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Koorliny birniny, ni, quoppa katatjin[1]: respect and ethics in working with Indigenous Australian communities

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Koorliny yeye – introductions

This chapter explores the topic of work with Indigenous Australians, particularly focusing on a range of ethical challenges. Rather than starting with a discussion of conventional English conceptions of ethics the authors introduce *Noongar* frames and discourse concerned with the business of *karnya* (a good disposition and sensibility).

We use the term *Noongar* to refer to people living and those who have passed away, who have long-standing cultural affiliations and connections to the south-west corner of Western Australia. *Noongar boodjar* (country) spreads from roughly north of Jurien Bay (about 250 kilometres north of Perth, the capital of Western Australia); moving inland to north of Moora and down the southern coast between Bremer Bay and east of Esperance (about 750 kilometres south-east of Perth by road). There is evidence that at the point of colonisation there were around 14 different areas with varied geography and spoken dialects. The approximate area of the Single Noongar Native Title Claim is 194,000 square kilometres. In comparison, Scotland is just over 80,000 square kilometres (National Native Title Tribunal, 2003).

Specifically, the chapter examines the place of the following practices: *wangkiny kaya boordier* (talking to the bosses); *gnarl* (sweat); *birniny* (digging and scratching); *quop karnya* (good and sensitive work); *quop koondarn* (respect); *dabakarn dabakarn* (going along steady); *wabaliny quop weirn* (singing out to the good spirits); *boodjar wangkiny* (talking to country); *maar ni* (listening to the wind); and *korunkurl moort* (becoming family and community).

The history of outsiders working with Indigenous Australian groups is long and often horrifying. To say that Indigenous communities have endured pain and trauma at the hand of governments,

church organisations, universities, resource companies, and non-government groups is a dreadful understatement. Partly, this reflects a long and lasting history where the vested interests of outsiders (for example, governments, business, universities, even non-government organisations) usurp the goals and aspirations of Indigenous communities.

In a chapter contemplating ethical work with Indigenous Australians some would expect a discussion about the importance of non-Indigenous people understanding the history of colonial Australia and the systematic marginalisation of Indigenous communities (see Haebich, 1992; Kickett-Tucker et al, 2017). Others may want us to talk about the need for community workers to 'decolonise' their minds; or indeed a discussion of principles such as social justice, self-worth, self-determination, inclusion and equity.

However, we will replace this with a discussion of *Noongar* conceptual ideas. We do this for a number of reasons. The first is that many *Noongar* have different concepts in their lexicon for talking about good practice. Additionally, we make the judgement that far too often concepts such as those just mentioned are used to mask a lack of real commitment to good practice with Indigenous communities. For example, in the 'Australian community workers code of ethics' document (ACWA, 2017a), the 'Australian community work practice guidelines' (ACWA, 2017b) and even the International Association for Community Development (IACD, 2017) standards document keywords, such as: 'Aboriginal', 'Indigenous', 'culture', 'language', 'racism', 'colonisation', 'country' and even 'family', are absent. This is particularly disconcerting given that in Australia a significant number of community development practitioners accept resources to 'service' the interests of Indigenous communities.

The conversations that helped shape this chapter have their roots in a long 'yarn' (the Aboriginal English term for the process of the respectful to and fro that goes on between parties as they weave their ideas together). We, as authors, have all known each other for about 30 years and had many long and deep conversations about these matters. However, we also undertook a series of filmed discussions in November of 2017.

Before our dialogue begins we should point out that we will be talking about Noongar and Wedjela (non-Indigenous) experiences, and that these are particular to the history of 'settler' and 'settled' communities in the south-west of Australia. Some of this history has points of similarity to what has happened in other parts of the world. However, we want to make the point that each place and circumstance

holds much difference, even within Australia. Indeed, recognising this speaks to a central theme of community development; starting our relationships with a sensitivity to the history, language and cultural context of the particular communities with whom we work.

Wangkiny kaya boordier – starting with respect

DAVE: Let's imagine that this chapter is an exercise in travelling on *boodjar* (country). How about we use the metaphor of 'walking' or 'journeying' to help us think about the ethics of working with Indigenous Australian communities? Len and Jen, what would be our first steps?

