

**Understanding Contemporary
Indigenous Cultural Differences -
Handy Hints for Helping Professionals
in Engaging Aboriginal Clients**

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Brief Biography

Jim Poulter (PhD. M.S.W. Dip.Crim. Dip.Soc.Stud. LifeMAASW) is a Social Worker by profession and the author of many Aboriginal theme books and papers. Many of these have been in co-authorship with or endorsed by Aboriginal Elders.

Jim's forebears first settled in Woiwurrung Country in Melbourne's Yarra Valley in 1840 and established close and enduring relationships with the Aboriginal community. Jim has continued this involvement over his own lifetime at both a personal and professional level. He has worked closely with a number of celebrated Elders, tribal people and key Aboriginal organisations, in order to strengthen knowledge of and pride in our Aboriginal history and heritage.

During the 1960's 1970's and 1980's Jim was a key figure in establishing organisational protocols and liaison services addressing Aboriginal cultural differences in their accessing of governmental services at both State and Federal government levels. This was done by recruiting Aboriginal people themselves to mediate the delivery of services in a culturally sensitive manner, as well as educating non-Aboriginal staff in cultural differences.

Jim has received civic awards for his contribution to reconciliation, but is probably best known to the public for having in the early 1980's posited that the tribal Aboriginal football game, now known universally as Marngrook, was a precursor to Australian football.

UNDERSTANDING CONTEMPORARY INDIGENOUS CULTURAL DIFFERENCES - HANDY HINTS FOR HELPING PROFESSIONALS IN ENGAGING ABORIGINAL CLIENTS

We all face problems in articulating our cultural differences

It is often a complex and daunting task for social workers and other helping professionals to gain an understanding of the cultural differences that will attach to working with indigenous clients. This is largely because it is not simply a matter of understanding cultural differences in themselves. It is crucial that the whole historical context in which those differences exist is also understood.

It is relatively easy to comprehend that people who have migrated recently to Australia from war torn countries such as Afghanistan, Sudan and Somalia are likely to suffer from the effects of trauma and social dislocation. It is however not readily appreciated by most Australians that our own indigenous people are still suffering a similar trans-generational trauma and that this impacts on their ability or willingness to communicate with other non-indigenous Australians.

Added to this is the extra dimension that all people from different cultures face an inbuilt difficulty in communicating about their cultural differences. Your behaviours and attitudes are just normal to you and you tend not to question them. It is just the way that everybody in your cultural group tends to think and feel and it is hard to explain why to outsiders. The effect of trans-generational trauma therefore compounds this difficulty and there is an even greater reluctance by Aboriginal people to communicate about cultural differences.

It is therefore only by appreciating the history of this trans-generational trauma that the first step can be made towards understanding contemporary indigenous cultural differences. It is through understanding the impacts of these historical issues on style of communication and relationship that a level of interpersonal trust can begin to be built in a professional relationship.

However even given this understanding it is still no easy matter. This trans-generational trauma has also given rise to vexed Aboriginal community and inter-agency politics, which can be a minefield to negotiate in trying to ensure the effective delivery of services.

Understanding the nature of trans-generational trauma

In the last fifty years Australian society has thankfully been able to move away from the myth that Australia was a peacefully settled, empty continent. Even so, the full impact on indigenous people of the concept of Terra Nullius is scarcely appreciated by non-indigenous Australians. The doctrine effectively declared that these people did not legally exist, and had no cultural heritage or history worth considering.

As such, the doctrine of Terra Nullius continues to be a total anathema to Aboriginal people right into the present day. As well as this, the true extent of the impacts of colonisation on indigenous society is scarcely understood by non-indigenous Australians. These impacts can be briefly summarised by six D's, devaluation, disease, dispossession, dispersal, discrimination and disadvantage.

In relation to disease, the impacts of European diseases, especially smallpox, on the fabric of indigenous society has been virtually ignored by historians. It now seems that previous estimates of Aboriginal population levels of around 300,000 at the time of white settlement (Kohen, 1995:80) were based on the numbers left after the smallpox plague. Based on the natural carrying capacity of the land such estimates are incorrect by a factor of ten.

