Understanding culture: the voices of urban Aboriginal young people

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ABSTRACT
Culture is an essential factor in the wellbeing of Indigenous peoples, but colonisation has disrupted and fragmented Indigenous cultures across the world. In Australia, urban Aboriginal young people are a growing population. However, research, policies and programmes aimed at improving Aboriginal wellbeing are unclear in their understanding of what culture is and how it is included in practice, particularly from the perspective of urban Aboriginal young people. Therefore, this study used yarning and thematic analysis to explore the experiences and conceptualisations of culture from the perspective of young, urban Aboriginal people. The young people described culture in terms of relationships, connection to Country, shared beliefs and values, and with regards to identity. Such understanding will contribute to an evidence-base of appropriate, better targeted and more effective wellbeing policies and programmes.

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Australia; Indigenous; young people; culture; connection; identity

Background
The importance of Indigenous cultures has been recognised by the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People, which declares that Indigenous peoples have the right to belong in accordance with traditions and customs of their community or nation (i.e. their culture) (The United Nations General Assembly 2007). Culture is a dynamic, fluid concept that represents ‘shared, learned behavior and meanings’, rather than being connected to specific group membership (Marsella and Yamada 2007, 801). Culture can be represented internally (e.g. psychologically, values) and externally (e.g. materially). These cultural frameworks are socially and inter-generationally transferred over time (Markus and Kitayama 2010; Marsella and Yamada 2007). Frameworks of culture offer individuals a lens through which to understand and make sense of their world (Marsella and Yamada 2007).

In Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (herein ‘Aboriginal’ is used to represent this term) culture is commonly used as a guiding principle or central premise in...
health and social policies. However, culture is rarely explicitly stated in approaches or desired policy goals or outcomes and, where it is stated, it is simply named and not conceptually defined (Commonwealth of Australia 2013, 2017; Department of Health and Ageing 2013; Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet 2020). This is despite global recognition that culture is imperative to the provision of healthcare and that failure to include culture promotes inequity with significant detrimental impacts to peoples’ health and wellbeing (Kirmayer, Tait, and Simpson 2009; Napier et al. 2017). The omission of Aboriginal culture and cultural practice in policy may be related to a lack of understanding about what Aboriginal culture is and how Aboriginal people experience culture. There is a particular lack of Aboriginal young peoples’ lived experiences of Aboriginal culture in urban settings. This article reports on findings from a qualitative study that used yarning research to describe young urban Aboriginal peoples’ understanding of culture.

Globally, Indigenous cultures have, and continue to be, severely impacted by colonisation. The processes of colonisation are designed to cease cultural practices through forced prevention of cultural expression, disconnection of families and communities including the forced removal of children (National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families 1997), the relocation of people away from tribal lands, the banning of traditional languages, indentured servitude, and the involuntary attempted assimilation of Indigenous peoples (Tuck and Yang 2012). The trauma experienced as a result of these processes has severely disrupted Indigenous culture and cultural identity, with the adverse effects continuing and compounding through generations alongside the ongoing colonial apparatus that function as government (Healing Foundation 2014). Furthermore, the new colonial landscapes have resulted in dispersion from original tribal lands due to family migration, poverty, access to healthcare, study and career purposes. This process has led to the development of a complex and contested cultural space, especially in urban areas and particularly for young people. Kirmayer and colleagues explain that

> Around the world, Indigenous peoples have experienced colonisation, cultural oppression, forced assimilation, and absorption into a global economy with little regard for their autonomy or wellbeing. These profound transformations have been linked to high rates of depression, alcoholism, violence and suicide in many communities, with the most dramatic impact on youth”. (Kirmayer, Tait, and Simpson 2009, 3)

The challenge of urbanisation impacts Indigenous populations across the globe (Stephens 2015). Driven by processes of colonisation, the United Nations highlights that Indigenous people ‘have moved from their traditional lands towards urban areas partly seeking opportunities for education and employment, partly because of human rights abuses and violations in particular to their land rights and partly for cultural survival’ (Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights 2010). Australia’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population live primarily in major cities (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2018) and is relatively young (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2015). Narrm (Melbourne) was the land of the Kulin nation pre-colonisation. The arrival of settler-colonists pushed Aboriginal people to the fringes, violently disrupting connection to Country and establishing Narrm as a hostile environment for Aboriginal people (Presland 2010). Aboriginal people from across Victoria were often forcefully removed to missions and reserves,
such as Coranderrk Station (Healesville), without regard for tribal differences (Presland 2010). Now, Narrm is a dynamic environment, mostly Westernised, but with many different cultures, including Aboriginal tribe and language groups living across the different suburbs of Melbourne.

