Practical Theology and Contextualizing Research

Maria Power[1]

Abstract: Being Christian in contemporary times is of ultimate concern to many hearts and minds committed to Christ who, as both human and divine, engaged the impact of situations on people's aspirations and experienced needs. This paper will examine the role of research and authoritative representation of those who are "other" via initially differentiating some elements relevant to situating a context.

Acknowledgement of Country

Before I begin, I wish to voice my respect for the peoples of the First Nations of this land through a now familiar Australian protocol called an Acknowledgement of Country. I acknowledge the custodians past and present of the land upon which this conference is being held. "As we share our own knowledge, teaching, learning and research practices, may we also pay respect to the knowledge embedded forever within the Aboriginal Custodianship of Country".[2]

Introduction

This paper is offered to facilitate discussion contextualising research projects and an understanding of Practical Theology. Many efforts in Australia aspire to the intention of contributing to the eventual establishment of greater parity in valued outcomes for people of Indigenous descent alongside those of mainstream Australia. However, achievement of the outcomes sought may also contribute to the ongoing differentiation of policy development for all people – inclusive of those who are Non-Indigenous. Essentially I am focused here on developing the importance of context in any project and to tap into any expertise or insight you as conference participants may wish to share.

A key factor in the initiation of any research project involving Indigenous Australians is an identified gap in valued outcomes. Key participants in the design of associated research can be Aboriginal Elders, Community members and key agencies valuing bridge building. Shawn Wilson advocates development of an Indigenous research paradigm – most especially one that anticipates and responds "to the concerns of academics accustomed to the dominant system's method of research presentation".[3] A growing movement of conversation away from sole concentration on disadvantage can be detected in some circles relevant to such research. A sole focus on 'disadvantage' can have within it the inherent danger of slipping into the predominant use of mainstream deficit models which reinforce low expectations and

[1] Maria Power, PhD, Board of Disaster Training International.

[2] Quoted from http://sydney.ed.au/koori/aboutus/acknowledgement%20of%20country%20wording.pdf

[3] Wilson, Shawn, ***Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods***. Winnipeg, Manitoba, Fernwood Publishing, 2008:6. Though an Opaskwayak Cree from northern Manitoba based in the Northern Rivers area of New South Wales, this author has spent many years riding the Indigenous and academic worlds' interface.

consequently create self-fulfilling prophecies.[4] Differentiating elements of disadvantage in economic terms or lack of equity however is valuable for understanding the context within which excellence strives towards greater achievement and success within two diverse cultural worlds, a core subject of Shawn Wilson's study. He states:

> focusing on the positive in Indigenous research focuses on harmony. It forms a relationship that pulls things together. … Making a connection in this way allows for growth and positive change to take place. Researching the negative is focusing on and giving more power to disharmony. Its focus is alienation or lack of relationships and does nothing to form relations but rather to tear them apart. So we have an obligation as researchers to help others to see this. And I think that this is what our communities are demanding. I think that for us it's just a matter of doing what our communities and Elders are telling us to do.[5]

Also, this author is adamant that, if research is done right, one must change.[6] One change often needed is movement away from preferred simplistic options disguised as efficient engagement rather than acknowledging the impact of interrelated layers of experience or cumulative stressors.

Here is a sample snapshot of a region in the Australian state of Victoria named East Gippsland. Compiling similar snapshots as part of method assist in building the "thick" descriptions of contexts gained by research participants' observations.[7] According to the 2011 Census, East Gippsland's median age is 47 compared to 37 for Victoria and Australia.[8] The following table reveals some other facts.

Table 1[9]

2011	East Gippsland Shire	Regional Vic	Victoria	Australia
Median Weekly Household Income	$798	$945	$1216	$1234
Couples with children	22%	27%	32%	31%
Older couples without children	15%	11%	9%	9%
Medium and high density housing	10%	11%	23%	25%
Households with	27%	32%	34%	33%

[4] A fresh initiative in driving Indigenous excellence is the National Indigenous Youth Leadership Academy, a collaboration between the National Centre of Indigenous Excellence (NCIE), the Stronger Smarter Institute (SSI) and the Foundation for Young Australians (FYA). See http://ncie.org.au/blog/2011/08/16/national-indigenous-youth-leadership-academy/ .

[5] Wilson, 2008:109

[6] Ibid, 135.

[7] This is a term employed by Geertz to assist the work of social science. Refer Geertz, Clifford, "Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture", in ***The Interpretation of Culture***. New York, Basic Books. 1973: Chapter 1. See http://academic.csuohio.edu/as227/spring2003/geertz.htm .

[8] Australian Bureau of Statistics http://profile.id.com.au/east-gippsland/home

[9] Reference http://profile.id.com.au/east-gippsland/population

a mortgage				
Median monthly mortgage repayment	$1296	$1300	$1700	$1800
Median weekly rent	$180	$190	$277	$285
Households renting	23%	24%	26%	29%
Non-English speaking background	4%	6%	20%	16%
University attendance	1%	2%	5%	4%
SEIFA index of disadvantage 2006	963	982	1012	1005

According to the broad defining Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) noted in Table 1, East Gippsland (except for two particular locations) is relatively disadvantaged socio-economically i.e. its whole population, not only the Indigenous component, are disadvantaged in terms of access to material and social resources and therefore in their ability to participate in society.[10] The two locations that are exceptions are: Paynesville surrounds where many people go to live in retirement and Metung-Nungurner and District where some people of Indigenous descent still will not go because of past happenings.[11] These two areas of exception and their immediate surrounds feature within the location of the highest concentration of workers. Notably, East Gippsland's overall population has steadily increased over the past decade to total 42,793 according to the 2011 Census.

Within the distribution of resources as outlined, the Gippsland East Local Learning and Employment Network has named the following critical and other issues within the region:

- The number of young people failing to have successful transitions to either education, training or meaningful and sustainable employment
- The low level of Indigenous engagement with post-compulsory levels of school or training
- The decreasing number of university enrolments and the high number of deferrals
- The decreasing population aged between 15 and 19[12]
- According to a recent survey, 31% of female students and 18% of male students have experienced cyber-bullying.[13] One school recorded a 50% incidence. Figures reveal a 36% incidence among all students in the 12-14 age groups.