It has now been estimated that Australia is able to support a permaculture farming society on an average of one person per square mile. This varies from one person per eighty square miles in desert areas to five people per square mile in coastal and riverine areas (Sutton, 1988:6). These estimates are certainly not inconsistent with the observations of the very earliest settlers on Aboriginal population density around Sydney. In other words, prior to British settlement it now seems more likely that there were three million or more Aboriginal people in Australia.

As Aboriginal people had no resistance to these diseases (Hill, 2008:232), then the previous post-smallpox estimate of 300,000 people indicates that around 90% of the population was killed within the first thirty years of settlement (Thompson, 1985:19). This occurred through the agency of two smallpox pandemics that swept around Australia in the 1789 and again in 1828. From this disease alone then, probably more than two and a half million people died. It is by far and away the greatest holocaust in Australian history, yet it barely rates a mention in the history books and its impact on indigenous society has scarcely been considered.

The problem immediately faced by indigenous society with this rapid depletion of population, was that many of the institutional rules that had existed since time immemorial, were suddenly redundant. Marriage for instance had previously been organised a generation ahead and had to be between people from prescribed groups. Whole groups had now effectively been wiped out and the rules had to be altered to now allow previously forbidden marriages. Intertribal relationships began to break down as wife-stealing suddenly came into vogue and payback escalated without the previous judicial controls between tribes.

Added to this was then the rapid dispossession that was occurring with British settlement. Previously responsible for the stewardship of specific watercourses and lands, tribes were being pushed off their lands and on to their borders with other tribes. Internecine conflicts escalated and social order continued to break down (Coutts, Witter & Parsons, 1977:43).

Unfortunately, the disorder following this disease, dispossession and dispersal being witnessed by the colonists, was assumed to be the natural state of affairs. This has led some of our most eminent historians to erroneously claim that more Aboriginal people were killed through inter-tribal violence than through the guns of settlers (Blainey, 1982:110).

Such minimisation of settler culpability in Aboriginal deaths has of course been evident from the earliest days of settlement. Any killing of settlers by blacks is always well documented, but the reverse is not (Thompson, 1985:24). Such episodes of atrocities by settlers is however still a current memory within the indigenous community, preserved by oral history. Travel anywhere around Victoria or the rest of Australia and the stories will emerge from the descendents of witnesses to or survivors of such events

You will for instance hear stories about Aboriginal children at Warrnambool being buried up to their neck in the sand at the beach, and then having their heads kicked off. Or a massacre of 200

people at Lake Condah after which their bodies were thrown into the lake. Or poisoned flour being handed out at Orbost, then when the settler responsible was killed, a reprisal massacre of more than twenty Aboriginal men took place at Snowy River.

Such accounts are usually pungent with personal meaning. Children who survived by being stuffed up hollow logs or hidden in the reeds of a swamp by their parents who were then killed, have recounted these stories in old age to succeeding generations. The trauma is still there.

The mission of Missions –obliterate indigenous culture

By the early 1850's tribal life in Southern Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania had been effectively extinguished. Disconnected from their traditional lands and lifestyles, many Aboriginal people began to drift to the urban fringes and get caught up in a culture of poverty and despair. Faced with vociferous complaints and newspaper calls for action, government policies of segregation were enacted (Coutts, 1981:216) (Woolmington, 1988:57)

Missions and Reserves were set up at various rural locations with Aboriginal people having no choice where they could live. In actual fact, an apartheid policy that was predicated on the belief that the Aboriginal race was doomed. The job of the Missions was therefore to civilize and Christianise the natives and 'sooth the dying pillow' whilst the black was bred out over succeeding generations (Black, 1984:52). The reality was that evangelical Christians were employed as agents of the State to round up Aboriginal people, contain them and control their freedom of movement.