Furthermore, although the life stage of young adulthood is critical to the development of fundamental domains of human functioning, ‘the needs of young adults, and the challenges they face, do not receive a great deal of systematic attention in policy and research’ (Institute of Medicine and National Research Council 2014, p. xv). Young adulthood is a period of identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between and possibilities (Munsey 2006). Young Aboriginal people are navigating this complex environment, exploring their identities, building careers and families, and attempting to connect and learn about their culture (Fredericks 2013; Stephens 2015). This includes a continual recovery from ongoing processes of colonisation whereby connections to culture and identity have been, and continue to be, actively denied, belittled, stereotyped and dismantled (Tuck and Yang 2012).

The dismantling of culture is of concern as the connection between culture, health and wellbeing is well established (Bamblett et al. 2012; Butler et al. 2019). Namely, it is well documented that participation in cultural activities, experiences and events is beneficial for health and psychological wellbeing, and even as a determinant of survival (Grossi et al. 2012; Hyyppa et al. 2006; Konlaan, Bygren, and Johansson 2000). Thus, it follows that the explicit and implicit destructive policies and practices of colonisation on Indigenous cultures continue to have extensive detrimental impacts on the health and psychological wellbeing of Indigenous individuals, families and communities. Conversely, engagement in cultural activities, practices and experiences is associated with healing from cultural trauma and positive impacts on Indigenous peoples’ health, psychological wellbeing, and survival (Black, Frederico, and Bamblett 2019; Zubrick et al. 2014). Therefore, there is a necessity to examine how ‘culture’ is conceptualised within Indigenous groups (and sub-groups such as young people).

Within Aboriginal cultures, as with other Indigenous peoples worldwide, health and wellbeing is more holistically conceptualised than the Western model of health. Social and emotional wellbeing is defined as ‘a multidimensional concept of health that includes mental health, but which also encompasses domains of health and wellbeing such as connection to land or “Country”, culture, spirituality, ancestry, family, and community’ (Gee et al. 2014, 55). Here, connection to culture has been explained as:

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ capacity and opportunity to sustain and (re) create a healthy, strong relationship to their Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander heritage. This includes all of the associated systems of knowledge, law and practices that comprise this heritage”. (Gee et al. 2014, 61)

Therefore, being connected to Aboriginal culture is an essential factor in the wellbeing of Aboriginal people. Having a sense of belonging to a cultural group and having knowledge of and connection to the beliefs and practices of that culture builds a ‘psychological sense of community’ (Colquhoun and Dockery 2011, 19). This relational experience serves as a protective factor of wellbeing. It builds resilience at both the community and individual levels; vital for the survival of Aboriginal people through the traumatic history of colonisation (Zubrick et al. 2014).
However, despite recognising the importance of culture to the wellbeing of Aboriginal young people, policies aimed at improving wellbeing often fail to present a clear understanding of what Aboriginal culture is and how it is included in practice. There seems to be an assumption that there is a shared consensus regarding the meaning of culture; however, this is an unlikely premise. Instead, Napier et al. argue that there has been ‘systematic neglect of culture in health [which is] the single biggest barrier to advancement of the highest attainable standard of health worldwide’ (Napier et al. 2014, 1608). The assumption that all conceptualisations of Aboriginal culture are the same is in danger of homogenising a heterogeneous group of marginalised peoples, further neglecting the individual differences in culture between tribes, generations, locations and experiences (Fredericks 2013).

Furthermore, using the label of ‘culture’ without incorporating the conceptualisation of culture from the perspective of Aboriginal people results in interpretations of culture biased towards the perspectives of non-Indigenous peoples. Every person lives within a culture which shapes their worldview. However, the dominant culture in Australia comes from a colonial, Western worldview, whereby the concept of culture differs from Aboriginal understandings. Without conscious consideration and reflection of one’s worldview, the likelihood of misinterpreting or misrepresenting other cultures is high. A non-Indigenous person cannot understand what factors or approaches are essential in improving the wellbeing of an Aboriginal person as they do not hold the same worldview. They may recognise some features of importance, but they will inevitably lack understanding of the meanings and manifestations of Aboriginal culture (Haddad, Doherty, and Purtilo 2018). In fact, enforcing adherence to non-Indigenous interpretations of health, even under the banner of ‘cultural’, largely replicates processes of assimilation (Macdonald and Steenbeek 2015). Thus, when governments, institutions and organisations use the label of culture without articulating what this means, then the focus, purpose and outcomes of programmes or policies aiming to include, or address culture can be misleading, inappropriate or outright fail.