[10] See http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/2011.0.55.001Main%20Features282011?opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=2011.0.55.001&issue=2011&num=&view where the Socio-Economic Index for Areas (SEIFA) is defined.

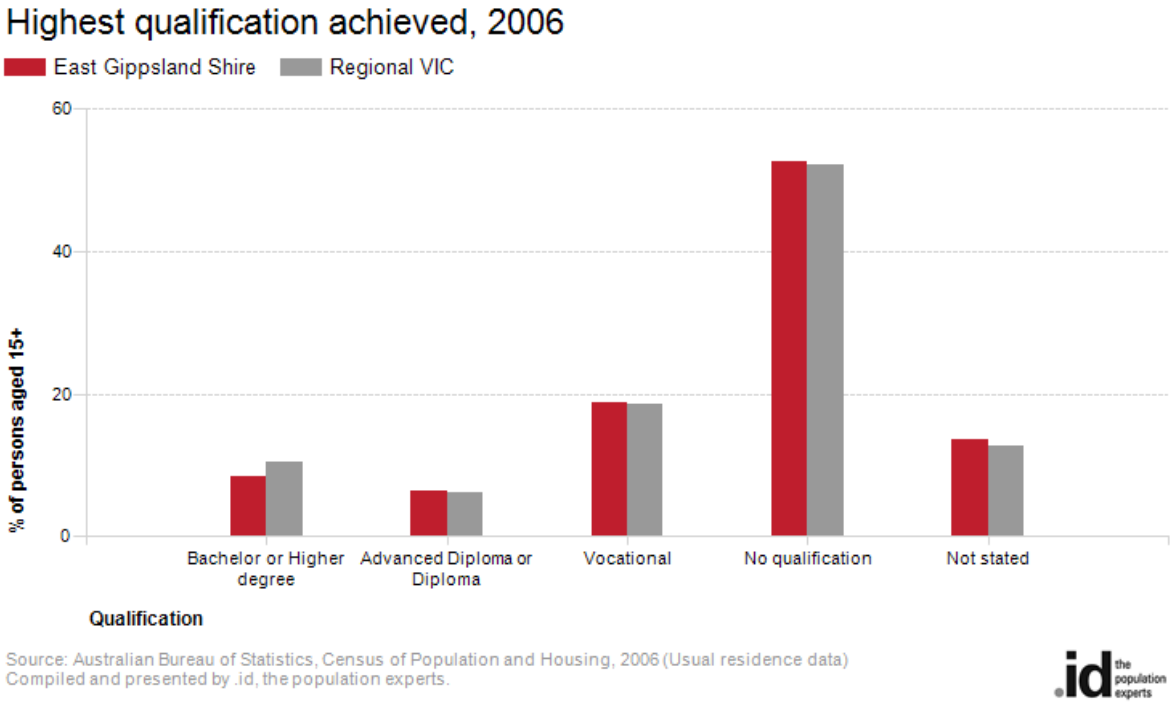
[11] Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Census of Population and Housing 2006. Compiled and presented by .id, the population experts. (Usual residence data); also personal communication by a local worker with Indigenous people.

[12] Ibid, 3.

[13] Ibid, 28, citing East Gippsland Shire Council Youth Strategy Report, 2011.

- The rate of self-harming among adolescents in East Gippsland is twice the rate for Victoria and the district is ranked 3 out of 30 Local Government Areas (LGAs) where a rank of one is the highest rate of hospitalisations for self-harm. Where 1 indicates the highest rate of psychiatric hospitalisations, East Gippsland ranked 25 out of 68 LGAs.[14]
- It has been assessed that 17.1% of 15-19 year olds live with a dysfunctional family and that this is comparable with the rest of Victoria.
- Destination of students is still dependent on socio-economic status.[15]

If we accept an impacting link between socio-economic status and educational qualifications achieved, we note the following distribution of qualifications achieved occurs.



Community

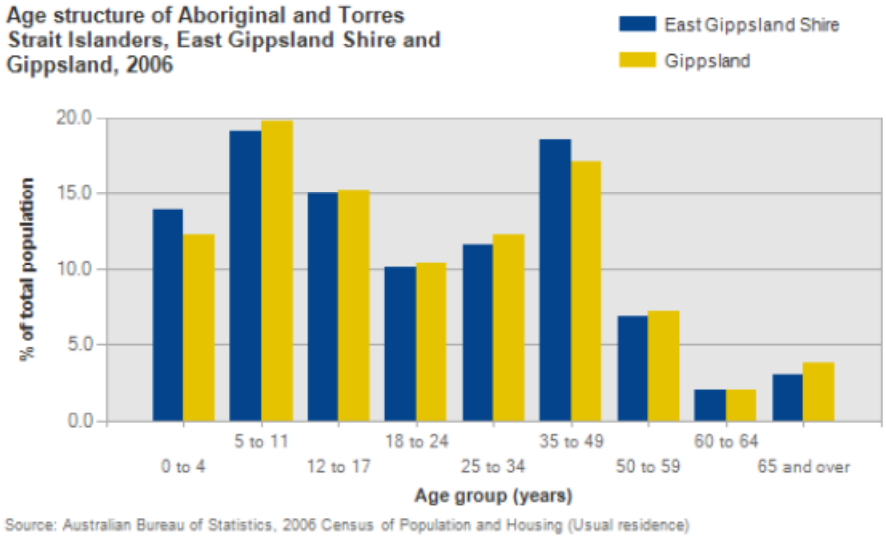
Sitting within this overview, who is the Indigenous community? Isaacs, Mayberry and Gruis identify the term 'Community' when used with a capital 'C', as referring to country/land, family ties, belonging, and shared experiences of a group of Aboriginal people.[16] The age structure within the East Gippsland Indigenous community in 2006 is shown via the following bar graphs where the blue columns note the percentage of the total Indigenous population in each age bracket compared to those of the total Indigenous population in

[14] Ibid. The source of this data is the Victorian Child and Monitoring System (VCAMS) Adolescent Community Profile for young People age 10-17. This is a tool used by DEECD to ascertain the interaction of the service system, the community and family to determine the wellbeing of children and for government planning and intervention. See http://www.education.vic.gov.au/researchinnovation/vcams/default.htm

[15] Ibid.

