Using participatory action research to prevent suicide in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

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Abstract. The National Empowerment Project is an innovative Aboriginal-led community empowerment project that has worked with eight Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across Australia over the period 2012–13. The aim of the Project was to develop, deliver and evaluate a program to: (1) promote positive social and emotional well-being to increase resilience and reduce the high reported rates of psychological distress and suicide among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; and (2) empower communities to take action to address the social determinants that contribute to psychological distress, suicide and self-harm. Using a participatory action research approach, the communities were supported to identify the risk factors challenging individuals, families and communities, as well as strategies to strengthen protective factors against these challenges. Data gathered during Stage 1 were used to develop a 12-month program to promote social and emotional well-being and build resilience within each community. A common framework, based on the social and emotional well-being concept, was used to support each community to target community-identified protective factors and strategies to strengthen individual, family and community social and emotional well-being. Strengthening the role of culture is critical to this approach and marks an important difference between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous mental health promotion and prevention activities, including suicide prevention. It has significant implications for policy makers and service providers and is showing positive impact through the translation of research into practice, for example through the development of a locally run empowerment program that aims to address the social determinants of health and their ongoing negative impact on individuals, families and communities. It also provides a framework in which to develop and strengthen culture, connectedness and foster self-determination, through better-informed policy based on community-level holistic responses and solutions as opposed to an exclusive focus on single-issue deficit approaches.

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Introduction

Social and emotional well-being (SEWB) in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (hereafter Aboriginal) individuals, families and communities is described as a multidimensional concept of physical and mental health that includes positive connections of self to body, mind and emotions, family and kin, community, culture, country and ancestors and the spiritual dimension of existence (Social Health Reference Group\textsuperscript{2004}; Gee \textit{et al.}\textsuperscript{2014}).

The extraordinarily high rates of psychological distress (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS)\textsuperscript{2013}), suicide (ABS\textsuperscript{2012}) and SEWB problems in Aboriginal communities are commonly attributed to a complex set of factors that not only includes disadvantage and risk factors shared by the non-Aboriginal population, but also (among others) social exclusion, racism, widespread grief and loss, community violence and childhood removals from family, all of which have a unique impact on Aboriginal SEWB and mental health (Zubrick \textit{et al.}\textsuperscript{2014}).

The National Empowerment Project (NEP) is an innovative, Aboriginal-led research collaboration that applied participatory action research (PAR) to engage eight Aboriginal communities across Australia to identify: (1) risk and protective factors influencing the SEWB and mental health of these communities; and (2) responses to tackle these issues through a focus on individuals, families and communities, and using the SEWB concept.

The NEP followed other projects that have used PAR as an empowering research approach among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Tsey \textit{et al.}\textsuperscript{2007}). It also built on the 2012 Kimberley Empowerment, Healing and Leadership Project, which identified a need for programs in Aboriginal communities.
What is known about the topic?

- Social and emotional well-being problems in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are attributed to factors including disadvantage and social, historic and political determinants that contribute to suicide, mental health problems and chronic disease.

What does this paper add?

- A systematic method for the identification of well-being challenges, and empowerment and healing strategies to deal with these challenges, for individuals, families and communities as mental health promotion and prevention responses.

that build on cultural strengths, work to heal individuals, families and communities and facilitate effective community leadership to address the broader challenges they face (Dudgeon et al. 2012).

Policy context

In Australia, holistic approaches, the active involvement of communities, collaborative working relationships and valuing Aboriginal knowledge and cultural beliefs are considered essential characteristics of programs that work effectively with Aboriginal communities to address the social and economic determinants of disadvantage (Osborne et al. 2013). In particular, empowerment is recognised as both an outcome in itself and an intermediate step to being able to deliver improved health and well-being outcomes (Mitchell 2000; Wallerstein 2006).

Further, the need for healing, building on cultural strengths and improving SEWB is often proposed as a response to the challenges faced by communities (Dudgeon et al. 2012; Osborne et al. 2013). Papers and reports that provide guidance for enhancing SEWB already indicate the potential importance of culture (Biddle 2011; Dockery 2011; Zubrick et al. 2014), connection to country (Dodson 1997; Burgess et al. 2009), remote living (because of greater opportunities to connect to culture and exercise self-determination; Rowley et al. 2008); and connecting young people to Elders, including by their participation in ceremonies (McCoy 2007). However, the lack of uptake of these identified solutions by policy makers suggests many continue to grapple with how these identified solutions may work in practice (Australian Government 2010).

The NEP

As set out in the Voices of the Peoples report of the NEP (Dudgeon et al. 2014), the NEP actively involved eight communities across Australia that were selected through an initial consultation process to represent the cultural, geographic, social and historical diversity experienced among Aboriginal communities. These communities were: Narrogin, Perth and Northam/Toodyay (WA); Cherbourg and Kuranda (Qld); Toomelah and Redfern (NSW); and Mildura (Victoria).