Likewise, despite the increasingly young and urban Aboriginal population in Australia, research describing how young Aboriginal people conceptualise culture is rare, particularly within urban contexts. A systematic review sought to understand the cultural factors important to Aboriginal people. However, this review included few perspectives of young urban Aboriginal people and primarily drew from studies evaluating health programmes rather than directly enquiring from Aboriginal people’s perspectives on culture (Salmon et al. 2019). This dearth of research compounds the problem of wellbeing policies with a poor understanding of the link between Aboriginal culture and wellbeing, and the experience of Aboriginal culture for urban Aboriginal young people. Therefore, this study aimed to describe how young urban Aboriginal people living in Narrm experience and perceive culture in relation to social and emotional wellbeing.

**Theoretical framework and methods**

**Research team**

We acknowledge the responsibility of the research team to be reflexive and to situate the authors and research team within this research (Morrow 2005). The first author led this
research project and is an Aboriginal emerging scholar with experience in qualitative research, social sciences, and health sciences. The second author is an emerging Aboriginal scholar with a background in psychology and qualitative research. The third author is a senior non-Indigenous scholar with substantial experience working in psychology and cross-cultural health settings. The last author is an experienced Aboriginal scholar whose research transects health and education research. This research team also worked alongside a respected community Elder, who provided cultural leadership and guidance regarding research with Aboriginal young people.

Methodology

The current study’s research question was: how do young urban Aboriginal people experience and perceive culture in relation to social and emotional wellbeing? An Indigenous Research Paradigm methodology underpinned this research (Wilson 2008), to ensure that the research aligned with an Aboriginal epistemology. This enables researchers to integrate the principles of resistance, political integrity and privileging Aboriginal voices within research practices, while utilising and adapting Western methods (Rigney 1999). This methodology determined that research methods were chosen to best fit Aboriginal beliefs around the nature of reality and Aboriginal ways of knowing and thinking. This methodology connects the purpose of the research, with the ethical responsibilities, cultural protocols, and Aboriginal knowledge within an Aboriginal paradigm (Datta 2018; Kovach 2010; Martin 2008). As such, the study was undertaken by an urban Aboriginal researcher close in age to the young people who participated in the study and Aboriginal yarning methods were employed, which prioritised the voices of knowledge holders.

This study received ethical approval from the university ethics committee. The research addressed the six core values for ethical research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) 2018). Specifically, cultural continuity was provided as yarning methods encompass Aboriginal ways of knowing, being, and doing. This included terminology shifting away from ‘participants’ to ‘knowledge holders’ to respect the value and ownership of knowledge holders’ stories and experiences. Second, equity was upheld through the use of yarning and the valuing of knowledge holders expressed worldviews in the analysis. Third, reciprocity was shown as the research addressed a gap in understanding identified by Aboriginal people, through the time-reimbursement to knowledge holders, and the commitment to provide publicly accessible research outputs. Fourth, respect occurred through consultation and acknowledgement of other Aboriginal people (cited references, Elders, supervisors, academics) at different stages of the research. Fifth, responsibility was addressed in support mechanisms for knowledge holders during the yarning phase and through the provision of a community report outlining the research. These five values upheld the sixth value of spirit and integrity.

Knowledge holders

There were 20 young Aboriginal people who took part in Yarns. Inclusion criteria required knowledge holders to be aged 18–28 years, identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait
Islander, able to complete the Yarns in English and be living in the Narrm (Melbourne) community at the time of the yarning sessions. This age range aligns with that of local Aboriginal youth organisation, the Koorie Youth Council (2015). People were recruited using hard-copy and social media flyers, advertisement through Aboriginal youth spaces (online and in-person), and via the newsletters of relevant organisations. Characteristics of the knowledge holders are summarised in Table 1. The knowledge holders came from a range of different tribes, clans and language groups. Some had relocated to Narrm for work and/or study, while other knowledge holders reported that their family had lived in and around Narrm for generations. Due to the ease of identification, we have chosen not to provide detailed information about the individual knowledge holders’ connections to Country.

