

Indigenous arts practice: promotes health and wellbeing, keeps culture alive, sustains cultural heritage and provides sustainable work

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Acknowledgements

This manuscript has been supported by the National Indigenous Research and Knowledges Network (NIRAKN)

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ABSTRACT: *Indigenous arts practice and cultural heritage are integral to cultural strength. This paper is based on a qualitative research project that focused on the artistic collaboration of Central Queensland Indigenous artists and Aotearoa New Zealand Māori artists. The research explored the artists' experiences and perceptions of the present, and future, pathways of Indigenous cultures, knowledges and arts practice. The study found the preservation and transferral of culture through the arts promotes sustainable work for artists, as well as the maintenance of cultural heritage and cultural sustainability. Promotion, exhibition and sharing of Australian Indigenous and Māori art and culture, while supporting health and wellbeing, cultural continuity and community cohesion, also has the potential to strengthen both nations' cultural and national identities.*

Keywords: Future of work; healthy work; Māori and Indigenous knowledge; Māori and Indigenous organisational forms; sustainability

In many contemporary societies post-colonial processes have altered the transmission processes of Indigenous arts and culture (Calman, 2015; Hendry, 2005; Fredericks, 2010; McHenry, 2010; Nagam, 2006). While cultural exchanges can promote cultural cohesion and the transferral and sustainability of arts practice and culture (Ware, 2014), there remains a paucity of literature about Indigenous cross-cultural exchanges.

This paper is based on a qualitative research project with Indigenous Australian artists from Central Queensland, and Māori artists who travelled from Aotearoa New Zealand for a cross-cultural, collaborative artist's event (Fredericks & Daniels 2018). The ten day residential event titled *Returning Cross Culture: Blending our Identities 2015* was held in the forest at Byfield, north of Yeppoon, Queensland. The research was requested by the artists via the event organiser. The artists gathering began with a moving re-enactment of Welcome to Country¹, carried out for the first time in 150 years in the Byfield region.

[Insert Figure 1 about here](#)

¹ The term 'Country' is used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to describe their connection to specific areas of Australia and their family origins. It encompasses understandings of time, place and cultural relationships within that environment (Queensland Government 2008). For further information, see the following link: https://www.qcaa.qld.edu.au/downloads/approach2/indigenoures005_0803.pdf

Fifteen artists participated in the one-on-one interviews held on Country which explored how they work together for the present and the future of Indigenous culture, knowledges and arts practice. They camped on Country in tents and worked under a marquee set up in a cleared area.

Insert Figure 2 about here

The artists produced individual works as well as working in pairs on collaborative projects. Their painting, printing, sculpting, carving and clay works were presented at the end of the ten day collaborative event at a public exhibition in the Yeppoon Town Hall.

Insert Figure 3 about here

This paper begins with background information on the benefits of cultural practice, cross cultural exchanges, and of preserving and transferring culture through the arts for the maintenance of cultural heritage and sustainable work. The research methodology is then discussed followed by the findings. The discussion focuses on the findings about cultural and work sustainability from an arts practice perspective. The conclusion presents the theoretical and practical contribution of the research, and finally, the implications complete the paper.

Cultural practice

Visual images and the arts more broadly, offer physical symbols of culture (Smith, Burke & Ward, 2000). For Indigenous peoples, the knowledge and practice of culture and respect of that culture by the broader community is linked to wellbeing (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision [SCRGSP], 2014). Colonisation of Indigenous Australians and Māori caused the fragmentation of culture (Hendry, 2005), making the arts a crucial component in the preservation and transmission of culture. In Australia, as in New Zealand, cultural revival gained momentum in the 70s and 80s through repatriation of Indigenous languages, increased arts practice and maintenance of cultural beliefs and practices, recognised as a vital link in maintaining individual and cultural identity and wellbeing (Fisher, 2015; Hong 2014; Zubrick et al. 2014). Cultural knowledge can be exchanged through cross cultural artists interactions which provide opportunities to work together, support and promote indigenous artists, culture and artistic works.

