No Filter Needed: Interweaving Deep Listening with visual methods in practice with young justice-involved Aboriginal women

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The visual voices of young Aboriginal women participating in the Name.Narrate.Navigate (NNN) program captured in six-by-four-inch images. Indistinct textures and forms. Feet and shadows. Cheeky 'selfies' snapped in front of the police station and Youth Justice office. Discarded shopping carts. A filthy mattress lying abandoned on the dirt ground. Graffiti tags on brick walls. Photographs that speak to the harsh realities of lives less privileged. These images reveal only a part of a more complex whole. Considered in isolation, they fail to encapsulate the wider realities of the young women's lives. Other images taken by the same photographers offer glimpses of laughter and more light-hearted moments. Blurred lines capture the playfulness of photos taken while spinning and swinging in a playground. Mementos of a visit to a regional art gallery. Poses beside culturally inspired installations and creative depictions of an interactive art space. Curated by the young women, cut and pasted into journals, and embellished with stickers and gel pens and personal notes, their photo montages reflect the paradoxical locations in which they find themselves daily.

In this paper we present our cross-cultural work with young Aboriginal women who both experience and use violence in their interpersonal relationships. We explore and honour the use of Aboriginal methods, which we intentionally foreground, as well as the implementation of creative methodologies in our practice with young women charged with using violence. The power of these methodologies in contributing to space and place and creating transitional change in practice will also be discussed.

We practice and write on Awabakal, Wonnarua and Worimi lands, and pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging, acknowledging that these lands are, and always will be, Aboriginal lands. We extend our respect to Elders of Country this paper might reach. While we speak to our work with justice-involved Aboriginal young women, it is not our intention to correlate Aboriginality with violence or deficit. We acknowledge and honour the depth and richness of over 65,000 years of cultural learning and knowing. We further recognise the devastating effects of colonisation.

We identify the young women involved as having demonstrated great strength, passion and generosity in their work with us and other program facilitators. It would be remiss of us to take away a picture of them as lacking in hope, because this is not the case. These young women possess hopes and dreams for themselves that include lives away from violence and offending.

We build on our previous work applying and honouring Aboriginal ways of knowing and doing, in particular, Yarning and Deep Listening, when working with young women who use violence in their interpersonal relationships, as well as in our work alongside young Aboriginal women who are both largely disconnected from their culture and replicating their kinship circles with peers who are also offending. Stories of practice are drawn from the University of Newcastle's NNN program, which will be discussed further, as will the use of expressive and creative methodologies in working with youth female-perpetrated interpersonal violence.

Contextual considerations

Violence in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities cannot be understood in the absence of contextual factors relating to the continuing effects of colonisation, including the forced removal of children, silencing expressions of culture and the invisibility of Aboriginal voices in giving violence meaning (Cunneen & Tauri, 2019b). The enduring effects of this structural violence for Aboriginal people as a group may be understood as collective trauma (Menzies, 2019), which Atkinson (2002, p. 83) contends manifests across generations as expressions of violence against self and others, as both experience and activity. An example of violence as an experience and activity is the story of a young female we worked with who had experienced significant violence in her life from a young age. She was concurrently engaged with both the perpetration of violence against others at school and in her residential setting and frequent acts of self-harm. Cunneen and Tauri (2019a) argue that to disregard the interrelatedness between colonial violence, systemic discrimination, and social and economic marginalisation diminishes the complexities associated with relationships to violence, and pathologises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities as being somehow 'deficit'.

Cultural identity is signified by a worldview that recognises collective and indivisible ties to family, kin and community. It is imbued with spiritual connections to Country and honours Aboriginal ways of being, knowing, doing and belonging (Krakouer et al., 2018). The nature of this deep interconnectedness means that, at the individual level for many young Aboriginal people, compounding experiences of grief and loss have the potential to overwhelmingly affect their social and emotional wellbeing from an early age and situate them at perilous intersections of disconnection, disadvantage, vulnerability and risk (Ralph & Ryan, 2017).