Many missions were closed down from the 1890's onward because of their economic cost to government and many Aboriginal people of mixed race ancestry were forced back into the community. This however was without assistance or support and their discrimination and disadvantage simply continued unabated. Aboriginal people were not citizens in their own country, they had their movements dictated by bureaucratic whim, and could have their children removed from their care without any recourse under law (Christie, 1979:178).

The official government policy of assimilation, which refused to acknowledge any right of indigenous cultural heritage, continued until the 1960's. It was only at this time that the constitution was finally changed to grant Aboriginal people the right of citizenship.

From the time of extinguishment of tribal life in eastern Australia in the 1850's and for more than the next century then, Aboriginal people were subject to an apartheid system that sought to extinguish their cultural heritage. On the Missions these conditions of cultural repression were at their harshest and most blatantly racist. On most Missions any form of traditional culture was banned. Only English was allowed to be spoken and the residents had to attend church not just on Sundays, but every single day.

In other words, serious brainwashing was practiced and backed up by deprivation of food and liberty as well as physical punishment (Christie, 1979:182). This repression of all traditional culture had two effects. First it drove Aboriginal culture underground to survive. Second, traditional values of caring, sharing, and elder respect came under pressure from the more competitive and individualistic values of western society.

This process, by which disempowered or imprisoned people take on the attitudes and behaviours of their captors, was recognised by Viktor Frankl, a Jewish psychiatrist who was in inmate in a German concentration camp during World War Two. He termed the phenomenon 'identification with the aggressor' (Krill, 1986:187). The condition was also later in the 1970's conceptualised as the 'Stockholm Syndrome' following the observation of similar behaviours in hostages at a bank robbery in Sweden (Stanley & Goddard, 2002:113).

To link these concentration camp and bank hostage scenarios with Aboriginal people on the Missions is no frivolous exercise. Just the same as Jewish people in Nazi Germany, Aboriginal people were subject to dehumanisation within an apartheid regime. Just as Stockholm bank hostages, they had no power over their own lives and were subjected to constant threats and intimidation to comply with their captor's demands.

And just as the mental scars of Jewish holocaust survivors were passed on to their children, so too have the scars of the Mission era been passed on. On top of this, Aboriginal people today have their own personal experiences of exclusion, discrimination, and disadvantage to confirm and consolidate their trans-generational trauma.

Cultural survival as an underground movement on the Missions

The real story though is that indigenous culture did survive, in essence by indigenous people becoming a secret society. Elements of language survived mainly through the nurturing of children and in whatever privacy was available in the home and out in the bush. However it was not just one single language. People from all different language groups now had to live together on the Missions, but regardless of that there are many similar words in many different languages that refer to body parts, body functions, forms of greeting, relationship, and suchlike.

Fairly quickly a vocabulary of universal words evolved that were transplanted into English and used as code words to establish affinity and identity. A brief glossary of words in common use today includes the following. *Binnung*-listen, *Boorai*-child, *Bunji*-brother, *Dootla*-snot, *Gahwung*-stupid, *Gournong*-stinks, *Goopri*-wine, *Goorie*-Queensland Aboriginal person *Gubbah*-white person, *Jungar*-pig or police, *Koonie*-feces, *Koorie*-Victorian Aboriginal, *Moom*-bum, *Moomba*-you're talking out of your bum, *Murrie*-New South Wales Aboriginal *Noongah*-West Australian Aboriginal, *Nunga*-South Australian Aboriginal, *Tukah*-punch, *Yarndi*-tobacco, *Yolgnu*-Northern Territory Aboriginal, *Yukai*-ouch. This list is only a small sample, but some proficiency in such words can have a significant effect in opening doors to communication with Aboriginal people.

In tribal times the transmission of culture was by story and metaphor and through personal instruction in a master-apprentice type relationship. A lot of cultural knowledge about the overarching conceptual systems was lost in the post-colonial period, particularly about the religious concepts that underpinned social and kinship organisation. Surviving knowledge therefore became more fragmentary and was centred on preserving specific behaviours, customs and practices, but often without that deeper level of knowledge of the concepts involved. This has therefore led to a higher level of mysticism being attached to these surviving customs and behaviours.