Yarning

Yarning (Besserab and Ng’andu 2010), an Aboriginal cultural practice for knowledge sharing (Fredericks et al. 2011), was chosen as a data generation method to engage young Aboriginal knowledge holders in the research. Unlike interviews and semi-structured interviews, yarning ‘provides an opportunity for participants to take the research topic and respond as they see fit’ (Adams et al. 2005; Walker et al. 2014, 1218), limiting direct set questions and incorporating cultural knowledge sharing. The first and senior authors, in partnership with the Elder in residence, developed an appropriate yarning guide. The guide allowed for flexible discussion around the research question of ‘What do young urban Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people think culture is?’ This question was purposefully vague, allowing for knowledge holders to respond directly with their conceptualisations of culture, rather than imposing a predefined understanding of culture. We have not aimed to determine a singular definition of culture, but rather to investigate the lived understandings of culture from the perspective of young people.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowledge Holder Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kora</td>
<td>27 years old</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>20 years old</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tiamni</td>
<td>19 years old</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lilly</td>
<td>20 years old</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachael</td>
<td>20 years old</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kylie</td>
<td>22 years old</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skye</td>
<td>21 years old</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corey</td>
<td>22 years old</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alkira</td>
<td>18 years old</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebecca</td>
<td>25 years old</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corina</td>
<td>23 years old</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erin</td>
<td>26 years old</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jarrah</td>
<td>18 years old</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steven</td>
<td>Undisclosed</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dustin</td>
<td>Undisclosed</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hannah</td>
<td>18 years old</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mirri</td>
<td>25 years old</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Briony</td>
<td>24 years old</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ben</td>
<td>20 years old</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neridah</td>
<td>22 years old</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Pseudonym selected by the research team.*
The researcher also asked further questions about experiences of culture which are to be reported elsewhere.

Yarning, a much more informal (although still intentional) method for sharing information, also emphasises the building of a trusting relationship between researcher/knowledge holder (Dean 2010). Yarning shifts the traditional researcher/participant power balance to create an equal environment of mutual sharing, trust, respect, and accountability (Walker et al. 2014). For this research, yarns were conducted one-on-one, in a mutually agreed location and lasted between 40 and 90 minutes. Similar to the yarning process outlined by Besserab and Ng’andu (2010), the research began with a Social Yarn whereby the first author and knowledge holder shared information about each other and built relationship and connection. Then the Research Yarn was initiated, and this section of the yarn was audio-recorded for transcription. This yarn followed an organic course led primarily by the knowledge holders, with the researcher steering the conversation in line with the yarning guide. These yarns were less linear in progression than Besserab and Ng’andu’s approach; reflecting the open-ended and flexible line of questioning. The method of yarning allowed for knowledge holders to respond to questions by sharing stories and defining topical areas of importance, resulting in informative and rich data that emphasised the perspectives and priorities of Aboriginal young people.

**Knowledge analysis**

Although there are some Indigenous analysis methods available globally (Smith 2012; Vaioleti 2006), the authors are unaware of any established Australian Aboriginal analytical methods for yarning research. However, thematic analysis is commonly used in research projects that utilise yarning for data collection (Bovill et al. 2017; Fleming, Creedy, and West 2020; Geia, Pearson, and Sweet 2017; Gibson, Dudgeon, and Crockett 2020; Kovach 2010) as it is ‘theoretically flexible’ (Braun and Clarke 2019) and as such, allows for interpretation using an Aboriginal epistemology. Therefore, through the lens of the Indigenous Research Paradigm, thematic analysis was used to analyse knowledge gathered through yarns. This determined that the researchers gave particular consideration to respecting and prioritising the voices of the knowledge holders in interpreting meaning, and as such, analysis followed an inductive approach to coding.

Using NVivo, transcripts were coded and themed according to Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six phases of analysis. Analysis began with reading transcripts several times over, with rough topical notes added. Notes were turned into pithy labels, that were refined into codes. The generated codes were given definitions and inclusion criteria to form a codebook, with which the first author then coded all transcripts. The second author cross-coded 20 percent of transcripts to ensure the trustworthiness of analysis. Coded data was refined by both authors through negotiation to consensus. Tentative grouping of codes was based on yarn questions, prevalence within and across transcripts, and knowledge holder-identified priorities. First and last authors refined these groupings into themes, and all authors reviewed and confirmed identified themes to ensure rigour. The first author identified sub-themes for publication and chose quotes to illustrate these sub-themes, which were reviewed by all other authors. Descriptors to indicate frequency were used within findings, but there was no intention to quantify thematic statistics.
Findings

This research found that young Aboriginal people described multiple understandings of Aboriginal culture. Knowledge holders identified four themes (see Table 2) including; relationships, connection to Country, shared beliefs and values, and identity.