[16] Isaacs, Anton N; Mayberry, Darryl and Gruis, Hilton, "Mental health services for Aboriginal men: Mismatches and solutions", in ***International Journal of Mental Health Nursing***, 2012, 21, 401.

Gippsland as a whole (Gippsland consists of 6 LGAs – East Gippsland, Wellington, Latrobe, Baw Baw, South Gippsland and Bass Coast).[17] A similar 2011 Census analysis is unavailable at the time of writing.



Although a characteristic of many communities of First Peoples and their descendants is their level of cohesiveness, one can ask how does this degree of cohesiveness emerge?[18] Is this cohesiveness primarily achieved through Elders or shared experiences? In their Gippsland study focused on improving mental health awareness among rural Aboriginal men, Isaacs and Mayberry have pointed out that "Elders have a considerable part to play in lending legitimacy to information that is disseminated"– perhaps most particularly at the interface between science and Indigenous knowledge.[19] One cannot however determine the number of Elders available as leaders by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) graphs. Age is not the sole determinant for becoming and being recognised as an Elder. Two East Gippsland Aboriginal Community members have stated that being an Elder involves meeting Community expectations and Community members knowing you will be there for them. An Elder has standing within their Community based on what s/he has done to gain respect over the

---

[17] East Gippsland Shire Council, ***East Gippsland Shire Regional Youth Plan 2011-2013 Background Paper***, 2011:16

[18] As assumed by Weijer, Goldsand and Emanuel, this applies to American Indians, Alaska Natives, Canadian First Nations and Inuit Peoples, Australian Aborigines, Torres Strait Islanders and others. See Weijer, Charles; Goldsand, Gary and Emanuel, Ezekiel J, "Protecting communities in research: current guidelines and limits of extrapolation", ***in Nature Genetics***, Vol 23, Nov 1999: 275-280. Publisher Nature America Inc, http://www.nature.com/ng/journal/v23/n3/index.html#af

[19] Isaacs, Anton and Mayberry, Darryl, "Improving mental health awareness among rural Aboriginal men: perspectives from Gippsland", in ***Australis Psychiatry***, 2012, 20:109. Originally published online March 28, 2012, DOI:10.1177/1039856212437256, http://apy.sagepub.com/content/20/2/108. The authors cite Mason Durie's contention that Indigenous knowledge can be successfully applied alongside other knowledge systems – involving elders allows Aboriginal knowledge to be disseminated in parallel with western knowledge (from Durie, M, "Understanding health and illness: research at the interface between science and indigenous knowledge", in ***International Journal of Epidemiology***, 2004; 33:1138-1143). However, this means that the process needs to incorporate the transfer of 'knowledge, skills and power' to the Elders and other community members (citing Kirmayer, LJ; Simpson, C and Cargo, M, "Healing Traditions: culture, community and mental health promotion with Canadian Aboriginal peoples", in ***Australasian Psychiatry***, 2003; 11 Suppl: S15-23.

years.[20] The respect generally accorded Elders is no guarantee that it also operates among Indigenous young people as it did in the past.[21]

The second highest concentration of Aboriginal people in Victoria lives in East Gippsland. The most recent figures available show this to be 2.8% compared to the figure of 0.6% for Victoria in general and 2.3% for Australia.[22] As part of their shared experiences, Victorian Aboriginal people like many elsewhere in Australia have been affected by trauma and exclusion.[23] In a national social survey conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households in 2008, notably 21.6% of young people between the ages of 15 and 24 felt discriminated against in the previous 12 months and consequently 4.5% stated they then avoided situations due to past discrimination. Of the participants in the survey who were 25 years plus, 31.5% felt discriminated against in the last 12 months and 10.6% then avoided situations because of this.[24] This would seem to suggest the need for recovery-oriented services which are value-centred; most particularly valuing of the person as an individual and part of a community as well as enhancing of personal responsibility, oriented to choice and awakening people's power. Rather than a return to 'normal' Western systemic control over people where destructive or detrimental absorbing of racist and discriminatory acts is expected because this makes life easier, a focus on broader transformation of services will assist personal recovery and fuller participation at all levels.[25]

One notes the social isolation imposed on the local Aboriginal people in East Gippsland for a significant part of the twentieth century which was "in part a product of misguided and discriminatory laws".[26] This also ensured mainstream separation from what have been called Indigenist models of health that operate with alternate understandings e.g. connection to

---

[20] Input from local Indigenous presenters at ***Cultural Safety Training*** for the East Gippsland Regional Clinical School held at Monash University School of Rural Health campus, Bairnsdale, October 4, 2012.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Australian Bureau of Statistics, Census, 2006. The 2011 Census Data relating to Aboriginal people in East Gippsland will be available with the second release of data.

[23] For a discussion on clinical and psychosocial interventions being misguided and failing to deliver positive outcomes because of their scant attention to exposure to traumatic events and resultant Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PSTD) in Indigenous communities, refer to Nadew, G T, "Exposure to traumatic events, Prevalence of posttraumatic stress disorder and alcohol abuse in Aboriginal communities", in ***Rural and Remote Health,*** 12:1667. Published October 12, 2012, http://www.rrh.org.au/articles/showarticlenew.asp?ArticleID=1667**,** accessed October 17, 2012. A 97.3% rate of exposure to traumatic events was found to develop into a 55.2% rate of PSTD and 91.0% alcohol misuse in those who developed PSTD symptoms.

[24] Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, ***Balert Boorron: The Victorian Plan for Aboriginal Children and Young People (2010-2020).*** Melbourne, Victorian Government, p 40, accessed via http://www.education.vic.gov/about/directions/aboriginalcharter/plan/default.htm

[25] Slade, Mike, "100 ways to support recovery", in ***Rethink***, May 2009: 6. Accessed via http://www.rethink.org/mental_health_shop/productsrethink_publications/100_ways_to_support.html The author's differentiation between clinical and personal recovery is pertinent though, in the case of effects of traumatic events or traumatising incidents, a suffering person is in the first instance dealing with a natural response rather than a mental illness or character flaw. Personal recovery relevant to ongoing health development is deeply personal and unique in process associated with a positive self-identity and removed from a traditional medical approach (ibid, 2, 5, 6).