As has already been indicated, Aboriginal religious concepts were those most actively and systematically repressed. Worship of the white man's god was mandatory and Aboriginal people were considered not to have any religion at all. This process was so successful that to my knowledge no serious academic study has ever been undertaken into the nature of Aboriginal religion. Whilst even the Oxford Dictionary of World Religions refers to the indigenous religions in every other continent, not one reference is made to Australian Aboriginal religion. Not even the concept of the Dreamtime is referenced.

Because of this pervading cultural repression in the Mission period then, indigenous culture became even more dependent on observation and technical instruction, rather than conceptual understanding. In other words the transmission of cultural knowledge became more covert with observational skill and patience in the student becoming even more prized. Perhaps some anecdotes from my own personal experience can help demonstrate this point.

When my older son was fourteen (in 1981) I took him with me to visit some friends at Framlingham near Warrnambool. Old Raymond was sitting in front of an open fire making a boondi, a throwing club. Ray was heating up a bit of specially shaped fencing wire and burning designs into the shaft of the boondi.

My son sat down and watched him for about two hours. Every now and again Ray would pause and ask my son 'Did you see that?' My son would nod without comment and Ray would say 'I'll show you again'. When he had finished Ray came up to me and said: 'He's a good boy yours, he doesn't ask questions'. The comment floored me and I immediately thought how much the comment stood in stark contrast to western values. Western culture gauges the intelligence of children by their verbal questioning. It directly encourages an ethic of inquiry and scepticism. In Aboriginal culture there is still a premium attached to patient observation and acceptance rather than an intellectual search for reasons why.

This acceptance of elder authority and docility in learning was reinforced to me around the same time in 1981. I was explaining to an Aboriginal friend, Kevin my reconstruction of totemic relationships that I had pieced together with the help of various elders and tribal people. One of the functions of these totemic rules in tribal times was to specify what you were allowed or not allowed to eat, so that food sources could never be hunted out.

When I had finished Kevin looked at me amazed and said 'That explains it all now'. When I asked him what he meant he then said that about fifty years earlier when he was about eight he had been fishing with an old uncle. He hooked a fish and when he pulled it out he saw it was a black perch. Before he could land the fish his uncle leaned over with his knife and cut the line. The fish fell back into the river and the uncle said 'You can't eat that fellah'. Kevin said that all these years he had simply obeyed the edict of his uncle without knowing why. He was happy to do so and continued to do so without having any discernible reason. He was content in his uncle's wisdom and authority. Again I could not help but contrast it with western cultural norms.

On still another occasion around 1982 I was explaining to Kevin the rules of the Aboriginal football game, Marngrook, that I had gained from pioneer accounts and stories passed down by my own great-grandfather who had seen and played the game. On hearing the process involved in preparing for the game, Kevin made exactly the same comment that it all made sense now.

When I asked what he was talking about, he explained that when he was a young boy at Cumeragunga Mission, he and his mates were kicking the footy. An old man, who Kevin said was about ninety, came out of one of the houses and told them who had to play on whom because of age, size and family relationship. After he went back inside they continued to play their game, maintaining the same opponents as the old man had instructed. It was only now Kevin said that he realised the old man had been teaching them to play marngrook, but he never actually told them that. Again, the story reinforced to me how culture was preserved on the Missions through the instruction of specific behaviours, rather than any explanation of the concept systems involved.

Parents cannot regard children as property

Perhaps one of the most enduring values that have survived from tribal times is the way in which parental care and responsibility is shared within a family. In tribal times all children had 'other mothers' and 'other fathers' which were your mother's sisters and your father's brothers. Parenthood was essentially regarded as a spiritual rather than a biological condition. Children were therefore not viewed as parental property as tends to be done in western society. One of the direct implications of this is that children are able to be more self determining and their wishes and preferences must be actively taken into consideration.