Knowledge holders reported that they found themselves navigating a complex social, emotional and political environment whereby they had to contend with non-Indigenous ascriptions of culture, remnants of mythical romanticism, historical traumas, contemporary narratives and their own personal experiences. These experiences were varied, with some knowledge holders considering themselves strong in culture, and others expressing difficult journeys of connection, often only beginning as late teenagers.

Theme 1: relationships

Knowledge holders commonly described understandings of culture as embedded within relationships (see Table 2). Knowledge holders spoke of how ‘culture and community is the culture of being connected and staying together’ (Hannah). Alex reflected on relational accountability and the concept of collectivism:

When I think about culture I’m thinking about social connectedness. I sort of view Indigenous culture as, it’s very collectivist, and it’s very, it’s about ‘us’ and not ‘I’. I think it’s about those strong social connections and having those, those, it’s that sort of family basis or that community basis. (Alex)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Codes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>culture through community, family gatherings and events; sense of connectedness; being around other Aboriginal people; yarning with Elders; sense of belonging; knowing others; looking after each other; sense of understanding between other Aboriginal people; sport with other Aboriginal people; yarning; building relationships; being connected and staying together; camps with others; sense of community; strength in numbers; calling each other by their relationships; being with other mob at events; working with other Aboriginal people; women’s/men’s gatherings; culture passed on through family; sharing difficulties with other learning about cultural practices from others; showing love; an inextricable link with others; mob as ‘home’; engagement through connecting with people; staying close to family; other Aboriginal people as a safe space; family and ancestors; being able to rely on people; family oriented; community as a part of who we are; culture as supportive of mob; family/community basis; caring for the young ones; social connectedness; collectivist; checking up on how everyone is.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connection to Country</td>
<td>grasses, woods or even dancing on Country; spiritual connection with the land; connecting to Country through family; connection to places of ancestors; raising children with connection to Country; Country as a safe space; knowing what Country was before urbanisation; connection to Country as a feeling; experiences of time spent on Country; scar trees; water holes; fishing; Country as a place for teaching and learning; being on home Country brings feeling of peace; magical feeling; swimming in the rivers; bare feet on Country; stars; quietness; sleeping out on Country; Country as where we, family and ancestors are from.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared beliefs and values</td>
<td>Same morals and ideologies; sense of one-ness and belonging; shared beliefs and values; foundational things; superstitions; belief sets and systems; lessons we learned about values; our interpretations; our priorities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>Culture is who I am; something that you breathe in everyday; culture has made me someone; connection to culture gives me a place on this earth; things that make us who we are; something inside/carried with us; culture is part of you; being Aboriginal gives pride; I identify as that culture.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
People described how living relationally was about ‘having a yarn with your Elders’ (Dustin) and participating in different activities with family and community. Family and kinship groups were often referred to as the environment or channel for connecting to culture in young people. Erin spoke of a cherished family tradition of listening to bush sounds and sharing dreaming stories to explain how ‘culture to me has always come from mum’ (Erin). Some participants reflected on their role as parents and how they wanted to raise their children in culture.

I’m going to have a healthy son, because he’s going to be swimming in culture… his spirit will always stay healthy and strong because my parents did that to me, and I feel like I’ve got a strong spirit because of it, and I want to do that for him. (Steven)

However, a lack of presence of culture within one’s family could negatively affect young people. Imperfect or tense family relationships impacted on some knowledge holders. For instance, Tiarni shared the story of intergenerational trauma impacting on sharing culture in her family and how she ‘didn’t get a lot of the culture from [dad] specifically’ (Tiarni). Others had similar stories of family tensions or separation that left them unaware or disconnected from culture during their childhoods:

We didn’t find out I- my family was Indigenous until after my grandfather died because he completely divorced himself of it because he was worried his children was going to get taken away. (Hannah)

Some knowledge holders felt fear of judgement or being an outsider if they did not already have established relationships. Perceived lack of connection to culture and community left people feeling excluded from opportunities and cultural events. This subsequently resulted in knowledge holders experiencing feelings of failure or confusion, thereby resulting in even further community disengagement. Mirri noted that young people felt at fault for not knowing other community members, and some community members made comments to her such as ‘black fellas don’t really like me so I don’t really hang out with them’ (Mirri). She argued that it is important to give these young people a wider perspective; ‘I’m like ‘don’t ever apologise for colonisation happening” (Mirri). However, she also pointed out that this internal community criticism was an entrenched consequence of colonisation which Aboriginal community had to face; ‘we as community, sometimes punish each other for that, punish each other for the disconnection’ (Mirri).