[26] Gardiner-Garden, J***. From Dispossession to Reconciliation***. Research Paper No 27, 1998-99. Canberra, ACT, Department of Parliamentary Library – Information and Research Services, 1999, cited in Christian, B and Blinkhorn, A S, "A review of dental caries in Australian Aboriginal children: the health inequalities perspective", in ***Rural and Remote Health***, 12, October 16, 2012:6. Available online via http://www.rrh.org.au

meaningful identity via 'country'. One is thus prompted to ask: Has this enforced separation anything to do with "today's Aboriginal communities being the most disadvantaged by all measures of healthy living"?[27] Alternate understandings of truth which come under the term "Indigenous knowledge" are defined by a number of authors as: locally bound, indigenous to a specific area; context and culture specific; non-formal; orally transmitted, and generally not documented; dynamic and adaptive, holistic in nature; closely related to survival and subsistence for many people worldwide; governed by ancestral laws of representation and owned by Aboriginal peoples.[28] These raise questions about western mainstream institutional capacity. If we accept institutional capacity as "the ability of a society to produce the results it wants", why do so many statistics keep revealing lack of parity in so many areas for Aboriginal people despite well-intentioned mainstream western services?[29] What is lacking in mainstream institutional capacity? Are Aboriginal peoples the only ones who need institutional capacity building as is often inferred? Do the impact of forms of racism on identified gaps in outcomes need consideration too i.e. elite-producing, internalised, interpersonal, inter-racial, intra-racial, systemic ones? Also, what is the impact of macro-stressors such as economic recessions or reporting of riots such as that associated with the Tent Embassy 40th anniversary in 2012?[30]

Based on research among children and young people accompanying an adult parent, the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) ***Balert Boorron*** document identifies cumulative stressors creating barriers to Indigenous young people's successful completion of secondary school: low income (the median weekly family income for Victoria's Aboriginal families according to the 2006 census data is almost half of that of all families: $688 compared to $1209); insecure housing and homelessness; health

---

[27] Ibid.

[28] Gower, Graham and Byrne, Matt, "Becoming a Culturally Competent Teacher: Beginning the Journey", in Beresford, Quentin; Partington, Gary and Gower, Graeme (eds), ***Reform and Resistance in Aboriginal Education***. Crawley, WA, UWA Publishing, 2012: 383; citing Boven, K and Morohashi, J (eds), ***Best practices using Indigenous knowledge***. Paris, Nuffic, The Hague and UNESCO/MOST, 2002:13. . Retrieved from http://www.unesco.org./most/Bpikpub2.pdf; Christie, M, "Transdisciplinary Research and Aboriginal Knowledge", in ***The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education***, 35, 2006: 78-89; Nakata, M, "The Cultural Interface", in ***The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education***, 36, 2007:7-14; Brady, W, "Indigenous Australian Education and Globalisation", in ***International Review of Education***, 43, 1997: 413-22. Nakata has argued "that the differences between Indigenous knowledge systems and Western scientific ones are 'incommensurable' and 'irreconcilable' (ibid:8). He argued further that these differences are such that one knowledge system cannot legitimately verify the 'claims of truth of the other via its own standards and justifications.' The Western knowledge system and the Indigenous knowledge system are grounded in different theories that frame 'who can be the knower', 'what can be known', 'what constitutes knowledge, sources of evidence for constructing knowledge, what constitutes truth, how truth is to be verified, how evidence becomes truth, how valid inferences are to be drawn, the role of belief in evidence and related issues".

[29] Cornell, Stephen, "What is Institutional Capacity and How Can It Help American Indian Nations Meet The Welfare Challenge", presentation prepared for the Symposium on ***Capacity Building and Sustainability of Tribal Governments: The Development of Social Welfare Systems through Preferred Futuring***. Washington University, St Louis, May 21-23, 2002: 8.

[30] Definitions of these terms can be found in Paradies, Yin; Harris, Ricci and Anderson, Ian, ***The Impact of Racism on Indigenous Health in Australia and Aoteoroa: Towards a Research Agenda,*** Aboriginal Health Discussion Paper No 4. Casuarina, NT, Co-operative Centre for Aboriginal Health, March, 2008: vi. Accessed via http://lowitja.org.au/sites/default/files/docs/Racism-Report.pdf
For comment on "the reality" versus reporting, see McQuire, Amy, "View from the Tent Embassy: reality v news reports", January 27, 2012, accessed via
http://www.crikey.com.au/2012/01/27/view-from-the- embassy-reality-v-news-reports

(more likely to experience dental health and hearing problems); disability (higher rates of physical, hearing or intellectual compared to other groups); early pregnancy (five times more likely to become pregnant under 20 years of age than other Victorian women. Aboriginal women under 20 years and the people around them often celebrate early pregnancy I have been informed by one worker of a service provider); behavioural and emotional problems; violence; child abuse; contact with the criminal justice system; racism and bullying.[31] They do not include connections with young people who accessed services unaccompanied as teenagers. Other reported findings are:

> Over 40 per cent of Aboriginal secondary school students aspire to attend university. When the respondent of Aboriginal children aged 4–14 years were asked about the type of support that would help them to complete Year 12, some 80 per cent of respondents suggested that support from family, friends and school would be the most important source, followed by career guidance (52.3 per cent) and individual tutoring (46.5 per cent); 23.6 per cent of respondents believed that increased discipline would help a young person complete Year 12.
>
> … Research shows that young people who leave school before Year 12 are less likely to participate in the labour force and more likely to experience periods of unemployment and to receive lower wages (Access Economic 2005). Early school leavers are also more likely to face health-related problems such as stress and anxiety due to job uncertainty (Vinson 2007).
>
> Despite enhanced attention to the transition from school, almost a quarter of Victoria's Aboriginal young people aged 15–24 are not in education, training or employment (SCRGP 2009). [32]

The results of Victorian Adolescent Health and WellBeing survey conducted by DEECD in 2009 among students in Years 7, 9 and 11 and a very small number aged 18 and over reveal that "the vast majority of Aboriginal young people aspire to complete Year 12 and pursue further education or a trade".[33]

Dr Zane Ma Rhea asserts that problems facing education systems are: the valuing of western industrial knowledge over human "lifeways" knowledge; the remoteness and inaccessibility of many small Indigenous and local populations mitigating against research and documentation undertakings and reducing accessibility to information about local initiatives in education, if they exist.[34] These problems impact the delivery of culturally competent services.

