the results from this study can be used to support and advocate for Indigenous languages in Australia and around the world

Who
Participants will include:
• Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people living within the Eyre Peninsula at the time the survey is undertaken
• Aged 15 years or above
### PART III. SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL WELLBEING

We are now going to move to some questions about wellbeing. We are interested in how you have been feeling lately. There are no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ answers.

*The first eleven questions are around how you are feeling about life now and also how you feel about the future. Please rate from 1 to 5 how each of these strength-based questions describe yourself, and the way you are with your family, community and culture. (1 = Not at all; 5 = A lot)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>A little</th>
<th>Somewhat</th>
<th>A fair bit</th>
<th>A lot</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C1. I feel very happy with myself</td>
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<td>C2. I feel very happy with my life</td>
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<td>C3. On a daily basis things happen that make me happy</td>
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<td>C4. Right now, I have all the things in my life I need to be happy and healthy</td>
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<td>C5. There is meaning in what I do in my daily life</td>
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<td>C6. I have opportunities to work in my life, keep busy and stay involved</td>
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<td>C7. I feel hopeful for a better future for myself</td>
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<td>C8. I feel hopeful for a better future for my community</td>
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<td>C9. I can do just about anything I really set my mind to do</td>
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<td>C10. I feel strong and full of energy to do what is needed</td>
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<td>C11. I have things in my life that I am passionate about</td>
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Key outcomes of the study include:

• the first formal test of a causal relationship between language revival and mental health;
• establishing community-based methods for evaluating mental health interventions; and
• an innovative wellbeing intervention in high-risk communities

Importantly, Aboriginal community voices form the central foundation from which the methods for this study are being developed
Barngarla Community Members
For more information, please contact us

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