Sharing spaces and experiences with others who had the same or similar identities as themselves led to knowledge holders experiencing positive emotions of enjoyment, pride, safety, happiness, and relief at the freedom from discrimination (see Table 2). Knowledge holders expressed gratitude for being able to share stories with each other and developed an affinity with other Aboriginal young people. Environments that encouraged such sharing enabled young people to feel a sense of belonging and safety. These relationships also existed in a digital space, with many expressing the value of social media for connecting to other Aboriginal people. One knowledge holder told the story of connecting with someone in a multi-player Xbox game: ‘if I see a blackfella, like a fella with an Aboriginal flag I’ll just add him, you know, regardless of how- just nonsense he’s talking online, but I’ll just add him you know, just to have a yarn’ (Corey).
Even the act of conducting the research using yarning was viewed by young people as embodying cultural relationality: ‘this is culture, just having [the research yarn] around, face to face, not over the phone or via email’ (Dustin).

**Theme 2: connection to Country**

Just as knowledge holders perceived culture as being in relationship with other people, so too was culture perceived as being in relationship with Country (see Table 2). Knowledge holders expressed that Aboriginal culture was ‘connection to the land and understanding what was here before it got turned into an urban jungle’ (Corina). People described the feelings experienced when in the bush as ‘magical’ (Skye). Alkira used stories of time spent on Country from her childhood to explain what connected her to culture:

Dad used to take us out to the river all the time, whether it was fishing or anything like that, and he would teach us like, this water hole meant this, or you know, show us where the scar trees were, and just like showing us little kind of artefacts and stuff that would indicate that Aboriginal people were there and like, you know, finding various signs on [my tribe’s] Country. (Alkira)

Connection to Country was not just about having physical access to the land of one’s ancestors, but knowledge holders also experienced connection as a space that enabled other activities and experiences considered essential to being Aboriginal. Sometimes, it was smaller experiences:

Yeah it sounds really dumb but every time I am having a moment, or whatever, I grab like a gum leaf from a tree, just scrunch it up a bit and smell it, and like, it’s so dumb but it just calms me down or like brings me down, like I just focus on that. (Rachael)

Rachael’s story mirrored other reflections on the benefit of spending time on Country during difficult times in life. Lilly shared that;

whenever sort of something bad would happen you know someone passed away or, just- you know life happens … we’d always kind of go back down to you know our particular spot where we came from as sort of like a resetting kind of thing … grounding … nourishing”. (Lilly)

One knowledge holder, a parent, shared how they spent time on Country to name their child ‘like how our ancestors would have done it’ (Steven). However, for many, access to ancestral lands was disrupted through the various consequences of colonisation, something many greatly lamented. In one case, processes of colonisation led to multi-generational separation of the family from their traditional lands as reconnecting to Country was not seen as the individual young person’s experience and responsibility, but rather that of the collective family:

I’ve always had that, you know sense of belonging and I know where I come from, but it’s like I can’t go home to Country until mum’s ready because I can’t make that journey without my mum and my baby sister so it’s like that part’s missing. (Briony)

**Theme 3: Shared beliefs and values**

Another common description of culture was that of shared values (see Table 2) and ‘beliefs system’ (Lilly); the ‘foundational things’ (Briony). Alex argued that ‘it’s more
than just the cultural practice … it’s about values and it’s about ways of living and learning’ (Alex). Reflecting on how these values are learnt and shared, Erin pondered the connection with stories, values and lessons: ‘culture kind of stems off values and I think about our dreaming stories and our creation stories and the lessons we learned about values and about life through those stories, so, stories is a big part of culture’ (Erin).

Nevertheless, some expressed that sometimes these values and beliefs were not always conscious or easily articulated:

It’s your belief and your values and all those things that you don’t even know where they come from … culture is, it’s all those beliefs and values and ways of thinking and being in this world that you don’t have any idea, where, you know, and it’s not until you’re put somewhere completely different that you’re like why do I think like this? Why do I see it that way, you know?. (Mirri)

Considering the concept of the binary traditional versus contemporary, Neridah explained that the common thread of culture through history has been ‘the same morals behind it, like you said community, and sense of oneness … we’re not necessarily doing traditional practices but we’ve still got the same morals and the same ideologies behind each of those things’ (Neridah).