For young Aboriginal women who have been subject to the continuing impacts of historic policies also experienced by generations of family members and kin preceding them, as well as practices of removal from their families, communities and extended cultural and kinship networks, their relationship with interpersonal and community violence is deeply entangled, with collective and cumulative effects of exposure to acts of oppression and control (White, 2005). Despite making up only 2% of the general population, Aboriginal women represent 34% of the prison population (Oscar, 2018). In 2016–2017, Aboriginal females were 34 times more likely than non-Aboriginal females to be hospitalised due to family violence (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2019). Pointing to this overrepresentation is not an attempt to lay blame, but to highlight the problematic and ongoing issues inherent in the way the various justice systems interact with many Aboriginal people and communities (Cunneen & Tauri, 2019a).

In the two areas of the Hunter Valley in regional New South Wales (NSW) where the majority of the young women involved in the NNN program live, rates of youth-perpetrated domestic violence (DV) are higher than the state average. In the Maitland area in 2020, 12% of DV-related assaults were allegedly perpetrated by people under the age of 18 compared to the NSW average of 7%. Of note, in the same year, 52% of charges proceeded against by police against young people in the Maitland area for DV-related offences were for females, compared to 39% in NSW (NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research [BOCSAR], 2021a). In Port Stephens, young people aged under 18 years represented 13% of DV-related offences proceeded against by police in 2020 and 32% of non-DV-related offences. Regarding non-DV charges in the Port Stephens area in 2020, 59% of young people proceeded against for non-DV charges were female compared to 40% in NSW (BOCSAR, 2021b). Notably absent in this data is specific reference to the numbers of Aboriginal women aged under 18 represented in offence-related statistics (Ng, 2014), with youth-specific numbers provided by gender or by Aboriginality, but not both.

Correspondingly, despite making up only 5% of the Australian youth population, young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 10–17 represent 59% of young people in detention and are more than 18 times likely than young non-Aboriginal people to be detained (AIHW, 2019). Viewed from a trauma-informed and historically contextualised lens, it is tragically unsurprising that an estimated 90% of justice-involved young Aboriginal people in NSW have a psychological disorder (Kalucy et al., 2019). The invisibility of young Aboriginal women in the justice system continues the cycles of systemic indifference and abdication of care. It restricts the capacity for responsiveness of policy and practice for all young women and perpetuates practice with female violence offenders that is informed by colonised assumptions about violence across cultures, contexts and systems.

Young people who use violence commonly intersect as both perpetrators and survivor/victims and are often kept out of much needed systems of support due to the violence they have been or are currently perpetrating against others, despite violence being perpetrated against them. There are complexities in the use of violence by young women; it is difficult to contextualise, enumerate and work with effectively. We note that violence towards women is still largely perpetrated by males who are known to them (Freeman, 2018); however, for the first time on record, young women are being charged more than their young male counterparts in areas of regional Australia (BOCSAR, 2021).

The growth in young female violence is contested, poses challenging questions for practice and policy, and has roots in how female violence has historically been framed and understood (Blakemore et al., 2021). Historically, and in public culture, women who use violence are often positioned as victims of oppression (the violence has stemmed from their victimisation) or biology (the violence is due to their 'lack' of womanhood) (Boxall et al., 2020; Chesney-Lind & Eliason, 2006). What is clear is the strong and pervasive nature of trauma in the lives of almost all young women who use violence (Swan et al., 2008).

Female offending related to violence and the relational aspects of trauma may develop into a continuing reciprocated process, oscillating between offending and trauma (Azad et al., 2018). In part, this reciprocated trauma may stem from difficulties in engaging, tolerating and narrating emotions (Pearlman & Courtois, 2005) – skills that are frequently developed or underdeveloped in childhood. Often, challenges emerging from experiences of trauma may coincide with the effects of intergenerational trauma, where the relationship between the caregiver and child is typified as being disrupted or dysfunctional in its connection (Fenerci & DePrince, 2018).

An understanding of these histories of trauma – as well as recognition of the complex and overlapping disadvantages experienced by many young Aboriginal offenders (Trotter et al., 2015), including the 'double bind' of racism, gender and oppression faced by Aboriginal women (Braybrook, 2015) – is fundamental to culturally sensitive approaches to practice. However, correspondingly, there is a need to recognise, acknowledge and celebrate cultural resilience, knowledge and strengths. While we have a critical awareness of the links between communities of violence and intergenerational trauma, this does not define a culture or its people (Bamblett et al., 2010).