Practical Theology

[31] DEECD, ibid:40.
[32] Ibid, 41;
[33] Ibid, 39.
[34] Ma Rhea, Zane, ***Indigenous People and Education***, PowerPoint Presentation, accessed via www.education.monash.edu.au/indigenous.ed/

I wholeheartedly support Michael Cowan's suggestion that Practical Theology could be named a Theology of Praxis but that such a description can be ambiguous.[35] I would describe this discipline as respectful of academic discourse while focusing on the formulation of contextualised outcomes. The discipline seeks to actively avoid the academic/practitioner binary in order to move beyond sole contemplation of context to producing responses attuned to, respectful and critical of existing traditions, cultures and people's experiences. As a discipline, its stance must be inclusive of the voice of the marginalized and those whose voice has been muted. The knowledge of researchers/academics is harnessed to create life-giving change and yet holders of knowledge are not the sole architects and implementers of such change. The human beings affected need to be able to participate at all levels as agents of change rather than unquestioning recipients of what others think is or interpret to be good/best for them.

As a discipline, Practical Theology is driven by concerns and the need for clear differentiation of all elements affecting associated issues. Therefore it seeks a degree of analysis that enables fertilization between energies straining for transformation and continuity, order and freedom, consultation, participation versus coercion, decision-making based on consensus with those affected and the tandem nature of rights and responsibilities. Practical theologians thus promote creative actions responsive to research, broad study of compelling issues and concerns and then evaluation of negotiated action. Their discipline:

- is hermeneutical in character highlighting the role of interpretation in reading our world and our traditions
- is correlational: holding all partners in reciprocal relationship
- can be described as critical because it demands explicit evaluation of inherited understandings that guide our interpretations and actions
- is transformative as "its constant concern is to bring the real world into greater harmony with the Creator's intentions".[36]

Within a response to research premised on partnership, Swinton and Mowat assert Practical Theology "seeks to inspire and direct new modes of action/practice which will enable individuals and communities to function, not more effectively, but more faithfully". [37] Can this faithfulness to current self-understanding possibly lead to a growing sense of identity from which self-directed effectiveness emerges? Hoch views Practical Theology as needing to be saved from introversion and blindness to present reality.[38] This redemption can partly occur via openness to the social science disciplines and more particularly via having sensitivity to context as its starting point.[39] From here it can make connections and be

---

[35] Cowan, Michael A, ***Introduction to Practical Theology***. New Orleans, Loyola University, Summer 2000, accessed in 2007 from http://www.loyno.edu/~mcowan/PracticalTheology.html

[36] Ibid.

[37] From Swinton, John and Mowat, Harriet, ***Practical Theology and Qualitative Research***. London, SCM Press, 2006, cited by Graham, Elaine, ***Do we need an International Practical Theology?*** Title of Presidential Address, Conference of the International Academy of Practical Theology (IAPT), Humboldt University, Berlin, April 2, 2007.

[38] Hoch, Lothar Carlos, ***The Struggle of Practical Theology in its Search for Identity: a Latin American Perspective.*** Paper presented at the ***Secularization Theories, Religious Identities and Practical Theology*** Conference of the International Academy of Practical Theology (IAPT), Humboldt University, Berlin, March 30-April 4, 2007:4.

[39] Kelly, Michael, ***Practical Theology: scholarly care***. Title of presentation given at Melbourne College of Divinity Research School, Dalton McCaughey Library, Parkville, Melbourne, July 11, 2007. Presenter stated that in his preparation he relied heavily on Darragh, Neil, "The practice of practical

dialogically constructive with other dialogue partners as sources for transformative praxis.[40] Essentially it thus fosters affirmation of uniqueness. The *Palawa* woman and Womanist theologian, Lee Miena Skye asserts that women of Indigenous descent that she has interviewed defy "the Church and the State to understand and support their uniqueness. To give freedom to that uniqueness (they maintain) is their human right and reflection of the wonder of God".[41] Privileging Western forms of engagement and knowledge, it is this uniqueness which is often marginalized by Western academic engagements. The uniqueness to which Skye refers encompasses an understanding of existence as shaped by relationship with land and a significantly integrated matrix of values often sidelined by Western systems premised on supposedly a-cultural models of participation. All too often participation is invited without the power differentials involved being consciously considered resulting in an ultimate dictation by the more powerful. The point at which the dictation asserts itself is dependent upon the level of tolerance for difference and even the ability to recognise it.

Jesus referred to Himself as "the way, the truth and the life" (John 14:6) and within His ministry challenged various existing institutional practices. He challenged their existing capacity which resulted in marginalization. In his engagement with Bartimaeus who could represent the marginalized and disempowered as well as those victimised by cultural blindness rather than simply physical blindness, we catch a glimpse of Christ recognizing personal dignity and full agency. He did this simply by asking, "What do you want me to do for you?" (Mark 10:51) We also learn from this scenario that Bartimaeus had a deep desire for full rather than partial wholeness, for an opportunity to flourish exactly like the non-marginalized. The decolonizing of methodologies is also being represented here.

Within the context in which there are the marginalized or victims of previous cultural blindness, concentration on facts is crucial. These facts confirm the reality and consequences of marginalization and are needed in formulating responses which invest valuable resources. Although as Dr Howard Bath, the NT Children's Commissioner, has stated: "The arena of **policy development around Indigenous disadvantage** is a fraught one with no shortage of strongly held opinions and beliefs", he strongly asserts:

> that we first need to be clear about the facts of what is happening before we proffer our opinions and solutions. The late American senator and social commentator Daniel Moynihan once famously remarked when involved in some international controversy at the United Nations, "everyone is entitled to their own opinion, but not to their own facts".[42]

---

theology: key decisions and abiding hazards", in ***Australian EJournal of Theology***, Issue 9, March 2007, http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/theology/ejournal/aejt_9/darragh.htm
Darragh states that all contexts are different but not isolated and thus we can learn from research conducted in different but related contexts. Process in Practical Theology "insists on a context-sensitive starting point as distinct from those theologies that begin with general premises about the world or about human nature"(p 10).

[40] Ibid.