LEN: Well, if you are *boodjar koorliny* (travelling on country), one of the first things you should do is 'sing out' to the old people, those who have passed away and are now the spirits of the land and sense of the place. You need to call out to ancestors, to *moort* (family), about who you are and what your intentions are;[2] you'd say something like:

> *Kaya noonarkoort Noongar Wedjela. Gnulla koort karnya barniny noonook nidja koorliny yeye nyinniny. Gnulla koort boola barniny djinanginy noonook ni gnulluk wangkiny yeye. Nidja Noongar boodjar noonook nyinniny. Noongar boordier nidja boojar, koora, yeye boorda. Gnulla koorliny birniny karnya koort.*[3]
>
> Hello to our friends both *Noongar* and non-*Noongar*. We write this while sitting in *Noongar* country. We believe it is worth remembering that *Noongar* have contributed much to cultural and economic life in the south-west of Australia and that *Noongar* knowledge and systems have long influenced life in this part of the world, particularly in community work. We will go along picking our way through knowledge with a respectful heart.

The other important thing to do if you are going out and away from your home area is to sing out to the living people from the area; to tell them you are coming out their way. You should ring up the local bosses to tell them you're coming out and what you intend to do.[4] This is the old way and the right way.

DAVE: That reminds me of the important part *gnarl*, or sweat, plays in ethical practice with *Noongar*. How would you explain this Len?

LEN: Part of the old *Noongar* practice is to make your *gnarl* (sweat) known to *boodjar* (country) as you sing out to the 'old people', or

spirits. This lets them know or, if you have been that way before, reminds them who you are and how you are related to that part of the world. This should be done with your grannies (grandchildren and other family who may be with you) so that they see you go about your business in a respectful way.

This is much the same as how people across the globe behave when they come into other people's houses, districts or countries. It shows respect, good manners and sets up relationships in a healthy way. *Quop koondarn* and *quop karnyan* are two concepts that come from *Noongar* ontological traditions that are important here. In short, this means to have a sensibility of good respect when you come into other people's country. And smelling your *gnarl* helps country know whether you are *quop karnyan* or not.

JEN: Lovely, hey? I can't say I've read too much about the importance of underarms in ethical community development. However, Elizabeth Povinelli (1993: 32) talks about how important it is in Aboriginal philosophy and practice. She puts it this way:

> Aborigines act on the assumption that entities inhabiting the country 'smell' and 'hear' their (visitors) verbal and physical activity and that these beings 'come out' or 'send out' agents in the form of climatic changes, an abundance of foods, spirits of possession, and sicknesses in order to communicate their reactions to human presence. Moreover, speech and sweat are seen to penetrate people and places: speech goes in the human ear and travels through the air, sweat comes out of the body and sinks into water holes.

DAVE: So *boodjar* (country) can tell who you are, what you have been doing, and all about your intentions through your *gnarl* (sweat)? Perhaps instead of saying 'actions speak louder than words', *Noongar* might say, '*gnarl* (sweat) speaks as loud as *wangkiny* (talk)'. Len, could we then conclude that an ethical practice with *Noongar* community would have to be laden with the sweat of community workers?

LEN: Both literally and metaphorically.

Birniny – digging and scratching

JEN: This implies that the way we hold ourselves (stand and carry our bodies) on country and the way we go about moving is very important.

Len, you have taught us much about the practice of *birniny*. As I understand it *birniny* is a deeply philosophical word for *Noongar*. It is also a word about practice. How we do things. It's a word that describes a way of moving through country, and a word that gets used as a powerful and poetic metaphor for life. Could you talk about this a little? How, as a concept and a way of being in the world, *birniny* might shape the approach 'outsiders' take on with Aboriginal communities?

LEN: *Birniny* translates as the act of scratching, scraping and digging. When you scratch, scrape and dig, you produce lots of *gnarl* (sweat). When we *birniny* we are literally trying to uncover both what is on the surface and what is underneath.

The word *birniny* comes from the word *birn* which is a kind of plant that you find in the undergrowth in many parts of *Noongar boodjar* (country).[5] You usually find *birn* off the main track, and as part of the rich ecology of ground cover and botany that sits between the soil and the height of your knees.

A *birn* plant is properly hardy and has prickles and tough foliage that can cut, graze and inflict sores on your legs if you're not careful. From when they were young, *korlangka* (young *Noongar*) were taught to walk through country in a particular way to avoid hurting their legs (see Rose, 2002). This way of walking demands that you are attentive to both the areas ahead of, in proximity to, and below your feet.