**Theme 4: identity**

Many knowledge holders conceptualised culture as central to their being, their identity (see Table 2): ‘Culture to me is who I am’ (Dustin), something that is ‘just this thing that’s inside’ (Rebecca). For some, it was quite tangible: ‘like you can hold onto it, you know it’s part of you’ (Corey). Mirri explains that culture is almost innate in how it manifests as part of her identity:

it’s always things that we don’t even know how it influences us, it’s all these things that just make us the way we are, the way we think and the way we interact with people and the way we behave. (Mirri)

Some of the young people articulated difficulty in defining what culture was to them, with the boundaries of what is and what isn’t included hard to see: “I can’t draw a line on what it is, like I can’t put a finger on it” (Ben).

Because it is such a different experience for everyone. For me culture is just a connection, it’s a connection to people, places, it’s like a feeling … it’s a real inextricable link, I think? It’s really hard to define. And you don’t know it, unless you are?. (Rebecca)

One knowledge holder summed up how some young people often felt constricted by contrived and outsider-applied definitions of culture. She argued for ‘widening this idea of being Aboriginal’ (Mirri) beyond simplistic associations with ‘traditional’ practices like basket-weaving, to recognising that activities and practices are a conduit for the meaning and teaching of culture.

**Discussion**

The aim of this study was to describe how young urban Aboriginal people living in Narm experienced and perceived culture in relation to social and emotional wellbeing. Given
the importance of culture in providing young people with a lens through which to understand and make sense of themselves and their world (Marsella and Yamada 2007), this study provided the first exploration of young urbanised Aboriginal peoples’ perceptions of culture and through yarning explored their perceptions of connections between culture and wellbeing.

Collectively, the knowledge holders told the story of culture as a space of safety and wholeness, one that pulls meaning from ancestors, Country, practices, togetherness and connection. Through researcher observations and the comments of knowledge holders, culture was expressed a place, time, and mind frame that afforded young people a buffer from the often-difficult experiences of being Aboriginal in a mostly non-Indigenous society. This cultural space manifest through practices, experiences, emotions, beliefs, and relationships as explored through the yarns.

However, accessing this safe space within culture was not always easy. Being strong in culture required conscious and ongoing effort that was often difficult to attain. This can be partially attributed to the difficulty in thinking through and expressing what culture is, from abstract conceptualisation to concrete terms. Furthermore, this research confirms other evidence that demonstrates how colonial disruption of culture has obstructed once clear and accessible knowledge systems about culture, thereby creating a barrier to young people feeling safe and culturally strong (Cerroto & Koorie Youth Council 2017; Jackomos 2016). Traditional methods of sharing culture have been disrupted and so young people are having to re-establish knowledge sharing pathways or develop new approaches to creating cultural spaces.

The findings suggest that young people articulate culture in varied ways. Amongst the sample, there were some contradictory definitions of culture, reflections of changing constructs, and several strongly shared interpretations. Overall, however, the young Aboriginal people described multiple understandings of Aboriginal culture, including articulations of relationships, connection to Country, shared beliefs and values, and identity. Similar to that explained by Kirkbright (Kirkbright & Koorie Youth Council 2019), young urban Aboriginal people described engagement in understanding and revitalising old cultural practices as well as re-interpreting them for the contemporary environment. These findings therefore represent one of the first pieces of research (to our knowledge) to highlight how young urban Aboriginal people practice culture as both grounded in old ways and evolving. Aligned with the findings of other researchers (Bamblett et al. 2012; Butler et al. 2019; Fredericks 2013), this study found that when discussing culture, descriptions involved recovery from colonisation. In particular, this involved the recovery and re-establishment of relationships including family, kinship, community, and Country. These continued, transformed, and renewed relationships within modern urban environments, such as Narrm, are important to the processes of decolonisation whereby the past is integrated into the present world (Smith 2012).

The findings can be utilised to inform policy and practice and as a model to improve understanding of how culture is conceptualised. The knowledge holder’s descriptions of culture found in this study are more nuanced conceptualisations than definitions often provided in policy (Commonwealth of Australia 2013, 2017; Department of Health and Ageing 2013). At present policy and practice related to Aboriginal culture may be challenging to implement, misguided or ineffective. Thus, there is a need for policy frameworks to reflect that Aboriginal young people living in diverse settings, with different histories
and circumstances, are likely to have unique strengths and challenges to maintaining and recovering culture.