NNN—The program

NNN is a trauma-informed and culturally responsive preventive intervention with a dual focus of working with young people who have used or are at risk of using violence as well as with the various practitioners who provide support to them. Young people involved in NNN have been both victims/survivors of violence, abuse and trauma, and perpetrators of harm to other children and young people (Blakemore et al., 2021). The program for young people involves experiential group workshops exploring emotional literacy, communication skills, empathy, power and control, and blame, shame and choice (Blakemore et al., 2021). Workshops involve psycho-education, skill building, reflection, and learning through movement, discussion and production of visual images using

Photovoice (Wang, 1999). Guiding practice principles for the program focus on validating trauma, supporting mindful engagement, and skill development using reciprocal communication and a deeply relational approach. NNN was developed and is continuously improved through a community-based participatory research approach involving young people with lived experience of violence, abuse and trauma, as well as Aboriginal elders, community members, practitioners and peak bodies (Blakemore et al., 2021).

Practice discussion and implications

This article is based on two of the most recent NNN groups, both of which in these instances comprised young Aboriginal women. NNN is a program for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal young people. Like many of the other NNN participants, most of the young women were disengaged from education or, more aptly, education had disengaged from them. They had left school many years prior, had minimal or negative experience in groups, and verbalised their reticence about being in the group. They also had much higher terms of incarceration than their non-Aboriginal counterparts. All eight of the young women were on community services orders, having been charged with violence-related offences, and they had also been victims of violence. Despite the challenges faced by the young women who were referred into the program, including their mandated community order statuses, by the end of the program, they had all connected and engaged, demonstrated that they had learned new skills and behavioural insights, and been incredibly generous in their sharing of stories. We will focus on our experiences as three practitioners working with two groups of young Aboriginal women who were on community services orders, having been charged with violence-related offences, participating in two iterations of NNN; one being the standard model, the second altered upon facilitator reflections and participant feedback, and the subsequent practice learnings.

The NNN workshops were facilitated by experienced practitioners with diverse levels of connection with, and lived experience and cultural understanding of, the group space. One is a proud Aboriginal Elder and knowledge-holder who is deeply connected to her Country, kin and community, and with lived experience of the effects of intergenerational trauma. Another is a proud Aboriginal woman whose ancestral connections were dislocated by assimilation, and who is still growing in the knowledge of her culture and Country. Another is a non-Aboriginal woman with a deep commitment to culturally sensitive engagement.

Our practice approach was underpinned by respect for the intrinsic role that cultural connection plays in the social and emotional wellbeing of young Aboriginal people, regardless of their lived experiences (Murrup-Stewart, 2021). This included a shared commitment to

viewing our engagement from a holistic perspective, developing a deeper understanding of the young women's situations in the context of their connections to family and community, and building meaningful connections with them.

Working in ways that privilege relational connection and voice within group programs can be unsettling for practitioners because we are challenged with negotiating a delicate balance between structure, content and pace. However, practice experience motivated us to do things differently from the outset, which meant surrendering controlled, colonised approaches to engagement and assessment as the first point of contact. Instead, we drew from practice wisdom imbued within decolonising and arts-based methodologies that challenged us to sit with the discomfort and allow processes of connection, knowing and understanding to unfold. Particular attention was given to considerations of space, materials and time, and drawing upon implicit and non-textual connections to knowing, being and doing (Martin & Mirraboopa, 2003).

Our first group, Group One, was delivered from a hall located within walking distance of a regional Youth Justice office and shopping precinct. While the space met accessibility requirements and the young women engaged well with elements such as the large kitchen, the building's resonance of colonialism (including a large photo of the Queen) was culturally incongruous, and we needed purposeful and culturally rich engagement to counteract the less-than-ideal surrounds. Group One was run to the standard NNN model of six group sessions, bookended by intake and exit assessment sessions. While the assessment session was conducted respectfully and collaboratively, it was purposefully brief as a first point of interaction. Positive gains were made throughout the program by all participants, with some level of connection formed between participants and facilitators. Course content was also reflected upon and considered. However, our reflections and feedback from the young women in Group One indicated that slower entry into the program would have been beneficial for their sense of connection and anxiety levels.