Key stages in the history of the NEP included:

- The establishment of a National Advisory Committee comprising experts and leaders in SEWB and related areas, with terms of reference that included oversight of all significant NEP activity.
- The NEP team building relationships with eight communities and the establishment of formal relationships with Aboriginal partner organisations in each community, which occurred during initial site visits and preliminary consultations, as well as through ongoing liaison and engagement with senior members of staff, including CEOs in each of the partner organisations, and ongoing visits to each of the specific site locations.
- The NEP team, with the help of partner organisations, selecting two people in each community to be employed as community consultant coresearchers (coresearchers).
- The coresearchers, with training and support from the NEP team, undertook community consultations in each site that involved focus groups and interviews (Dudgeon et al. 2014).

To conclude Stage I of the project, the coresearchers, with training and support from the NEP team, delivered a 2-day introductory SEWB workshop with the purpose supporting community members to exert greater control over their SEWB. In this workshop, participants were asked to consider ways to strengthen their connections to the domains of SEWB, namely to body, mind and emotions, family, community, culture, country and spirituality. In particular, participants were asked to identify and focus on the strengths they found within each domain and to identify actions they could take to enhance their connection to these protective factors (Dudgeon et al. 2014).

A further important element of the NEP process involves participants considering how empowerment programs could be developed. These programs are intended to support each community to exert greater control over its SEWB by taking the steps each community identified as necessary to address or minimise risk factors and increase the benefits of protective factors at individual, family and community levels (Dudgeon et al. 2014).

NEP Phase 2 involves further work to support individuals to address some of the risk factors in the domains of SEWB to restore some of the ‘losses’, further strengthen their connection to protective factors and facilitate the development of an empowerment program. The NEP developed a Cultural, Social and Emotional Well-being (CSEWB) Program that aims to promote the cultural, social and emotional well-being of individuals and communities. The CSEWB Program was developed with assistance from the NEP local community coresearchers as a 12-month program with 6-week blocks involving 2 days per week of facilitator–participant contact. The CSEWB Program covers a range of topic areas with various activities and handouts to assist community participants to explore and address some of the major issues and factors identified throughout the initial community consultation process. The CSEWB Program is currently being piloted in the NEP Queensland sites of Kuranda and Cherbourg, under the auspice of a local community organisation, Ngoonbi Cooperative Society Limited in Kuranda. The NEP, through the School of Indigenous Studies at the University of Western Australia, is a partner under this separate arrangement and, as such, will assist with the ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the pilot program.
Main findings

The main findings from the NEP showed that although the eight communities differed in size, location, history and level of remoteness, all identified similar issues as challenges in their communities. As detailed in Table 1 the aggregated qualitative data from the eight communities was quantified and ranked by themes that emerged from the information as it was collated (Dudgeon et al. 2014).

As is evident from the thematic analysis, there were several issues that were repeatedly identified by participants across all the communities. Further, all eight communities identified a similar set of strategies to strengthen the SEWB of individuals, families and their communities, as detailed below.

- For individuals, restore and strengthen connections to culture, family and community; focus on youth; focus on health; and offer life skills programs (e.g. communication, self-esteem, mentors, role models).
- For families, restore and strengthen connections within and between families through shared activities (to restore a sense of community); offer life skills programs (e.g. communication, dealing with conflict, healthy lifestyle); and provide access to education and/or training, as well as transport.
- For communities, focus on youth (provide activities, drop-in centres, camps, connect to elders, health promotion and education sessions, parenting programs, restore sporting competitions); restore and strengthen a sense of community through shared activities (e.g. hosting community events, such as fun days, competitions, projects); self-determination; men’s and women’s groups; and provide access to employment, education, housing and transport (Dudgeon et al. 2014).

Importantly, participants across all sites identified programs to address family violence and substance abuse as essential to strengthen individual, family and community social and emotional well-being (Dudgeon et al. 2014).

What can be learnt from the NEP?

The NEP makes substantial contributions to our understanding of how to work with Aboriginal communities to address the challenges they face. These contributions include: (1) highlighting the shared range of problems facing communities, and that these are the same challenges communities have been reporting for decades (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision 2011) and therefore the critical need to work differently as a result; (2) highlighting the value of using the SEWB concept as a framework for systematically identifying the challenges that Aboriginal communities across Australia are grappling with, and the solutions to these challenges; and (3) demonstrating a practical and flexible way to work with these challenges in a relatively short time frame, and in a cost-effective manner, and that sharing common features in terms of process and broad outcomes (identifying and addressing community challenges) allows for the diversity among communities to be acknowledged and for each community to prioritise their own responses.