While many of the young peoples’ perceptions were similar to literature describing the importance of relationships to nature (Biddle and Swee 2012; Butler et al. 2019; Kingsley et al. 2013), this current research documents for this first time how young Aboriginal people living in urban areas describe their connection to Country. This is important because it can enable improved cultural safety and relevancy of programmes and initiatives designed for young Aboriginal people. Young people described connection to Country as connecting with local Country as well as their own custodial lands. Young people also reported that having commonalities with other Aboriginal people was important to understand culture. These commonalities, often referred to in terms of shared beliefs and values, were not made explicit by the knowledge holders. This supports evidence indicating that although urban locales such as Narrm consist of multiple different cultures and language groups, there are unifying characteristics of Aboriginal culture (Atkinson 2002; Bamblett et al. 2012) and such intersections could be an area for further research in order to understand how these commonalities are conceptualised.

Furthermore, these findings provide practical examples for which policy and practice should consider. For example, wellbeing programmes and policymakers should consider strengthening face-to-face and e-relationships between Aboriginal young people, thereby, responding to an identified need for a sense of belonging. Programme and event organisers should likewise consider the tensions that are felt by urban Aboriginal young people who may lack connections and feel excluded from ‘cultural’ opportunities. There is opportunity to support young people to create and sustain relationships with Country utilising the different positive methods of connection to Country provided by young people as examples of good practice. The knowledge holder’s proposal that concepts of being Aboriginal needed to be widened recognises the often reductive or conflicting messages that young people are receiving about what it means to be strong in culture. This finding holds great significance for the development and promotion of social and wellbeing programmes targeting Aboriginal young people. As such, policies and programmes that address cultural identity could benefit from considering how young people view themselves to avoid alienation for those who may feel a sense of disconnection or be struggling with their identity.

Finally, these findings have implications for how social and emotional wellbeing is conceptualised. Young people described positive social and emotional wellbeing derived from relationships, connecting to Country and strong cultural identities. When these different cultural factors were disrupted, negative impacts on wellbeing were described. This suggests that many health and wellbeing programmes framed from the colonial biomedical perspective may not effectively target the needs of young urban Aboriginal people. In order for the social and emotional wellbeing of young urban Aboriginal people to be supported, rather than undermined, policies and practices should stipulate that the inclusion of Aboriginal culture and cultural practice is articulated by young urban Aboriginal people themselves.

It is important to note that this study only examined one geographic region and, thus, further investigation is required to assess the understandings of culture in other regions. Further research is also needed to understand how to integrate, translate and implement this evidence into policy and practice.
Before concluding, it is worth highlighting that, the use of thematic analysis can limit interpretive power. However, this was purposeful here to enable knowledge holders to hold the position of ‘expert’. Additionally, without established Aboriginal analytical research methods, this study had to utilise the method of thematic analysis as a tool. Thematic analysis includes a process of breaking data into components, whereas Aboriginal epistemology perceives a more connected and holistic interpretation of data. However, without an appropriate alternative, much research that utilises yarning methods routinely uses thematic analysis. As such, we used thematic analysis while simultaneously incorporating the connection between themes and situating findings in the Indigenous Research Paradigm. We concur with other researchers (Geia, Hayes, and Usher 2013) that argue that there is a substantial scope for future research to address the issue of current lack of appropriate Aboriginal analytical methods.

Conclusion

These findings describe how young Aboriginal adults living in urban environments perceive Aboriginal culture. The findings suggest that young people describe, express and conceptualise culture in multiple ways. These ways are often different from standard interpretations that are promoted and applied by health programmes, policies and research as ‘cultural’. As a generation who are experiencing the ongoing effects of colonisation, an increasingly global and political everyday life, and pushes for cultural rejuvenation, navigating what is culture can be a challenging venture. Likewise, dispersion from traditional tribal lands into urban spaces has led to the experience of a contested shared Aboriginal culture for many young people. Navigating concepts of relationships, connection or disconnection to Country, beliefs, values and identity is a complex process for young people who also must contend with different and shifting interpretations of culture, the responsibilities that come with being Aboriginal, colonisation, and racism. This research has implications for academics, practitioners, governments and community members who must consider these ambiguous and often highly subjective conceptualisations of culture when speaking of cultural approaches. It is vital that young urban Aboriginal people are supported by environments that allow them to safely explore culture in order to develop a strong identity and support wellbeing, so they feel confident about who they are and how to be in the world; a focus of the developmental period of young adulthood (Munsey 2006).

Notes

1. This term refers to Indigenous peoples globally
2. Australia’s Indigenous peoples are two distinct cultural groups made up of Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Grouped together, these are referred to Indigenous (capitalised). Within these populations, there are over 250 different language groups spread across the country.

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