Unlike travelling on a well-worn path or road that is clearly mapped out, *korlangka* were taught that our feet needed to be *genininy* (looking), and our *kaat* (head) needed to *koorliny yeye* (go along in the present). Just like the *waitj* (emu) that is constantly picking, scratching and looking for what is available in the undergrowth, when we walk through the *birn* we have to move in and around what is offered up by *boodjar* (country).

JEN: Yes, I love the way the *waitj* (emu) moves. I've often marvelled at their feet, and the relationship they have to the beak and eyes. It's almost as if the emu has eyes in its toes so that when it walks it lifts its claws. Momentarily pausing for the feet to make the decision of where to land.

DAVE: Nice metaphors for community workers Jen. I love the idea that our bodies and our gait take lessons from the old *waitj* (emu). And what you say Len is also very interesting. It reminds me a little of the etymology of the word 'read'. As I understand it, 'read' comes in part from the old Norse word *raten*, in part the Latin *legere*, and in part the old French *lire*, which meant to gather up, collect, pick up

and choose. The idea of early readers was to carefully pick through a text much as an emu picks through the undergrowth picking out food and discarding those things that cannot be digested.[6]

LEN: That's right for *Noongar* too. The way I was taught was to dig and scratch and scrape my way through knowledge. In much the same way, we were taught to *birniny* through our relationships with others; struggling and picking our way through the complex systems of community, constantly looking out for the prickly things, and being ready to quickly adjust our movements to deal with those around us.

DAVE: That reminds me of an observation that Western Australian writer Tim Winton makes about the business of seeing things in the Australian bush. He says that though we may stare, try as we might, we often do not first see the objects of our attention when we are looking at them straight on. Rather, he notes that things in the natural world, whether they be sea creatures in saltwater country, or birds and animals in the forests, seem to come to us from the corner of our eye (Winton 2015: 86).

I think this is another good tip for how we might hold ourselves in community development practice; always on the lookout, attentive to what might lie just out of the corner of our eye, and always prepared to adjust to what we see and do. I also like the lesson that this offers about the need to move off the main track in our search for things to sustain ourselves and our community.

LEN: Yes, as *Noongar*, we were always taught that when you walk through *boodjar* (country) you are always *genininy* (looking). Always looking for a feed, for sources of sustenance. Always *aliwa* (looking out) for potential danger. And always looking to *katitjin* (learn). *Birniny* is a philosophical way of being. A way of doing things and holding yourself. And I think an approach to community development too (Collard, 2007).

Quop karnya, quop koondarn – respectful sensibility

DAVE: Len, can I ask you to talk more about manners and everyday ethical behaviour in community development with Indigenous Australians?

LEN: Well, the word *karnya* means good manners, or good moral integrity and sensibilities. *Koondarn* is another word that implies sensibility and good ways of conducting yourself. If someone says that you got no *koondarn* then they are saying you have no manners; you are behaving in a manner that is out of order.

When I was growing up *koondarn* was related to shame. *Karnya* is sensibility or having sense. Nowadays many young *Noongar* use the word *karnya* to mean shame but it was always more about having respect.

DAVE: That's interesting. According to Richard Sennett (2002), the word respect gets poorly used in modern times. Often it gets used as a weapon against communities who are not doing so well; a way of demanding they earn it or gain it by doing things. Sennett reminds us that the social practice of respect is much more reliant on a gift economy. That entering relationships of reciprocity, of giving and receiving, is how respect gets built.

JEN: So, reciprocal systems of obligation are at the heart of respect or *karnya*? This reminds me of the importance in Aboriginal cosmology of the obligations that come with age to nurture those who 'come along after' (Myers, 1991: 211). Brian McCoy (2008: 22), who writes from a strong ethical position of involvement in community development with *Kukatja* (a southern Kimberley Aboriginal group), draws on the Western Desert concept of *Kanyirninpa*.