Cross cultural exchanges

While there is a paucity of literature about Indigenous arts cross-cultural exchanges, what is known is that cultural exchanges can promote increased social cohesion (Ware, 2014). Closely related to cross-cultural exchanges are similar to study tours which provide opportunities for participants to increase their knowledge and skills base in a different environment (Miao & Harris, 2012). Cultural exchanges include the opportunity to experiment and receive cultural benefits including increased self-confidence, pride, social identity, self-discipline and future hope (Palmer, 2010). Indeed, cross-cultural exchanges have the potential to transform perspectives, and increase self-awareness and knowledge (Bennett, 2006; Greatrex-White, 2007; Palmer, 2010).

Participating in cross-cultural exchange programs can be empowering, (re)igniting pride in Indigenous knowledges, spirituality and traditions, effectively strengthening culture (Bennett, 2006). Recent research on the outcomes of a cultural and knowledge exchange program between two different Indigenous populations (Indigenous Australians and sub-continent Indian people), revealed that Indigenous Australian participants experienced an ongoing positive impact that remained after the tour participants completed the tour, both professionally and personally (Fredericks, Mann & Daniels, 2018, in press). Cultural exchanges can highlight the importance of transferring culture for the maintenance of cultural heritage and sustainability.

Sustainable work

The support and maintenance of cultural heritage and the transferral of culture is embedded in the arts, requiring sustainable work practices for Indigenous artists (Ware, 2014). Sustainable work can be defined as living and working conditions that encourage individuals to remain engaged in work across their working lives (Eurofound, 2018). The concept of sustainability was adopted from the field of ecology, which describes the ability of systems and processes to ‘develop and endure’ (Eurofound, 2015, p. 2). In the same way, sustainable work for individuals encompasses work processes and systems that promote job satisfaction, flexible workplaces and take into consideration individuals social environments (Eurofound, 2018). In order to achieve this, broader societal supports are required that enable individuals to access work, and while carrying out this work, to, maintain work/life balance. Policies, practice and legislation influence employment and funding arrangements which in turn impact Indigenous artist’s capacity to carry out sustainable work practices (Eurofound, 2015).

Transferring culture through the arts: policy and funding

While it is evident that maintaining culture and transferring arts practices and culture across generations is imperative, in contemporary societies, post-colonial processes have changed traditional transmission practices (Calman, 2015; Hendry, 2005; Fredericks, 2010; McHenry, 2010; Nagam 2006). Often, difficult social situations serve as barriers to arts production and the subsequent ability of Indigenous artists to provide for their families (Nagam 2006). Sustainable work in the arts is often self-funded or can be supported through individual and collective funding processes managed by National Arts Councils.

Australia Council for the Arts, also known as the Australia Council, is the Australian government's primary funding and advisory body for arts and culture (Australia Council, 2017; DoCA, 2017). The Council's objectives include a commitment to support the 'creation, presentation and appreciation of First Nations arts' (Australia Council, 2017, p. 21). Two activities that support this goal include: 1) the *Signature Works* program, comprised of intensive workshops which supports artists to advance concepts from production to distribution, and 2) the *Chosen* program designed to support the intergenerational transfer of arts practice and cultural knowledge (Australia Council, 2017). *Chosen* aims to address the deep-seated impact of intergenerational interruption of culture of First Nations Australians (Australia Council, 2018). Australia Council (2018, p. 27) acknowledge that '[t]he unmet demand for culturally abased programs is immense, as is their potential to address Indigenous disadvantage in a strengths-based approach recognising the centrality of Indigenous cultures'.

Creative New Zealand is the national arts development agency responsible for delivering government funding for the arts in New Zealand. The *Arts Council*, (the governing body of *Creative New Zealand*), is made up of 13 members, and manages related strategy, policy and funding arrangements (Creative New Zealand, 2016). A minimum of four *Arts Council* members must have knowledge of Ngā Toi Māori (Māori arts practices), Te Ao Māori (Māori worldview), and Tikanga Māori (Māori culture and protocols), to provide guidance to Council on matters concerning Māori (Arts Council of New Zealand, 2016). As well, two members of the *Arts Council* must have

knowledge of the arts, traditions and cultures of the Pacific Island peoples of New Zealand (Arts Council New Zealand, 2016).