[41] Skye, Lee Miena, "Australian Aboriginal Catholic Women Seek Wholeness: Hearts Are Still Burning", in Pike, Elizabeth; Elvey, Anne; McCoy, Brian and Reynolds, Robyn (eds), ***Land, Culture and Faith: Listening, Respecting, Responding, Connecting, Pacifica***, Australasian Theological Studies, Vol 19, No 3, October 2006:307.

[42] Bath, Howard, ***Disparity and disadvantage - the context for child protection in the Northern Territory.*** Presentation at NT Council of Social Services Conference, April 15, 2011:1.

This reminds me of the prophetic stance taken by Rev Dr Cyril Hally, SSC, JCL, who would reinforce his delivery of a talk or teaching class by punctuating it with: "And that's a fact!"[43] Although deeply rooted in Church teachings, tradition and culture, his love of truth moved him to seek truth via processes from which it could emerge – especially via respect for those processes which illuminated contexts. His prophetic voice and that of others within the Church itself who have suffered from marginalization remind me of Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann's words "Deep talking to Deep".[44] Rooted in the depth she describes, Practical Theology rather than being solely contemplative is transformative in impetus. It can do this only via deep familiarization with context and focus on helping to address operating limitations, barriers, rights violations and oppression. The necessity to connect with context and its various interacting elements, however, does not always emerge as a mandatory expression of communicable information within Practical Theology. A source of angst for the Practical Theologian Julian Müller is blatant detachment of the application part from the descriptive part "as if the context was never really part of the hermeneutical process".[45]

Though religious knowledge and truths in themselves are important, it seems that sometimes these are the sole starting points for engagement with the marginalized and that their actual circumstances are not acknowledged. If one acknowledges also the existence of Indigenous knowledge, how does this feature in the differentiation process that is part of orthopraxy? Orthopraxy recognises the experience of "the other" without necessarily always promoting orthodoxy as having the sole, absolute privileged position from which helpful dynamics evolve.[46] Does being Christian in a world with the marginalized demand the full, total embrace of Christian orthodoxy as a pre-requisite for orthopraxy? Jesus engaged Bartimaeus without reference to or promotion of orthodoxy. His action can be emblematic of orthopraxy as encouragement in the face of others' discouragement. Linking in once again with the theme of this conference, one could state that orthopraxy is a necessary part of the expression of Practical Theology. As an endeavour of accompaniment, orthopraxy may perhaps be covered by an expansive interpretation of the term "mission" but too many still associate/are satisfied with "mission" meaning an unconditional sole promotion of orthodoxy and development of a pre-determined response to the other by those who know best.

Orthopraxy within the liminal space between a dominant culture and a minority one is guided by principles e.g. enabling agency and safeguarding values such as respect, reciprocity, equality, spirit and integrity and responsibility.[47] A key component of formulating

---

[43] In 1995, he was awarded the Philia Prize for Vision and Initiative in Religious Work in Australia by the World Conference of Religion and Peace. On 31st March, 2005, he became a Doctor of the University (Honoris Causa) at Australia Catholic University. He was a long time friend of the Chinese people and mentored many of us who were Non-Chinese. Refer http://old.xinde.org/English/universal/20059211 .

[44] Ungenmerr-Baumann, Miriam-Rose, ***Dadirri: Inner Deep Listening and Quiet Still Awareness***, page 4, accessed via http://www.liturgyplanning.com.au/documents/main.php?g2_view=Core.DownloadItem&g2_itemId=4832

[45] Müller, Julian, "A Postfoundationalist, HIV-Positive Practical Theology". Paper presented at the ***Dreaming The Land: Practical Theologies in Resistance and Hope*** Conference of the International Academy of Practical Theology, Australian Catholic University, McCauley Campus, Banyo, Brisbane, Australia, June 25-29, 2005:3.

[46] Interestingly, Geertz observed a minimal focus on doctrine operating among the Indigenous peoples of the Bali and other autochthonous religions of the Indonesian archipelago (Geertz, C, "Internal Conversion" in Contemporary Bali, in ***The Interpretation of Cultures***. New York, 1973:177), cited by Adams, K M, "The Discourse of Souls in Tana Toraya (Indonesia): Indigenous Notions and Christian Conceptions", in ***Ethnology***, Vol 32, No 1, Winter 1993:55-68. Published by University of Pittsburgh, see http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307

[47] See National Health and Medical Research Council, ***Values and Ethics: Guidelines for Ethical Conduct in***

transforming responses is the building of ethical relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples on the one hand and others who "must take into account the principles and values of Aboriginal and Torres Strait cultures".[48] The National Health and Medical Research Council's Guidelines for Ethical Conduct in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research state that to "ignore the reality of inter-cultural difference is to live with outdated notions of scientific investigations".[49] In facilitating research, note that:

> To '*mis*recognise or fail to recognise (cultural differences) can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone [or a group] in a false, distorted and reduced model of being' … Research cannot be 'difference-blind'.[50]
> Research relationships are also influenced by what is not said. 'Problems [emerge] if we do not recognise that values operate in the everyday world from *undeclared* evaluations and judgements about other people, their behaviours and practices'.[51]

Thus time needs to be taken to unearth the differences themselves which come from engagement in context, reflective practice, care, patience and the building of robust relationships.[52] Eliminating 'difference-blindness' in relationships is complex as it involves mindfulness to personal and institutional self-talk and resultant thinking patterns. It is "made more complex by the trivialisation of values and principles in contemporary society. The National Health and Medical Research Council further states that "Advocates who talk about values and cultural difference are often being told they are being too political or adopting an 'ideologically correct' view. Token gestures worsen this situation by exposing the debate to dismissive labelling".[53] Avoiding an illusion of resolution of difference is critical for enabling the ongoing self-definition and agency of the marginalized.

This approach is presented visually in Edward Hicks ***Peaceable Kingdom***.[54] It speaks of an eschatological state inferred particularly from Isaiah 11:6 – "The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them".[55] Often only the part to the right of the image is focused on as implying our ultimate destiny. However, on the left, we find inclusion of the marginalized represented by a group of Native Americans. Practical Theology assists the Church by prophetically proclaiming the need to create such places where the 'other' is seen with the eyes of Christ when he met Bartimaeus "so that Birth, growth and transformation can take place … where life is nurtured, not stifled".[56] Significantly, "researchers who choose to research in the margins are at risk of becoming marginalized themselves in their careers and workplaces. One strategy for overcoming this predicament is to 'embrace' the work and commit to building a career from that place".[57] Non-Indigenous

---

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research. Canberra, Commonwealth of Australia, 2003.