LEN: *Kanyirninpa* sounds like the *Noongar* word *karnya*. What does that mob mean by *Kanyirninpa?*

DAVE: As I understand it *Kanyirninpa* is expressed in a few interconnected ways. It includes the practice of nurturing the young through law and life; particularly to describe older people taking responsibility and offering protection for those they 'hold'. It involves relationships of teaching and learning, where older people help young people 'grow up the right way' (McCoy, 2008: 22). McCoy also explains that *Kanyirninpa* or 'holding' young people is an act of exercising respect towards others; creating conditions to reinforce social bonds and social obligations (2008: 28; see also Palmer 2012 for a description of how this plays out in a remote area community development project).

Wangkiny – talking and yarning

LEN: As I mentioned earlier, many English words used to talk about ethics are not always accessible to *Noongar*. In my view, this is the first reason why *Noongar* words, intent and meaning are essential if we are to understand how community workers need to conduct themselves with *Noongar* communities (see Trudgen, 2000).[7]

JEN: It strikes me that using *Noongar* language in your practice is an important way of recognising many of the elements that are important to *Noongar* community. Words like *boodjar* (country), *moort* (family and

relationships), *katatj* (*Noongar* knowledge), *kura*, *yeye* and *boorda* (the connection between the past, present and future) are all important ideas that better set out how to behave than English concepts.

In our case, the language of the south-west of Australia has come to exist over 40,000 plus years to articulate how to live and 'do' community in this part of the world (Host and Owen, 2007: vii). English is much younger, is relatively unfamiliar to many *Noongar*, and emerged in a different set of communities to explain and achieve things in completely different circumstances. Most importantly, English is an introduced language for *Noongar* and not always the most comfortable language to carry knowledge, practice and insight. So, in a way, a vital ethical obligation for community workers is to recognise where they don't have the language of Indigenous Australia. The act of acknowledging this helps us recognise that we need to do one of two things: either recruit local people as translators or learn the language.

DAVE: Of course. Language is how we hold not just our knowledge but also our ways of being. We hold our ontologies, behaviours and cultural protocols in language. Indeed, words probably shape the way we hold our bodies.

Many of those who have set out conversations about community development have long reminded practitioners of this. One of Freire's first order ethical principles is concerned with the critical part language and local conceptual frames ought to play in setting up work with community (Freire, 1986).

Jen, you and Len are working on a project called *Noongarpedia*. Can you briefly describe this and talk about what you have learned about ethics from this work?

JEN: *Noongarpedia* is a project that has been running for about four years.[8] It's involved using Wikipedia as a platform to support the use and reinvigoration of *Noongar* knowledge and language. It has included academics, language teachers, children, young people and community groups to both create *Noongarpedia* entries as a way to learn, pass on and make public *Noongar* knowledge, and to create relationships across the generations.

LEN: As a *Wedjela* involved in this community development project can you say some things about learning *Noongar*? Some *Noongar* and non-*Noongar* have been critical about *Wedjela* learning language, claiming that it's just another act of cultural appropriation. What are your observations?

JEN: I'm very sensitive to this, so I get nervous and it is complicated. In my case, I'm working in a project where *Noongar* are my bosses.

Two of the three chief investigators are *Noongar* professors. *Noongar* language is an integral part of the work we are doing; and I have been clearly instructed that an integral part of me showing my respect is to build my *Noongar* language skills. If I don't have the will to learn *Noongar* then my ability to learn about the process of doing this with *Noongar* community members is compromised.

On the other hand, I am very aware of the sensitivities and pain that many *Noongar* experience around language. Part of the history of what governments have done over many generations is to make it illegal for *Noongar* to live on their country, marry who they want, raise their children and speak their language. So, for many *Noongar* it is a very painful thing that they now can't speak in the language of their ancestors. As a *Wedjela* woman, for me to show off my language skills can be hurtful and insensitive. I think to do this in an egocentric way is deeply unethical and cruel.

DAVE: So perhaps rather than asking, 'should a *Wedjela* learn *Noongar* language?' we might ask 'how should *Wedjela* learn and practise *Noongar* language?'

JEN: It varies. Sometimes I need to be sensitive to the trauma of *Noongar* who have not had this opportunity, and take a back seat – listening, and resisting the urge to speak. However, in other contexts, when working with *Noongar* who are strong language speakers, I might have an obligation to be less hesitant.

LEN: That's where the concepts *koondarn* and *karnya* are useful. Both are used to imply a way of being in relation to others. It's not possible to practise this unless you are considerate of others, put your ego in your back pocket, watch what is happening, and have some decency and care for how others are feeling.