Because NNN is a culturally reflexive program, facilitators were able to meet, yarn, think and plan for ways we could adapt the program's delivery to better suit its facilitation for young Aboriginal people. This meant a consideration of pace, space, timing and engagement style. Given the reflections of past participants, who spoke of their disappointment in having limited connections to culture, kin and Country, as well as facilitators indicating that further practice reflection was required, we recognised the need for a culturally safe and neutral space. For Group Two, we embedded a longer introduction period to the front end of NNN with a focus on offering opportunities to gather and make art together which would also act as a slower assessment and intake period. We also changed our location to an art gallery owned by our Aboriginal Practice Lead.

Across the two programs discussed, culture permeated the group space, was marked by the presence of facilitators, and was innately connected to story and woven within and throughout session activities. Group Two in particular, was infused with a level of cultural materiality that offered a grounding space for the social, expressive and relational program work that was to come (Fenner, 2011). By our reference to materiality, we recognise the potential for environments and objects to influence experience, participation, affect and meaning-making (Griswold et al., 2013).

The urban shopfront gallery selected for Group Two was undergoing a period of transformation. No longer exclusively limited to exhibiting and selling the artworks of Aboriginal painters, the space hosted a range of initiatives for the local community, including art groups for elders and participants of a social justice service run by the facilitator and Aunty, whose very presence in the space invited a sense of cultural safety. Acknowledging the multidimensional nature of Aboriginal identity was prioritised across program resources, including Photovoice images and language used. This mingling of the personal, sensational and material contributed to carving out a space where the very notion of being invited to participate offered endorsement of the young women's Aboriginal heritage and right to cultural connection. Here, we observed objects that provided a stabilising effect for the participants, and open-ended opportunities to move freely both around the gallery and outside to a light-filled outdoor courtyard acknowledged the young women's agency and extended connections beyond the relational to include place and matter.

Given the brief time we had with the young women we were working with, this was usually six weekly, two-to-three-hour sessions, and the faith they were placing in us as facilitators and in the NNN group by being willing to commit to the work, we were acutely aware that we had to make each interaction count. This meant we took opportunities to make seemingly mundane moments matter. This was especially so for the communal lunches held at each NNN session. Although it would be easy for facilitators to 'take five' or disengage at this point, allowing participants to flick through their phones while facilitators chatted among themselves, this would be a missed opportunity. Instead, we used the shared lunch to continue the course discussion in a less structured way, or just to chat in general. For many of the young women, these shared meals provided the main meal of the day, and sometimes the week. On one occasion, when we decided to eat our shared meal outside, the young

women were keen to be involved, helping set the table and bringing out food, cups, and crockery. That day, our conversations were not content based; they were about a range of topics and experiences. Everyone was involved in the process, and to the casual observer, the meal may have looked like women of a variety of ages chatting and laughing together.

Feelings of displacement and disconnection were common discussion points among the young women – especially for those who were in formal or informal care arrangements. Experiences of formal and informal care are further related to youth offending, including young female offending (Bollinger et al., 2017; McFarlane, 2011). Mendes et al. (2014) discuss the relationship between the desire for family connection and acts of offending by young people with a dual status of being in care and involved in juvenile justice. This is supported by Blakemore et al., (2018), whose findings suggest that young people who are offending are doing so, in part, to communicate and connect with family. Being in a care situation and trying to maintain a connection with kin and community can often be a fraught experience. Several participants discussed their experiences of foster care placements and what made for 'good' and 'bad' placements. A 15-year-old young woman who had six foster care placements before being referred into the residential care system shared that five out of the six placements were marked by further abuse and dysfunction. Despite one of the carers showing her a lot of kindness and care, her previous experiences meant she could not and would not trust the intent behind the kindness, and she purposefully sabotaged the relationship to end the placement.