This could perhaps be seen to have some disadvantages in that if a child does not want to go to school, an Aboriginal parent is less likely to force the child against their will. However a culturally consistent parent would seek to understand the nature of the child's reluctance and seek to rectify the situation, rather than simply forcing them to comply. Again, my own personal experiences were able to offer some useful insights on the issues of child self-determination and parental responsibility.

I was holidaying many years ago in 1968 with my young family down at Lake Tyers Station and was sitting on the shore of the lake with a local family. My five-year-old daughter was playing in the shallows with five or six children from the other family. Their twelve-year-old son was the only one not in the water and he was fully dressed sitting on the sand shouting to the other children as they frolicked. I asked their father, Ron, why he was not swimming and Ron simply replied that the lad did not like swimming and it was his choice.

I immediately thought of how many times at the beach I had seen stern western parents forcing their tearful and reluctant children to go in the water and 'learn to swim for their own good' I asked Ron if he thought his son would ever learn to swim and he shrugged, indicating that it was entirely up to the child.

It was then that I noticed the youngest in their family venturing knee deep into the water. The child was only about eighteen months old and was obviously attracted by her older siblings having so much fun shouting and splashing. As the child moved thigh deep Ron made some hand signals to his nine-year-old son. No words were exchanged but the nine-year-old came and stood next to the toddler. He continued waving and shouting to his siblings as the toddler moved chest deep while he stayed at her side. Neither parent said anything but continued to watch impassively but intently while they also continued their respective conversations with my wife and me.

At this point the toddler took another step forward and disappeared under the water. Hardly stopping his shouting, her brother grabbed her by the hair, lifted her head above the water and set her back at neck deep level. The toddler spluttered and both parents nodded to their nine-year-old who continued to stand next to the toddler, still shouting to his siblings. Neither parent rushed to the child to snatch her up out of the water. They did not attempt to verbally interpret the child's experience for her or somehow construct it as a traumatic event or potential tragedy. They simply provided a safe situational structure for the child and then allowed the child to interpret their own experience.

This proved to be a valuable experience for me in cultural differences, many years later around 1993 when I was in child protection. I had arranged an access visit between an Aboriginal mother and her five- and eight-year-old sons, with a view to possible family reunification, after they had been out of her care for a couple of years. I was accompanied on the access visit by a young female worker. At the start of the visit after warmly greeting her children they told her they wanted to go out into the backyard to play. She took them out and first checked the gate and perimeter, then sat in a chair and watched her children play. They soon got into a bit of an argument exchanged a couple of biffs and then settled down again. At the end of their play period the boys both came up and gave their mother a hug. After briefly hugging them and saying goodbye, she told them to come again if they wanted to.

My young co-worker later said she had not been impressed by the woman's mothering skills and that she had failed to interact with them appropriately or to properly supervise them. I then asked the worker to describe in full what she had observed. When she did, I then pointed out that the mother had indeed ensured a safe structure of the situation by checking the gate and perimeter, she then allowed the children the freedom to determine not only their own relationship but their relationship with her. She had not put emotional pressure on them or had tried to bribe or brainwash them about returning to her care. I said that in my experience these behaviours were culturally consistent with good parenting. To her credit the young worker was able to adjust her view to take proper account of these cultural differences.

I have however one further anecdote that vividly shows how Aboriginal people are culturally bound to respect the wishes of children and not treat them as if they are property. I was visiting an Aboriginal family near Bairnsdale around 1980 and the mother Eileen had her own four children plus another six she was caring for as a substitute parent.