JEN: Yes, it's a very Western thing to want to show off how much you know. This can be terribly brutal and traumatic for people who have been taken away from their language.

DAVE: This seems particularly relevant to academics. In a university context knowledge is king; we are expected to showcase and promote our knowledge. What you are saying is that in work with *Noongar* it is relationships and respect that trumps knowledge.

LEN: Yes, *Noongar* might say '*moortaliny boordier nidja karnya*' (how we treat family and relationships is the boss and right way to do things).

But it is not always this simple. On the other hand, at home when I was growing up it was expected that you 'show off' to a certain extent. Oldies would say, "*Woolah* (an expression of celebration) *per* (wow), listen to little Lennie talking like a real *Noongar*."

Dabakarn dabakarn – going along steadily

JEN: This is also why it's important for outsiders to come into their work gently and quietly. Here I really like the *Noongar* idea of *dabakarn dabakarn*. This means to go along gently, quietly and steady. To go along *dabakarn dabakarn* involves not only listening to what people say, but also noticing what is happening with people's bodies, what is happening outside and what is happening between people.

LEN: Part of going along *dabakarn dabakarn* involves 'reading the play', watching what's happening and being ready to respond. It doesn't mean that you don't move quickly when you need to. In fact, *dabakarn dabakarn* is a way of preparing you to *kert kert djakoorliny* (jump quickly into action). Dave, you played Australian Rules Football so you recognise how you move like this.

DAVE: Yes, I used to play a position called half-back flank. Many think this is just a defensive position but when I was young I learnt that my job involved being prepared to receive a handball (a ball pass) from a key player by stepping into action from slightly behind the play.

LEN: Jen, how do you know the right speed, whether you sit back or step up?

JEN: I think this is taking us back to our earlier discussion about coming into country. Part of what I do is read my own body. My stomach feels good. I feel good. My breath feels good when I am in the right place and doing things respectfully with people. There might be birds singing, a gentle wind that blows, a warmth. I feel safe. Now some people might find this really strange. I think this is the point. You are a stranger coming into a new community setting. Doing things that feel strange or *wamaluk* is a discipline that reminds you not to take things for granted.

LEN: Obviously I don't think it is strange. I've been raised to look out for responses from the subtle messages that country and the old people give. It is often a little sign, a little bit of wind, a little bird or a leaf dropping a certain way.

JEN: And of course, science has just caught up with some of these old Indigenous insights and practices. The idea that we should sing out to country and sing out to the beings that inhabit country was once thought of as a bit 'out there'. I'm reminded of the beautiful character of Doctor Doolittle, created by writer Hugh Lofting in the 1920s, who used his talents to talk with his animal patients in their own language. Not only does this allow Doolittle to care for animals as humans are cared for by doctors, it also allows him to

better understand the natural world and the history of everything (Lofting, 2013).

Now it seems that science is beginning to see the value of humans building relationships with birds like magpies, famous as they are for swooping and sometimes causing serious damage to people during the nesting season. In recently published research, zoologist Gisela Kaplan has established that a magpie only swoops a person if they are unknown to the bird and pose a threat. Communicating with a magpie will earn you their trust and goodwill for the life of the animal (Kaplan cited in Brown, 2017).

DAVE: There are also comparisons being made with the practices of business and the corporate world, and Indigenous community development. For example, at the beginning of an induction onto a production site of an oil and gas company you can't enter the site unless you have gone through a process that often takes considerable time. This process involves changing what you are wearing; putting on colours (bright visible shirts), perhaps what you might describe as 'painting yourself up'. It also involves changing your feet (putting on steel-capped boots), how you are going to step to protect yourself and not put others at risk. You often watch a short video and take instructions on how you should act and behave on site.

Increasingly this comparison is being made by community-controlled Aboriginal ranger groups. For example, the Murujuga Land and Sea Unit, who are responsible for the Burrup Peninsula in the Pilbara region of our state, combines these processes with cultural safety inductions.[9] One of the rangers takes on a role as the occupational health and safety officer and another the cultural safety officer. When you go to their headquarters you need to sign in, much the same as if you are visiting other organisations, government departments or industry sites.

They point out, and industry points out, that it doesn't matter if you believe in this new religion called 'risk management' or think that we have gone overboard with health and safety measures. Similarly, it really doesn't matter if you think it is silly to have someone sing out to the old people. You simply won't be allowed to go on site unless you go through these rituals and processes to keep you as safe as possible.