As noted by Drake et al. (2014) and McNeill and Maruna (2008), the depth and quality of working relationships between a young person and a practitioner are principal factors in motivating change. Arrigo (2001) argues that more is needed for young people who have experienced long-term disengagement from the community and marginalisation, and that transformational change can occur only through the mutual exchange of shared histories, personal accounts and lived experiences. Such examples occurred throughout NNN from both a cultural and cross-cultural perspective. From a cultural perspective, our Aboriginal facilitators shared examples of intergenerational trauma at the personal and community levels, specifically on the role of Sorry Business. From a cross-cultural perspective, all facilitators discussed reflections and experiences of schooling, education, and the challenges of young womanhood. These shared stories allowed for greater depth of discussion with and between all group participants. In culturally sensitive practice, this process is called 'Social Yarning' (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010), although in Western colonised practice manuals, such use of self can often be misinterpreted as a lack of boundaries, oversharing or a lack of professionalism.

Acknowledging the subjective nature of describing transformation on behalf of the others, as facilitators we observed shifts in behaviours in the young women, as did youth justice support workers and, at times, the young women themselves. One young woman started with a deep anxiety about participating in the group, initially pacing about the space, speaking only about her anxiety, slowly moving to a willingness to share the impact that music had on her life, eventually singing an emotive rendition of her favourite song. Her completion of the program in spite of a range of challenges being experienced in her life, was recognised and celebrated by her youth justice worker. Across both programs, the young women attended closely to the sharing of cultural learnings and, over time, began to trust us and each other enough to yarn about their own lived experiences.

Social Yarning is the practice of coming together and talking with the express purpose of trusting each other, sharing, and building belonging (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010). At their core, Aboriginal ways of work, knowing and doing are about connectivity and are deeply relational (Martin & Mirraboopa, 2003). They include the endorsement of kinship and replicated kinship as pivotal to understanding and demonstrating respect for inherent cultural responsibilities (Dudgeon & Bray, 2019). As Bessarab and Ng'andu (2010) note, this means that relationship building goes beyond merely having rapport; it extends to recognising shared history where it exists, honouring and understanding historical and cultural contexts, and deeply committing to *hearing* the story of the other person. Typically, it is the *hearing* that is missing from traditional early intervention programs with young people who use violence (France & Homel, 2006). However, listening and hearing are cornerstones to Aboriginal principles, values, and lore, and they were key to cultural practice survival for generations (Atkinson, 2002).

Taking time, being still and using purposeful, clear, and respectful listening is key to building strong relationships with Aboriginal people (Bennett et al., 2011). This process of 'Deep Listening' (Blakemore et al., 2021; Brearly, 2014) is known by many names in Aboriginal languages, including *Dadirri* in Ngangikurungkurr language and *Gulpa Ngawal* in Yorta language. As noted by Brearly (2014), the practice of Deep Listening becomes a way for people to be present by mutually sharing respectfully. The experience of Deep Listening was foreign to the young Aboriginal women in the NNN groups, with the majority indicating that they had never had the opportunity to sit and be heard. It was not always a comfortable experience for the young women, and it did not come naturally. Assisting the process was the guidance of one of the facilitators who, in her role of Aunty, first shared her experiences as a young Aboriginal woman and the struggles she endured. This mutual exchange of shared history opened the space for the young women to *hear*,

paving the way to *be heard*. The blood kinship systems for many of the young women in NNN were fractured, and they have knowingly or unknowingly replicated their kinship systems with co-offenders. Through these conversations and shared stories and histories, the young women heard about the place of Elders, Grandmothers, Aunties, Mothers and Cousins, and how co-offenders cannot replace these roles sustainably in the longer term. They also heard and learnt about alternatives to replicating their kinship models based on lived experiences.

Stepping away from the connections they had developed with co-offenders presented inherent and real risks for the young women, who were able to detail the complexities of belonging both biologically within families where most members had been, or were still, known to police, and within communities where crime and violence are commonplace but are also known quantities. One young woman shared her concerns about stopping offending and her criminal association with her boyfriend because she would have 'no one left'. Other young women discussed the stresses of community expectations in maintaining the status quo, including being careful about who they did or did not associate with, being cautious not to offend the wrong person, and not speaking out of turn or disclosing information and stories that were not their own for fear of being labelled a 'snitch'.