[48] Ibid, 2.

[49] Ibid, 3.

[50] Ibid, citing Taylor, C, ***Multiculturalism and the politics of recognition***. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1992.

[51] Ibid, citing Cameron, H, ***Values Education for a Pluralist Society***. Paper presented at Australian Association for Professional and Applied Ethics, 8th Annual Conference, Adelaide, 2001.

[52] See Beresford *et al*.

[53] NHMRC, 2003:3.

[54] See image created circa 1834, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/FileEdward_Hicks_-Peaceable_kingdom.jpg#file

[55] King James Version (Cambridge Edition), accessed via http://bible.cc/isaiah/11-6.htm

[56] http://www.cam.org.au/acmv/Article/Article/13155/marys-promise

[57] Smith, Linda Tuhiwai, ***Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples***. London, Zed Books, 2012: 213.

scholars can become involved "mentoring Indigenous researchers on the intellectual aspects of academia related to operational requirements" while guarding against the marginalization of the spiritual, holistic nature of Indigenous knowledges so "problematic for the more traditional, empiricist approach to knowledge".[58]

Conclusion

As part of the representation of the 'other', I propose that being Christian in a world with the marginalized partly means questioning the maintenance of a conversation solely focused on disadvantage. Disadvantage is relevant when working to define the context of the marginalized yet a consideration of their capacity for excellence and intellectual engagement, together with a human rights perspective, collective responsibility, Indigenous Peoples' rights when applicable and their individual aspirations are most important.[59]

We have seen that contexts can be multifaceted e.g. not only Indigenous community members characterised by relatively low levels of education and income.[60] Yet with the discarding of so much based within Indigenous structures of feeling and experience, remaining elements become identified as problems.[61] Any research project premised within Practical Theology needs to recognise objectivity can be claimed but a strong insightful hermeneutic of suspicion needs declaring as does focus "on negative aspects of life as identified by outside researchers".[62] Inclusion of a cross-cultural appreciative inquiry dimension can be beneficial alongside clear articulation of assumptions regarding the nature of reality. Simply indigenizing Western methods is limited.

Over time some Western cultures have come to emphasize knowledge gained most especially via scientific methods. Indigenous knowledges and ongoing recognition of cultures, not as a static given but rather as lenses for understanding perceptions, daily interactions and felt experiences need to be continually sought. The concept of 'culture' can be a springboard for also realising that all members of a particular culture will "not always think and act in ways … consistent with their cultural background".[63] To marginalize the existence of such differences is to repeat mistakes previously made. The Western mainstream outlook is

---

[58] Kovach, Margaret, ***Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts***. London, University of Toronto Press, 2009:170.

[59] An example of a holistic and innovative approach evidenced by comments by Mr Glanville, CEO of National Centre of Indigenous Excellence (NCIE) has merit. It assists Indigenous youth to raise expectations of self as a group and in setting new benchmarks for Indigenous achievement. See http://ncie.org.au/index.php/media-releases/106-focus-on-excellence.html .

[60] This is further supported by the Index for Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage (IRSED) derived from Census attributes linking ones such as low income, low educational attainment, high unemployment and proportion of the work force in relatively unskilled occupations. The IRSED score for East Gippsland places it in the 5th decile out of all local government areas across Australia where the 1st decile contains 10% of the least disadvantaged. East Gippsland's geography complicates addressing of realities represented by IRSED and SEIFA scores as many communities and homesteads are relatively isolated. Mobile phone coverage and internet access is inconsistent across the region. Refer: Office for Children and Portfolio Coordination, ***Adolescent Community Profile: Shire of East Gippsland 2010.*** Melbourne, Victoria, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, June, 2011:3; also, East Gippsland Shire Council, ***Tomorrow's Library: Submission to Ministerial Advisory Council on Public Libraries***. Endorsed by Council, May 2012.

[61] Wilson, 2008:16.

[62] Ibid.

[63] Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria Inc, ***Cultural Competence: Guidelines and Protocols***. Carlton, Vic, Statewide Resources Centre, December 2006:1.

challenged to consider the "problem of good" also within the marginalized, in Indigenous ways of being and knowing.[64] In an effort to be pragmatic and/practical via "One size fits all", it is most important that we assess our institutional capacity for cultural competency and actively avoid ultimately subscribing to the view: "In the end, we have the Gatling gun, and they have not".[65]

References

Adams, K M, "The Discourse of Souls in Tana Toraya (Indonesia): Indigenous Notions and Christian Conceptions", in ***Ethnology***, Vol 32, No 1, Winter 1993:55-68. Published by University of Pittsburgh, see http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307

Australian Bureau of Statistics, http://profile.id.com.au/east-gippsland

Bath, Howard, ***Disparity and disadvantage - the context for child protection in the Northern Territory.*** Presentation at NT Council of Social Services Conference, April 15, 2011:1.

Christian, B and Blinkhorn, A S, "A review of dental caries in Australian Aboriginal children: the health inequalities perspective", in ***Rural and Remote Health***, 12, October 16, 2012. Available online via http://www.rrh.org.au

Cornell, Stephen, "What is Institutional Capacity and How Can It Help American Indian Nations Meet The Welfare Challenge", presentation prepared for the Symposium on ***Capacity Building and Sustainability of Tribal Governments: The Development of Social Welfare Systems through Preferred Futuring***. Washington University, St Louis, May 21-23, 2002.

Cowan, Michael A, ***Introduction to Practical Theology***. New Orleans, Loyola University, Summer 2000, accessed 2007 from http://www.loyno.edu/~mcowan/PracticalTheology.html

Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, ***Balert Boorron: The Victorian Plan for Aboriginal Children and Young People (2010-2020).*** Melbourne, Victorian Government, p 40, accessed via http://www.education.vic.gov/about/directions/aboriginalcharter/plan/default.htm

East Gippsland Shire Council, ***East Gippsland Shire Regional Youth Plan 2011-2013 Background Paper***, 2011:16. Accessed via http://www.eastgippsland.vic.gov.au/About_Us/Groups_in_Our_Community/Youth

East Gippsland Shire Council, ***Tomorrow's Library: Submission to Ministerial Advisory Council on Public Libraries***. Endorsed by Council, May 2012.

Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria Inc, ***Cultural Competence: Guidelines and Protocols***. Carlton, Vic, Statewide Resources Centre, December 2006.

[64] Rohr, Richard, ***Daily Meditation: The Immortal Diamond of the True Self***. October 23, 2012. www.cac.org

[65] Refer Maffie, J, 'in the end, we have the Gatling gun, and they have not': Future prospects of indigenous knowledges, in ***Futures***, 41, 2009: 53-65. Accessed via www.elsevier.com/locate/futures

Geertz, Clifford, "Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture", in ***The Interpretation of Culture***. New York, Basic Books. 1973. See http://academic.csuohio.edu/as227/spring2003/geertz.htm .

Gippsland East Local Learning and Employment Network, ***Environmental Scan***: ***Partnership Brokers School, Business, Community.*** Bairnsdale, Gippsland East LLEN, 2012:4

Gower, Graham and Byrne, Matt, "Becoming a Culturally Competent Teacher: Beginning the Journey", in Beresford, Quentin; Partington, Gary and Gower, Graeme (eds), ***Reform and Resistance in Aboriginal Education***. Crawley, WA, UWA Publishing, 2012: 379-399.

Graham, Elaine, ***Do we need an International Practical Theology***? Title of Presidential Address, Conference of the International Academy of Practical Theology (IAPT), Humboldt University, Berlin, April 2, 2007.

Hoch, Lothar Carlos, ***The Struggle of Practical Theology in its Search for Identity: a Latin American Perspective.*** Paper presented at the ***Secularization Theories, Religious Identities and Practical Theology*** Conference of the International Academy of Practical Theology (IAPT), Humboldt University, Berlin, March 30-April 4, 2007.

Isaacs, Anton and Mayberry, Darryl, "Improving mental health awareness among rural Aboriginal men: perspectives from Gippsland", in ***Australis Psychiatry***, 2012, 20:108-111. Originally published online March 28, 2012, DOI:10.1177/1039856212437256, http://apy.sagepub.com/content/20/2/108.

Isaacs, Anton N; Mayberry, Darryl and Gruis, Hilton, "Mental health services for Aboriginal men: Mismatches and solutions", in ***International Journal of Mental Health Nursing***, 2012, 21, 400-408.

Kelly, Michael, ***Practical Theology: scholarly care.*** Title of presentation given at ***Research School***, Melbourne College of Divinity, Dalton McCaughey Library, Parkville, Melbourne, July 11, 2007.

Kovach, Margaret, ***Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts***. London, University of Toronto Press, 2009.

Maffie, J, 'In the end, we have the Gatling gun, and they have not': Future prospects of indigenous knowledges, in ***Futures***, 41, 2009:53-65. Accessed via www.elsevier.com/locate/futures

Ma Rhea, Zane, ***Indigenous People and Education***, PowerPoint Presentation, accessed via www.education.monash.edu.au/indigenous.ed/

McQuire, Amy, "View from the Tent Embassy: reality v news reports", January 27, 2012, accessed via http://www.crikey.com.au/2012/01/27/view-from-the- embassy-reality-v-news-reports

Müller, Julian, "A Postfoundationalist, HIV-Positive Practical Theology". Paper presented at the ***Dreaming The Land: Practical Theologies in Resistance and Hope*** Conference of the International Academy of Practical Theology, Australian Catholic University, McCauley Campus, Banyo, Brisbane, Australia, June 25-29, 2005.

National Centre of Indigenous Excellence, http://ncie.org.au/blog/2011/08/16/national-indigenous-youth-leadership-academy

National Health and Medical Research Council, ***Values and Ethics: Guidelines for Ethical Conduct in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research.*** Canberra, Commonwealth of Australia, 2003.

Office for Children and Portfolio Coordination, ***Adolescent Community Profile: Shire of East Gippsland 2010.*** Melbourne, Victoria, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, June, 2011.

Paradies, Yin; Harris, Ricci and Anderson, Ian, ***The Impact of Racism on Indigenous Health in Australia and Aoteoroa: Towards a Research Agenda,*** Aboriginal Health Discussion Paper No 4. Casuarina, NT, Co-operative Centre for Aboriginal Health, March, 2008: vi. Accessed via http://lowitja.org.au/sites/default/files/docs/Racism-Report.pdf

Richard, ***Daily Meditation: The Immortal Diamond of the True Self***. October 23, 2012. www.cac.org

Skye, Lee Miena, "Australian Aboriginal Catholic Women Seek Wholeness: Hearts Are Still Burning", in Pike, Elizabeth; Elvey, Anne; McCoy, Brian and Reynolds, Robyn (eds), ***Land, Culture and Faith: Listening, Respecting, Responding, Connecting, Pacifica***, Australasian Theological Studies, Vol 19, No 3, October 2006:283-307.

Slade, Mike, "100 ways to support recovery", in ***Rethink***, May, 2009. Accessed via http://www.rethink.org/mental_health_shop/productsrethink_publications/100_ways_to_support.html .

Smith, Linda Tuhiwai, ***Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples.*** London, Zed Books, 2012.

The Hills Sydney's Garden Shire, ***Local Studies Information***, page 1, accessed via http://www.thehills.nsw.gov.au/IgnitionSuite/uploads/docs/Tradition

Ungenmerr-Baumann, Miriam-Rose, ***Dadirri: Inner Deep Listening and Quiet Still Awareness***, page 4, accessed via http://www.liturgyplanning.com.au/documents/main.php?g2_view=Core.DownloadItem&g2_itemId=4832

University of Sydney, ***Acknowledgement of Country Wording***, accessed via http://sydney.ed.au/koori/aboutus/acknowledgement%20of%20country%20wording.pdf

Weijer, Charles; Goldsand, Gary and Emanuel, Ezekiel J, "Protecting communities in

research: current guidelines and limits of extrapolation", ***in Nature Genetics***, Vol 23, Nov 1999: 275-280. Publisher Nature America Inc, http://www.nature.com/ng/journal/v23/n3/index.html#af

Wilson, Shawn, ***Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods***. Winnipeg, Manitoba, Fernwood Publishing, 2008.