Boodjar wangkiny – talking to country

LEN: Yes, this is what we were taught as kids. *Boodjar* (country) and *boordier* (local bosses) have voices, ways of communicating and power

in influencing things. We were taught that if you're not sure then ask for more signs. Like a *yonga* (kangaroo) making himself known to you might just be a curious *yonga* who accidently stumbles into you, but if it comes towards you instead of racing away and the wind suddenly kicks up at the same time as you see an old *moodjar* (native Christmas tree) then you need to take note that the old people are watching you. Jen, what are some of the experiences of being in the wrong place?

JEN: I can't sleep. If I do go to sleep I might wake up like I am dreaming. There are things that I will see and hear.

And the people from the community will give you signs too. They will stop being involved, they will allow projects to wind down, they will look away from you when you are trying to talk with them. This'll make me sound strange, I bet?

LEN: No, I don't think so. You are talking about things that the old people taught us. While this may sound incomprehensible to many community workers, academics or government officials it is completely understandable to me. And I suspect to Aboriginal people across an array of communities in Australia.

However, it does point to the dangers of sending out young community workers with no knowledge of these things. When we do this, we send them straight into harm's way, both for them and the communities they are working with. We have a moral and ethical obligation to not allow this to happen. Yet, my estimate is that we would be lucky to find more than 10% of community workers employed in this area who know these things.

DAVE: There will be some people who read this, Jen, and think this is way too esoteric; this sounds like community workers are 'oddities', not professionals.

However, one way of thinking about this is to imagine that what we are talking about is a set of literacies. Many of us are raised being 'literate' to signs like a fence telling us that we shouldn't cross over to the other side, or a HAZCHEM sign warning us there are chemical dangers in our proximity. The point of occupational health and safety training is to make us more 'literate' or knowledgeable to the risks. In a similar way in *Noongar boodjar* (country) there are signs that the 'illiterate' will not be able to read. Unless you are familiar or 'literate' in *Noongar* then your work might endanger you and those around you.

And I don't think this is as foreign to Westerners as many might imagine. I think the French poet and philosopher Charles Baudelaire was onto something similar when he wrote about the *flâneur* (Tester,

1994), from the sixteenth and seventeen centuries, who would saunter around early modern European cities, observing society and the ecology of the neighbourhood. Baudelaire's *flâneur* was a talented and attentive spectator of their environment, reading the city as others might read a text. Later, philosopher Michel de Certeau described the act of walking 'was to a network of city streets as speech is to the language spoken' (cited in Morrison, 2017: 145).

Len, what are some of the other signs that *Noongar boodjar* offers up?

LEN: There is anxiety. There is conflict. There is mishap. All of a sudden, we will find ourselves in the middle of interpersonal dramas. When good people start to have arguments and things start to go wrong then this is often a sign *boodjar* (country) gives us that what we are doing, where we are or who is involved is not right.

As Jen pointed out, if people can't sleep at night or are anxious, they are jittery and in disputation, and that things don't seem to be working to plan, then the 'old people', the spirits are signalling that due processes have not been followed.

Maar ni – listening to the wind

DAVE: Jen also talked before about wind. It seems extraordinary in a discussion about ethical work in community development to talk about 'wind'. Are we saying that I have to be literate about the wind to work ethically with Aboriginal communities?

LEN: Yes, the wind is very important to *Noongar*. This is where of course the relationship with senior people and cultural leaders who can 'read' these things becomes critical. You need to do more than simply ask or consult with these people; you need to rely on them as your 'bosses', those who literally guide your every step.

JEN: So, to use this example are you saying that a community development project needs to employ someone who knows about wind?

LEN: Well, literate in a whole bunch of stuff including wind.

JEN: Can you explain how this works?

LEN: I can do and will do, but here is another challenge. You are asking me to be the cultural instructor and this is good. As I just said, we need to find ways to draw in *Noongar* as those who help lead the work. However, *Noongar* are not always going to be available to you. Across the nation, Indigenous Australians only represent about 3.3% of the population (Biddle and Markham, 2017) and not all of them have deep cultural literacy. Many are also incredibly busy with dozens of obligations to their family, their jobs, to community-

controlled organisations, and negotiating land and management of country.