The practice of art and culture has multiple intrinsic and extrinsic benefits, including improved health and wellbeing, and the reinstatement of lost identities, cultures, traditions and languages (Bennett, 2006; Hendry, 2005; McHenry, 2010; Ware, 2014). These concepts, from an Australian perspective, link to the Closing the Gap policy². Arts councils are aware of the importance of reviewing the appropriateness of existing policies and funding arrangements. They have the capacity to advance Indigenous arts and culture thereby promoting sustainable work for Indigenous artists.

METHODOLOGY

The research adopted an exploratory, qualitative lens in order to gain a deep, rich understanding of Indigenous Australian and Māori artists' perceptions of the future of Indigenous cultures, knowledges and arts practice. Additionally, the research aimed to benefit the broader community through increased understanding of how the arts and cultural practices are fundamental to Indigenous learning capacities and identity formation. Through better understanding the Indigenous artist's experiences, it is hoped the benefits of working together for cultural and arts development in the present and the future is established. In this way, recording the artist's experiences may become a signifier of the subjective and collective ways of knowing and of Indigenous culture and spirituality, for the benefit of artists, researchers and the broader community alike.

Participants were invited through emails and via researcher invitation on site to participate in a one-on-one interview to gather data, using a semi-structured interview guide for prompts. Interviews were digitally recorded and notes were taken. Through the qualitative interviews, participants had the opportunity to share their experiences through 'yarning'³. A total of fifteen interviews with seven Indigenous Australians, three women and four men, and eight Māori, six women and two men, were conducted on Country during January 2015. Each artist was offered a gift/koha⁴ in return for their

² The 'Closing the Gap' policy and target strategies are Australian Federal Government policies developed to address Indigenous disadvantage, including socio-economic, education, health and other outcomes for Indigenous peoples, which currently do not match those of non-Indigenous Australians.

³ Yarning is an informal discussion that requires the building of a relationship between researcher and participant; yarning provides a culturally safe conversational process for sharing stories and ideas (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010, p. 38).

⁴ The term koha in Māori is a gift or present, refer to link: <http://maoridictionary.co.nz/search?&keywords=koha>

contribution. An open-ended process of thematic coding and cross-referencing was employed for data analysis. Human Research Ethics approval for the research was received prior to the event. Consent to participate in the research was received from each participant, which included permission to publish the results and use photographs. Confidentiality was assured.

FINDINGS

The following sections provide a summary of the key themes emerging from the interviews. The participant's direct quotations are italicised in inverted commas and have been used wherever possible to foreground their voices. Some themes emerging from the data are presented from both Indigenous Australian and Māori perspectives, while other themes have been merged as appropriate.

Opening ceremony reflections

Almost all participants mentioned the personal impact of the gathering, illustrated through comments about the Welcome to Country Ceremony and the dancing. One of the Indigenous Australian artists explained that the opening ceremony '*captured my heart...words can't describe how I felt*'; another shared that '*the dancing yesterday is reviving and keeping [culture] alive*'. The Māori artists were equally impacted: '*I was in absolute awe of the dancing. I really felt it. It was emotive*'; '*[t]he dancing. I'm so glad I was here. The young men are in touch, they've reconnected with their culture*' and '*[t]he young artists of the future, the dancers - it is here.*'

Identity and belonging

The artists were asked what it was that their arts practice gave to them. Themes of identity and belonging emerged from the data: '*It gives me a sense of belonging, of being with my people. It gives me pride. It gives my children knowledge of culture*'; '*[i]t gives me identity and belonging and having something to offer, especially to your family. Nothing is as important to offer as my work*' and '*[i]t gives you an identity. It came through art, not language like we thought. My art is seen through two sets of eyes. One brings the past up. I work in two worlds*'. One participant explained the search for identity spans generations:

'I knew I had Māori background. My Grandparents were brought up in an era when it wasn't cool to be Māori ... for a long time we thought we were Spanish ... I wanted to know where I sat and fitted within our own history [My work] took me on a journey of self-discovery ... For me it was rebirth. My work is a metaphor of birthing

and rebirthing and renewal ... It's trying to find a happy balance between being Māori and being Pakeha ... There were loving relationships ... it's not all bad.'