Yarning is a deeper collective experience than the sharing of stories. As facilitators and women in the group setting, we were mindful of how we occupied the physical space. We were attuned with our tone, our body language, and our use of a nurturing tone. We used humour where appropriate (which was often) and told stories as we co-created together. We did not expect full eye contact, and the young women were able to participate when they felt ready. The use of authentic voice relies on trust, with each party being committed and genuine to the process (Drake et al., 2014). As facilitators and practitioners, we acknowledged that, as outlined by Bessarab and Ng'andu (2010), we held knowledge but were also there to learn from the young women. Sharing authentic voices as facilitators required vulnerability and some risk on our part. As Linehan (2015, p. 95) outlines, it required us to express ourselves in a way that could be 'heard and understood', which was essentially what the young people had been asked to do by all other professionals they had come across.

Through being attuned with our own body language and occupation of physical space, we became more focused on what could be observed, felt, and heard through our interactions with the young women as they communicated their lived realities. Leaning into the work of Hunt (1991) and Stokrocki (2004), who argue that the use of expressive methods are primers to connect with the inner and outer worlds of people, we used art to fire creativity, trigger conversation, effect learning and, in doing so, break barriers (Hickey-Moody, 2013). Opportunistic conversations occurred during the creation of mandalas, the production of colour journals, and the tie dying of t-shirts and socks outside in the sun.

By using Photovoice, a creative and expressive methodology in which participants are given a camera and often a verbal prompt to take photos reflecting their stories and experiences, we explored the perceptions and lived experiences of the young women. By taking photos in local surroundings of the key drivers of youth violence – emotions, voice, empathy, power, shame, and choice (Blakemore et al., 2021) – we unpacked visual, verbal and reactive responses to the photo images. Here, we not only saw unseen parts of their community and lives, but we also bore witness to how the young women interacted with their surroundings and community, and how the community interacted with them. Through the Photovoice excursions, we saw how vigilant the young women were in traversing their public space, how their presence in the community was often met with suspicion from others and how, when faced with an opportunity to embrace their inner child (e.g., by playing on a set of park swings), they took it with pleasure.

Within our work, we took a relational approach to flatten hierarchies as much as we could. Our aim was to promote cultural safety while viewing the young women through a community, as well as an individual, lens. Dudgeon and Bray (2019) argue that relationality is pivotal to lasting, flourishing, interconnected kinship networks in Aboriginal communities. It is a key contributor to how kinship is understood, and it guides Aboriginal people on their inherited obligation to make Country and people work and heal. Aboriginal ways of working, knowing, and doing have a deep and direct link with relationality and connection, lending themselves as appropriate and suitable when working with young women who use violence (Dudgeon & Bray, 2019; Rose et al., 2003). Rose et al. (2003) underline the importance of Aboriginal relationality in terms of safety, connection, and bonding people to place. It is also important to consider female violence in the context of social relationships (Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2004), and the value of using Aboriginal ways of practice to develop mutually beneficial working partnerships between practitioners and young people (McNeill, 2006; McNeill & Maruna, 2008).

The experience of connections made through respectful reciprocity was not limited to cultural connections. The program foregrounded space for female connections to flourish through yarn up style with other adult women – Aboriginal Aunts and non-Aboriginal women alike – providing a platform that allowed the young women to take ownership, build a replicated kinship model and make space for other people in their lives to continue

their development. In doing so, we produced what Jackson-Barret and Lee-Hammond (2018) term 'spaces of affirmation', where people who have been typically underrepresented or unheard are able to voice their opinions and develop and share relational capital.

Concluding reflections

Our practice commitment to developing and holding a flattened space for the young women urged us to step aside (not outside) from long-held processes of group engagement in which sessions followed a predictable, measurable sequence and facilitators were implicitly assigned direction of the pace and progress. In this space, we (sometimes uncomfortably) took the lead from the young women and intuitively wove the core elements of the sessions across and amid themes made evident within processes of social yarning. This meant analysing, challenging and letting go of notions of power and control – concepts that are theoretically acceptable for many practitioners, but unnerving in practice, particularly when working with people who use violence. Our practice focus shifted from 'what happens next, and for how long' to 'what are we hearing is happening for them at this time, that we can tie to this session?' As we took the time to hear and understand, the program themes of emotions, voice, empathy, power, shame, and choice were not difficult to draw into conversations and activities. The ability to create, slow down, pause and listen – luxuries that not all programs are awarded in the age of outcomes-based funding – made a significant difference to practice and engagement.

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