However, if the cultural and knowledge bosses are not available this is where someone like yourself, with good solid grounding, needs to stand up and show your *boordi*, your leadership and knowledge. This means that you cannot always and continuously get away with not learning about these matters.

So, Jen, I'm going to ask you to speak on this one right now. What has wind got to do with ethics?

JEN: Many of my Aboriginal colleagues have taught me that there is a profound connection between health, one's spirit and wind. There are parallels in old European cultural traditions; though since the Enlightenment the 'high priests' of knowledge, biomedical scientists and health practitioners tell us that our health and well-being is shaped by things like stress, nutrition, disease and poor lifestyle. However, in most of the places I have travelled the wind and breath of people and country is what causes ailments and, conversely, can help heal. Often illness is associated with particular winds. Arrernte knowledge tells us that the north-west wind, *aretharre*, is a bad one (Dobson, 2007: 23–4). According to Clarke (2008: 21–2). Aboriginal knowledge systems in Central Australia interpret the decline of people's health as often caused by malevolent winds and sorcerers who exercise their influence through bad winds.

LEN: Well when the wind starts to blow through the sheoaks[10] then *Noongar* would say that the ancestors are speaking. When I was growing up the old people who had special healing skills would fix people by removing illness through sucking it out and throwing it away in the wind.

It is important to understand that *Noongar* knowledge systems are not as anthropocentric as Western knowledge systems. In *Noongar* community there is a deep and long-standing relationship between people, plants, rocks, animals and the wind. For Aboriginal groups across the country each person in a community is connected with the ecology through a family-based section and subsection system, often called a skin system. The way this works is that each person is born into a skin (group). This sets out how they relate to others in their community. Every person and 'thing' in the same skin, regardless of their biological or genetic connection to others, is treated as a brother or sister. Similarly, all women in one's mother's skin are treated as a mother, all men in the mother's skin group are treated as uncles.

The skin system helps tell us about our rights and responsibilities, our obligations, and our birthright. Different winds are included in this complex set of relationships. These winds help us know where we are in relation to each other and country. In this way wind acts as an ethical barometer (sorry to mix the metaphor), helping guide our movements and behaviour. If we do not 'read' this, then we risk becoming ethically lost. Dave, how would you explain this?

Korunkurl moort – becoming family and community

DAVE: As I understand it, there is a deep connection between three things in the *Noongar* world: *boodjar* (country), *moort* (family) and *katitj* (the law, knowledge and stories of things seen and unseen). This ontological connection is pretty consistent in all the places I've ever visited and worked.

It is through *moort*, or the family system of obligation, that *katitj* is passed on. Children get to know about the world through the key people, according to their skin, whose job it is to educate them. When they get older it becomes their responsibility to take care of these older people and in turn pass on knowledge to younger people. Indeed, this link between the generations is not broken by birth or death (Collard, 2007). As people get older, indeed particularly when they pass on, their obligation to hold future generations becomes more pronounced. The way this works is that senior people who pass away go back to *boodjar* with the job of looking after members of their family. Their main role is to protect the safety of their *moort* (family), ensure that integrity of *katitj* (knowledge), and thereby maintain the health of *boodjar* (country).

If *wam* (strangers) travel to this country then part of the responsibility of those who have passed on is to act as guardians of family. If *wam* (strangers) come onto country unannounced or without proper introductions then they are likely up to no good. It is the job of the 'old people' who have passed away to place barriers, and 'make mischief' on the outsiders. Such mischief might include damaging people's feet, sending them a little crazy, inducing conflict, getting them confused or making them sick.

In describing the ontology and practice of Belyuen people from northern Australia, Povinelli (1993: 31) explains it this way:

> Places are perceived as sentient-like beings or as filled with those beings. Mythic vistas and ordinary jungle patches absorb and evaluate the physical sounds and smells, the

> ceremonial names and social identities of the people who walk through them. If the country does not recognize the language and sweat of persons, it inflicts them with bad luck, or worse, mental and physical disease.

LEN: One of the important consequences for community workers is that this way of being, this ontological tradition, demands that people 'buy into' deeper relationships with community. Dave and Jen, my children and grannies (grandchildren) count you as family, and your kids count me as family; I know that you have family connections in the Kimberley as well, and that this brings with it obligations that are not just work related.