Whether painting, print making, sculpting, carving or working with mixed media or clay, the artists identity, Indigeneity and Indigenous knowledges were expressed through 'the patterns I use' and 'through our [culture's] designs; every design has a meaning'. At the beginning of a project, some artists worked through 'finding the back story first to build a knowledge base... To express myself effectively within my work is what my culture has taught me is not a myth but true'. The artists expressed and exhibited culture in the present, from the past, and for the future.

Reflecting on the past: the present impacts the future

Reflecting on the past revealed the major theme of racism emerging from the interviews. One Indigenous Australian artist explained: 'My Grandfather kept a low profile. It was a protection measure. He didn't want us to suffer like he did ... My family had lost the majority of our culture ... [Art] was the beginning of me putting it back together'. Another shared 'My Father was brought up by Granny. He didn't promote himself as Aboriginal. He was warned light skin kids would be taken'. Another explained that non-Indigenous Australians 'say [racist remarks] in common speech and are offended if you call them on it'. One artist felt that we should all 'be one here in Australia, but keep our [Aboriginal] culture. A treasure should be shared, not locked away in a box'. Another explained that '[w]e get refused as Indigenous artists [in art galleries]'

Māori artists likewise identified the racist history of Australia through its colonisation processes, the impacts of which reverberate as intergenerational trauma (Atkinson, 2002): 'How did your country handle having their children being taken away? We didn't have this' and '[w]e feel privileged compared to Indigenous people here' and 'what Aboriginal people have gone through, and they're on their own. No one is listening'.

Passing culture on to our children

When asked what they hoped to gain from the Gathering, one participant explained, 'Exactly what's happening here ... the young ones are working with our artists'. Other comments followed the theme of passing culture on to the next generation: 'it's about culture, keeping culture alive, exchanging stories, heritage, history, family and passing it on to our children'; '[t]he biggest thing

I've got so far is seeing young people have a space that's their own. We are in their space'; 'I want to gain more chances to be part of other Gatherings, for our children to keep on practicing the arts for their children' and '[a]s Māori we are always looking to the younger generation, that's where the health of the people [is]. Visual arts is an opportunity to keep the stories, and traditions...'

Cross cultural unity through connection

The theme of unity across cultures emerged when participants were asked what they hoped to gain from the Artists' Gathering. One artist explained that learnings from cross cultural exchanges revealed *'Native American and Māori stories are similar to ours. [It] backs up your beliefs...This is good on all levels ... it reinvigorates and reinforces what we know.'* Others explained that *'[t]his cross cultural stuff is amazing. ... It broadens everyone's perspectives of who they are';* and *'It's like a mirror, listening to their stories helps you to appreciate things... You gain energy from here and take it with you, that's a gift'*. The theme of strength in unity was explained by one artist: *'[w]e have a saying, "You have one Waka⁵, but many paddles", meaning, we have the same plight, but we can be stronger as a people [together], we are one people.'* Another felt *'it's time to connect with people, and open people's eyes, it's bigger than cultures'*.

Passing culture on to the broader population

Participants recounted their desire to pass culture on, to share their culture and stories with the broader population: *'I want the public to get a hunger for more Indigenous arts and culture'; 'I want to share our culture and stories ... I want to feed people culture, to show off traditional owners';* *'[in the future] I would like to see recognition by the general public that what they are viewing is unique from a cultural perspective. It has nothing to do with Western arts philosophies. We have a different perspective'* and *'[I'd like to share our] culture, who we are on a deeper level, with everybody'*. Many of the artists viewed their work as a medium for storytelling. Artists can be *'gifted with insights'* to tell *'stories through the medium'* coming from *'ancestors looking over your shoulder'*. One artist said, *'the public will say "What is the story behind the artwork?"'* Another felt *'artwork [is] the pretty face in front of the story'*. One artist explained *'as artists...we are birthing Spirit, formulating it as a*

⁵ A 'Waka' is a canoe. The wide-girthed trees in New Zealand meant that Māori could build a variety of canoes from elaborately carved waka taua for war parties, to useful rafts for fishing: <https://teara.govt.nz/en/waka-canoes>

construct, birthing it into the world as a physical thing. We are the eyes for the people who can't see anymore'.