When I arrived late in the afternoon and entered the kitchen, two of her teenage sons were playing cards at the kitchen table. Eileen greeted me and asked one of the sons to make a cup of tea for me. Eileen and I then sat down and fell into conversation for a few minutes. After a while I saw Eileen briefly look around to see that her son was still busily playing cards Eileen said nothing but shifted her chair so that her back was to the boy. I was now curious and kept a weather eye out whilst we continued talking. Soon after the son happened to glance up and when he saw his mother's back, the reaction was catalytic. He dropped his cards and immediately went and made a cup of tea for me. The incident confirmed to me a number of things I had previously observed in Aboriginal families. First, Aboriginal people are brought up to be group and relationship sensitive. Second, child discipline is often achieved by withdrawal of communication. Third, Aboriginal people have enormous skill at interpreting body language.

This however was not the end of evening's instruction in cultural differences. Shortly after, a knock came at the door with a woman loudly announcing she had come for her children. Eileen brought the woman into the kitchen and it was quite obvious she was worse for wear from alcohol. She again loudly demanded her twin boys back. Eileen was completely unperturbed and told one of her card playing sons to go and fetch the twins. He duly did and two ten year olds accompanied him back into the kitchen.

They greeted their mother and Eileen told them quite impassively that their mother wanted them to go home with her. Equally impassively, the boys just shook their heads and said no, they wanted to stay with Eileen. The mother was crestfallen and her belligerence immediately dissipated. The twins then told their mother they would see her next time and left the room to return to whatever they were doing. Eileen then made the boys' mother a cup of tea which she dutifully drank and then quietly departed. It was a fascinating process to observe. The children had spoken and indicated their preference. Regardless of her intoxicated state the mother had immediately respected their choice and had not persisted in any claim to treat them as if they were parental property.

The clash of western and indigenous values in contemporary society

It is perhaps the preoccupation of western social values with property that causes the most basic problems for indigenous people. Western culture is acquisitive, competitive and individualistic and as indicated in the preceding discussion, the focus on personal property even extends to viewing children as property (Poulter, 2007:39). When we speak of parental rights for example, what do we really mean? One could argue that a parent has no rights other than those that flow from meeting their responsibility to properly care for their children. To talk of parental rights outside the context of responsibility is simply to reduce children to parental real estate.

In traditional indigenous society, ideas of personal property were limited to basic hunting or survival tools or some possessions that marked your status or identity. Certainly, there was no concept of personal acquisition or wealth and the right to possession of particular articles was dependent on use. If for instance you were wearing a cloak and removed it because you were hot, if the person sitting next to you was cold, they would have an unfettered right to pick up the cloak and wear it. Ownership by use is therefore a concept that still applies in Aboriginal communities today and this can cause significant problems with the law as the following anecdote indicates.

When I was the probation and parole officer down in Bairnsdale in the early 1970's I was talking to a local police officer. He was recounting how he had just charged a local Aboriginal lad with theft of a bike and that the crime had been amazingly simple to solve. He said that a complaint had been made that the bike was missing and a description given of the bike. It was suspected that an Aboriginal lad who had been at the house earlier might have taken it. Driving past the address where the Aboriginal lad lived, he saw the bike leaning against the front fence. On being questioned the youth freely admitted taking the bike and was duly charged with theft.

I pointed out to the police officer that culturally it was not in fact theft. He had just borrowed the bike to get home and left it where it could be retrieved. He therefore had no intention of keeping

the bike so rather than him having committed a crime, it was the policeman who had created the crime by charging him. It was also obvious that in doing so, he had made a whole lot of unnecessary work for himself.

I then told him how only a couple of weeks before my four-year-old son had been playing in the back yard with some Aboriginal children who were neighbours from about three doors down. My son later came into the kitchen and said that one of his friends who had been called home had taken his trike. I told him not to worry, that he was just borrowing the trike to get home and that it would come back tomorrow morning. Next morning just as I had predicted the trike came back.

It was my experience that Aboriginal parents tended to admonish their children about property by saying things like 'Just remember that white people are funny about property and don't like sharing'. My police colleague was amazed, he had never thought about it like that and didn't know that Aboriginal people had a different view about property I am pleased to report that immediately after that, the juvenile crime rate dropped dramatically in Bairnsdale as much fewer Aboriginal children were charged with theft.