JEN: It's interesting isn't it that, as neo-liberal language and mentality has increasingly shaped the way community organisations do business we become more nervous about intimacy and family-based connections. In most discussions of ethics, we are expected to distance ourselves from or 'declare' any conflicts of interests. One of the big things in this regard is declaring if we have family interests in our work. This is kind of counter to the ethical importance in *Noongar* ontology of looking after family. The older I get as a community worker the more I think my obligations to 'become' family with my close *Noongar* brothers and sisters grows.

Boordawan: conclusion

LEN: As I said earlier, I have always found it difficult understanding the concepts and ideas that many use in the community development area. I believe there are at least two reasons for this: (1) *Noongar* is my first language and knowledge system; and (2) community development workers have been too closely implicated in the long, and I think continuing, history of using language as a tool against rather than for *Noongar* families.

JEN: I think the observations of women like Audre Lorde and Chandra Talpade Mohanty about the limitations of Western language and ontology are helpful here. Talking about the circumstances confronting women of colour, Lorde (1983: 100) claims that 'the masters tools will never dismantle the master's house'. She clearly posits that the language of the West has limited value in helping change the circumstances of Indigenous communities. Similarly, Mohanty (1984) points out, that Western conceptual and policy tools function as the norm against which the lives and communities of the Indigenous and developing world is managed and evaluated.

Both point to the profound importance of drawing on the language and ontology of local people if we are to support these communities.

DAVE: What we have tried to do in this chapter is seek out *Noongar* ways of thinking about ethics and the behaviour of those working in the field of community development. While not trying to codify this, we are setting out a number of key themes that might prove helpful. These, we believe, start from the ontologies and conceptual traditions that go back many thousands of years for *Noongar*. As well as arguing that community development practice ground itself in *Noongar wangkiny* and *katitj* (language and knowledge) we invite workers to take on distinct practices such as *wabaliny quop weirn* (singing out to the good spirits) and adopting a way of moving that reflects the way of moving *Noongar* describe as *birniny* (digging and scratching) and *dabakarn dabakarn* (steady steady). We offer a slightly different way of thinking about ethical practice, taking inspiration from the *Noongar* idea of *quop karnya, quop koondarn* (a respectful sensibility). At times this is likely to appear strange and demand new 'literacies' such as *maar ni* (listening to and reading the wind). Finally, often against the conventions of Western professionalism we claim that outsiders adopting community development have an obligation to *korunkurl moort* (become family and community) rather than sitting outside and distancing ourselves from those with whom we work.

LEN: Knowing this and taking account of it allows us to *quop koorliny* (go along) *quop karnya* and *quop koondarn* (in a good and respectful way) creating the *quop weirn* (good spirit). This is what *Noongar* describe as an ethical practice. This is both a metaphor and a literal practice for how we can do things as community workers.

DAVE AND JEN: *Kaya boordawan* (yep, that's right, talk later).

LEN: *Kaya boordawan.*

Notes

1 *Koorliny* (going); *birniny* (scratching and digging); *ni* (listening); *quoppa* (good); *katatjin* (knowledge).

2 'Travel' to Noongar boodjar (country) and enjoy a 'Welcome to country' via YouTube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=FUSuGWH-HrU posted by South West Aboriginal Land and Sea Council (2012).

3 Visit the YouTube 'Noongar language lessons' to hear the beautiful sounds of Noongar language: www.youtube.com/watch?v=LOYKZox_Szk&t=17s posted by ACE (2016).

4 The Aboriginal-English term 'local bosses' denotes those who are senior elders with cultural custodial rights to the area.

[5] Visit the Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Project to listen to more language: http://wirlomin.com.au

[6] See English Language & Usage: https://english.stackexchange.com/questions/239630/how-did-pick-out-evolve-to-mean-read

[7] See the bibliography for a range of sources for use in work with *Noongar* language.

[8] Visit the *Noongarpedia* site at: https://incubator.wikimedia.org/wiki/Wp/nys/Main_Page

[9] See Murujuga Aboriginal Corporation: www.murujuga.org.au

[10] The sheoak or casuarina is the genus of a tree species that is native to Australia, Indian and South-East Asia. This evergreen tree of slender branches and many small twigs often creates a powerful sound of the wind as it rushes through the air (Huxley, 1992).

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