Language retrieval

Language was another theme that emerged from the data: *'My language, there is minimum stuff there. If you research you can find it, but the Māori, they speak fluently... I did a six week program for kindergarten. There was enough language for me to do a little program'*. One Indigenous Australian artist shared: *'[o]ur lost culture is like a giant jigsaw puzzle ... I love to pass on culture. I know only a few words of language, but that's enough ... I'm constantly restructuring my six letters into a story. Māori have twenty-six letters, I can learn from them'*. Another explained *'Mum is where I get my Māori from. She would tell us stories...'*

Health and wellbeing

When asked what their arts practice gave to them, many of the artists connected their work to their health and wellbeing. One artist shared that their arts practice *'[gives me] grounding ... It's almost like meditation. It allows me to stop; I need to do it for my own health and wellbeing'*. Another said it *'makes me feel calm'*. Others *'found it a great way to relieve stress'* and that it was *'therapeutic ... It's therapeutic for a lot of artists. I've worked a lot in jails and even the wildest ones get very calm when they paint'*. Another said *'[i]t's a healing thing I feel. Both our cultures have been impacted by colonisation. We are a strong culture, we're still finding it, and that's why I try to keep it alive. It is healing for us to be proud and it gives a sense of belonging.'*

DISCUSSION

The artists in this project are engaged in cultural revival, identified by Fisher (2015), Hong (2014) and Zubrick et al. (2014) as the repatriation of Indigenous languages, continuing arts practice, and promotion of cultural beliefs, all of which are pivotal to maintaining personal and collective cultural identity and wellbeing. A key theme that emerged from the research was the significance of the artists' work in the transmission of culture to their children and to the younger generation more broadly. Bennett's (2006) work with 'at-risk' Canadian Indigenous youth in a cultural exchange program may have a different focus from the research outlined in this paper, but the findings are transferrable, providing guidelines for initiating mentoring workshops and their possible outcomes.

Brennett (2006) found that, with guidance from Elders when establishing international connections, pride in Indigenous knowledges, spirituality and traditions can be strengthened amongst young people. Moreover, Bennet (2006) explains that ‘youth may, thereby, reclaim a collective role in healing their families, their communities, and their traditions and assist other youth to become leaders in movements of international change, healing, and renewal of Indigenous values and Earth bases knowledge/practice’ (p.97). Mentoring and guidance can build, progress and embed culture and the arts, thus assisting cultural continuity. In line with this concept, several participants in the project suggested that future cross-cultural artists’ exchange programs could host workshops for Indigenous young people.

Many Indigenous people have experienced loss within their identity. For some of the artists in this project, journeys ‘*of self-discovery*’ were enabled through their arts practice, allowing the retrieval of aspects of their identity. Many of the artists explained that their arts practice increased their sense of ‘*identity*’, ‘*belonging*’ and ‘*pride*’. Moreover, the research affirms the importance of cultural exchanges for promoting social cohesion (Ware, 2014), increased pride, identity and hope (Palmer, 2010), and the transformative impact of the experience on participants (Bennett, 2006; Greatrex-White, 2007; Palmer, 2010).

Artists explained their arts practice provides opportunities to ‘*pass on culture*’ through the telling of stories, and for ‘*self-discovery*’ and ‘*cultural expression*’. The artists pointed out the importance of sharing and educating the ‘*public*’ about Indigenous culture. Findings from the research suggest that sharing culture with the broader community (or the ‘*public*’) can work towards combatting racism.

Sustainable work supports cultural continuity

Findings revealed the future of Indigenous cultures, knowledges and arts practice is linked to cultural revival, rebuilding and continuation, achieved through: continuing arts practice; dancing; music songs and other cultural expression; retrieval of identity; development of belonging; retelling of stories; passing on of culture to the younger generation; re-instating Indigenous languages; combating racism – through passing on of culture to the broader community; unity through connection;

maintaining Indigenous spirituality; maintaining cross cultural connection; and working creatively in arts practice (which is also linked to positive health and wellbeing).

Implicit throughout the data, and in line with Ware's (2014) assertions that the transferal of culture, and maintenance and sustainability of cultural heritage is embedded in the arts, is the need for sustainable work practices for Indigenous artists. Moreover, cultural sustainability is dependent on the intergenerational transmission of the arts, underpinned by sustainable work practices that promote cultural continuity. Integral to sustainable work (and the transmission, maintenance and sustainability of Indigenous culture and the arts) is the availability and accessibility of funding for culturally based arts programs for individual and collective groups of Indigenous artists (Australia Council, 2018).