Understanding the nature of contemporary cultural differences

The preceding anecdote shows that just a small understanding of cultural differences can sometimes have big impacts. However, as we have seen from our preceding discussion this knowledge of cultural differences is often not easy to gain. Apart from the fact that Aboriginal people share the same difficulty as others in articulating these differences, there is also the disinclination to do so. Trans-generational trauma and the cultural repression suffered over the generations have reinforced the need to maintain a level of secrecy about Aboriginal culture and identity. I can offer one last anecdote to illustrate this point.

When I was working at a secure forensic mental health hospital in 2002, a nurse from another ward mentioned to me that a young Aboriginal man had been just admitted to the hospital. He said that he was aware that I had worked with Aboriginal people before, but that it probably not relevant because the person did not identify as Aboriginal and did not want to discuss anything. Later I saw the patient in the grounds and went up and stood beside him. I introduced myself as Jim the social worker from another ward and with a wave of my arm to the Yarra River Valley vista ahead of us, said that I was lived locally in Wurrundjeri country. I then asked what mob he was from. He smiled and said he was Yorta-Yorta. I replied enthusiastically saying that his people had a great history, that it was great country up that way and that I loved the Goulburn River region.

I then asked who his family were. He then mentioned his father's and mother's family names and that of an uncle. I immediately remarked that it was a famous family name and I knew of his uncle who was indeed a great man who had done a lot for his people. We then chatted a while about who was related to who and how various people were going. I then told him I had some Aboriginal theme posters if he wanted them and he indicated that he did.

Later I sought out the nurse and told him a bit about his patient's extended family and who were noted footballers and suchlike. I then suggested that the nurse should feel free to publicly state

to others in the presence of his patient, just how famous his family was and what wonderful country he came from. He duly did this at a ward meeting of patients and staff. The nurse then later reported that the patient seemed to have since made rapid progress in his mental state. He now openly identified as Aboriginal and had put up Aboriginal posters and art in his room.

Issues of professional engagement with indigenous clients

It is instructive to look at what how engagement was achieved in this case as there are many instances of how one can pay respect to indigenous cultural differences. In fact when you carefully analyse what happened, eleven different 'handy hints' can be gleaned, which are as follows.

Stand or sit alongside to talk, not opposite. In tribal time it was considered polite to stand side by side when you spoke. This aided hearing, showed respect by avoiding unnecessary eye contact and allowed you to scan the horizon while you spoke. This behaviour is still a culturally inherited trait, so if you are going to interview an Aboriginal person, sit alongside them and not opposite them.

Reflect pride in your country. If you live in a particular area, have a think about the natural beauty and features of where you live and what is the major river system of your area. In tribal times each family, clan and tribe had responsibility for maintenance of a particular water course. Respect for river systems and country is deeply buried in the Aboriginal psyche, so it can only help your engagement if you reflect that same respect.

Acknowledge prior Aboriginal custody of the land. Acknowledge prior Aboriginal custody and stewardship of the area in which you live. If you do not know the name of the tribe originally inhabiting your area, find out and store it away. Also try to build up knowledge of the tribal names in areas where there are concentrations of Aboriginal people. One of the most pleasing innovations in recent years is how local, state and federal governments have instituted indigenous welcoming ceremonies and acknowledgement of prior custody. This can only help to redress the cultural repression and denial of heritage that has been the norm over the past two hundred years.

Use culturally appropriate language. Familiarity with some Aboriginal words such as those listed in previously will assist the engagement process. These words are however not completely universal and will vary from region to region. Try to find out some common words in your area and it is quite appropriate to ask your clients to help you build up your vocabulary. Engagement can also be assisted by just being aware of some styles of expression rather than Aboriginal vocabulary as such. In the anecdote given, I only used the phrase 'What mob are you from?' and this was an initial key to engagement.