The evidence base provided by the NEP consultations and analysis is also significant: the emphasis on cultural factors and requests for culturally specific programs is of particular note. The NEP reinforces the empowerment literature (Wallerstein 2006; Dudgeon et al. 2012) regarding the critical role of culture to restoring supportive communities and families, and overcoming the challenges faced by their young people. There is a range of programs that highlights the importance of the PAR process (Tsey et al. 2007; Doyle et al. 2013). Although the NEP shares similar principles, goals and a community-based PAR approach with the Family Wellbeing Program (FWB), it also differs in some important respects. The FWB program is an Indigenous empowerment skills development program to address Indigenous social and emotional well-being issues such as family violence and abuse and suicide prevention. The FWB program focuses on the empowerment and personal development of Indigenous people through sharing their stories, discussing relationships and identifying goals for the future. The FWB program is designed to identify and examine the various health and social issues experienced by Indigenous communities and to consider steps to deal with them. It is designed to facilitate Indigenous people’s capacity to regain social and emotional well-being to strengthen their families and community. It begins with the individual and, through that, identifies the issues; the team is then often invited into a community or organisation to address the issues.

In contrast, the NEP is a community engagement and empowerment process that involves consultations and workshops with individuals to identify individual, family and community issues. It builds the capacity of local community coresearchers to undertake interviews with a minimum of 40 people to identify issues, develop site reports and provide this information back to each community. It is a staged process that facilitates opportunities for communities to secure funding to address community-identified issues, as well as providing a CSEWB program. The program is a flexible 6-week program.

![Table 1. What people say are issues confronting individuals, families and communities](image-url)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ranking</th>
<th>Individuals</th>
<th>Families</th>
<th>Communities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Health and/or mental health</td>
<td>Drugs, alcohol, gambling</td>
<td>Drugs and alcohol</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Employment</td>
<td>Health and/or mental health</td>
<td>Employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Drugs and alcohol</td>
<td>Family</td>
<td>Violence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Family</td>
<td>Financial issues</td>
<td>Health and/or mental health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Children and/or young people</td>
<td>Employment</td>
<td>Youth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Violence</td>
<td>Violence</td>
<td>Family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Personal issues</td>
<td>Housing</td>
<td>Accessing services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Housing</td>
<td>Communication breakdown</td>
<td>Housing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Racism and/or discrimination</td>
<td></td>
<td>Racism and/or discrimination</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
that spans 12 months, and builds a sense of connection and community.

Importantly, the NEP team provides ongoing support, training, advocacy and research. Drawing on the learnings of Stage 1, NEP guidelines have been developed for establishing and implementing community empowerment programs within a 12-month time frame. These include the importance of full involvement of the community in the design and delivery of such programs, that they employ local people and be culturally appropriate. In addition, the program should focus on enhancing individual, family and community well-being.

Finally, a key element in many of the studies that focus on enhancing Indigenous well-being is the importance of creating a safe place and facilitating a sense of belonging to a group and positive sense of identity. This is exemplified by the Mibbinbah: Indigenous Men’s Spaces Project, which focuses on addressing the health and well-being of Indigenous men by creating a culturally supportive place for them to connect with one another (Bulman and Hayes 2011). Another exemplar is the Rumbalara Football Netball Club (RFNC), which extends well beyond its role as a sports club, using sport a vehicle to create a safe place where Indigenous people can maintain and/or strengthen their connection with community, culture and identity (Doyle et al. 2013).

The NEP team will undertake further research and evaluation to provide evidence of the importance of the various elements to support culture and promote healing, empowerment and leadership in the current NEP sites.

Full ethics clearance and approval was sought for the NEP and these approvals were provided by the University of Western Australia Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC), the Western Australian Aboriginal Health Ethics Committee, the Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council’s Ethics Committee, the Menzies School of Health Research HREC and the Aboriginal Health Council of South Australia Ethics Committee.

Conclusion

The NEP community consultation and engagement process and the CSEWB Program have been developed to empower communities to take action to address the social determinants that contribute to psychological distress, suicide and self-harm.

Although still in the early stages, the NEP community-level findings confirm the need to enhance individual, family and community SEWB, to build on cultural strengths identified at a community level and to enact strategies to address adverse social determinants and disadvantage within Aboriginal communities.

The NEP will continue to work with the eight communities, supporting individuals and communities to implement the strategies they identified to strengthen their SEWB at individual, family and community levels. In addition, the NEP is currently working with an additional three communities – Darwin in the Northern Territory, Mount Gambier in South Australia and Geraldton in Western Australia.

Conflicts of interest

None declared.

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References