CONCLUSION

The search for Indigenous identity and the importance of regaining, rebuilding and transmission of culture to the next generation (and to the broader community) were key themes emerging from the research. Related to the quest to discover, develop and revitalise Indigenous identity and rebuild culture is the vital role that arts practice can play in sustaining artists' health and wellbeing. Indeed, the artist's health and wellbeing is intrinsically linked to their work. These concepts are interconnected and central to securing the future for cultural continuity arts practice, identities, health and wellbeing, spirituality and the sharing of culture.

The artists have deep pride in their cultures; they are purveyors of culture for the now and for the future. This is a role that they welcome, and undertake with pride. Central to this is their involvement in the transmission of culture to their children and to the younger generation more broadly. The artists recognise that the '*public*' is critical in cultural continuance. The artists revealed a deep longing for the '*public*' to understand their cultures. It is the lack of understanding demonstrated by the '*public*' that impedes progress in culture, knowledges and arts. And it is the dominance of that '*public*' in the governance of both Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia that maintains the imbalance. Enlightening the '*public*' by taking them on a pathway of discovery and cultural recognition and illumination, provides a potent avenue for securing the future of Indigenous cultures, knowledges and arts practice.

The research project revealed that Indigenous Australian and Māori arts practice is deeply spiritual and multidimensional. Theoretical integration and interpretation of the data produced a snapshot of how Indigenous artists maintain cultural heritage, transmission of Indigenous knowledges and culture for the now and the future:

Indigenous Australian and Māori artists reach into the past to paint in the present, to retain culture for the future. Inspiration for their work comes from Spirit, passes through their mind, and is enabled through their hands, in order to let those who can no longer see, see again (Fredericks & Daniels, 2018, p. 49).

The process of revitalising and re-affirming contemporary Indigenous cultures, knowledges and arts practice is advanced through the collaboration and encouragement experienced at cross-cultural exchange arts events. It is evident that cross-cultural artists' exchanges are an important link in regenerating and rebuilding Indigenous cultures, knowledges and arts practice. Furthermore, the datum suggest that the future of Indigenous cultures, knowledges and arts practice depends on cultural revival, rebuilding and continuance facilitated in part by artists engaged in sustainable work practices.

Findings from this research have policy implications for both Australia and New Zealand's culture and arts policies. The promotion, exhibition and sharing of Indigenous Australian and Māori art and cultures, while benefitting individual and community health and wellbeing, facilitating cultural continuity and community cohesion, also has the potential to contribute, in an holistic way, to Australia and New Zealand's cultural and national identity. Linked to policy implications is the need for sustainable work for Indigenous artists, which is integral to health and wellbeing, cultural continuance and community cohesion and, for Indigenous Australians, to Closing the Gap more broadly. Funding processes that promote the transmission of culture, intergenerational transmission of the arts and culture, and mentoring of young people would benefit both groups.

While the findings of this study are context and situation specific, (Collis & Hussey 2009), and the small number of participants may be viewed as a limitation, future research could focus on interviewing artists from other Indigenous groups, as well as Indigenous arts administrators and art gallery management staff. The findings of this project highlight the importance of supporting, promoting and funding Indigenous artists work for the now and the future of Indigenous cultures, knowledges and arts practice.

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FIGURES

Figure 1 Welcome to Country re-enactment held in Byfield for the first time in 150 years



Welcome to Country re-enactment, Byfield Forest, Queensland. Photo: Carolyn Daniels.

Figure 2 Marquees provided a work space for the artists



Artists worked in marquees in the middle of the clearing, Byfield Forest, Queensland. Photo: Sue Kratz.

Figure 3 Selection of Indigenous Australian and Maori collaborative art works



Artist's collaborative work, Byfield Artists' Retreat, Queensland. Theresa Reihana & Patricia Coleman (Left); Victor Tepaa & Joe Butler (Centre); Kaylene Butler & Theresa Reihana (Right) Photos: Sue Kratz photo 1; Carolyn Daniels photos 2 & 3.