Express admiration for their country. As well as expressing appreciation for the country you live in, express admiration for the wonders of their country. This is a deeply embedded protocol from tribal times and still survives undiminished. You will note that in the anecdote I expressed respect and admiration for the Goulburn River area and the lower Goulburn junction with the Murray is the heart of Yorta-Yorta territory. As indicated before, knowledge of such tribal affiliations with land and water can only help the process of engagement.

Show respect for their tribal affiliation and reputation. As well as knowing tribal locations, it also pays to know something of tribal history in particular areas. What resistance activities were there to invasion and conquest? Is there documented or oral history of massacres or atrocities? What historical figures, male and female, have there been in tribal, colonial and post colonial times? It is perfectly appropriate to ask your clients to tell you the stories attached to their past and present tribal leaders.

Show interest in or knowledge of their kinship. Pride in family and kinship is still a powerful cultural force in indigenous communities. Just as it is a normal cultural requirement in the broader Australian culture to discuss the weather and sport before you get down to business, so it is a cultural necessity amongst Aboriginal people to swap kinship news. Try to build up your knowledge of family names belonging to particular areas and who is related to whom. Just as you would with your own family friends, enquire about the health and wellbeing of your client's family. Also do not be reticent about giving them some information about the health and wellbeing of your own family. You need to be prepared to rethink the nature of your professional relationship somewhat and the degree to which your ideas of professional boundaries are culturally prescribed. These cultural assumptions may in fact act as a barrier to proper engagement with indigenous clients. However, the golden rule with all self disclosures to clients remains unchanged, it is for their benefit, not yours.

Show respect to their elders. Nowadays, honorific titles of 'Uncle' and 'Aunt' are attached to influential elders in the indigenous community. So be sure you refer to particular elders by using these titles when you discuss kinship with your Aboriginal clients. Don't feel awkward at using such relationship terms when you are not in fact related to them, because this is irrelevant. You are simply reflecting respect for their status as influential contributors to both the Aboriginal and broader communities.

Show respect for Aboriginal achievement. This is perhaps the easiest of all to achieve. All you have to do is note indigenous achievement, particularly in relation to sport. Know the names of present-day footballers, boxers and athletes and their particular skills and abilities. Also know something of past achievements by Aboriginal people, such as previous world and commonwealth champion boxers and champion athletes, tennis players or cricketers. It is also handy to know achievements buried in the past such as the Aboriginal cricket team of 1868 which was the first Australian team to defeat the English. Or Peter St Albans, who was an Aboriginal jockey and won the Melbourne Cup in 1876 at age 13, riding Breisis. He is still the youngest Cup winner ever. Or even more obscurely, Murrumgunarriman (known as Jemmy Tarpot), who holds the longest standing world record in athletics history, having in 1867 run the 100 yards backwards in 14 seconds. This is only one of many athletic world records by Aboriginal people that were never officially recognised simply because they were by black men and therefore did not count.

Show respect for Aboriginal culture. Implicit within this showing of respect for Aboriginal land custody, kinship and achievement in your interactions with clients, is a demonstration of respect for Aboriginal culture. But this can also be buttressed by demonstrating some knowledge of indigenous art, music and dance. Actively seek to understand the symbolism and concepts involved in Aboriginal art. Not just traditional culture though. Try to understand the way in

which contemporary culture is regenerating and transforming traditional culture. Encourage your clients in any artistic endeavour that will assist them in strengthening their own cultural identity and overcoming the effects of personal alienation and trans-generational trauma.

Show respect for Aboriginal culture and achievement in public ways. It is however not enough to show respect in just private and interpersonal ways with your clients. Just as I was able to encourage my nursing colleague to do, take that extra step. Show public respect to your clients, their family achievements and their cultural heritage. As was seen, the results were dramatic in terms of improvement in the person's mental state, wellbeing and self esteem. Here was a person seen as someone who did not identify as being Aboriginal, but this was only because it first had to be proved safe to do so. Institutional racism is still unfortunately alive and well in many respects today, so public demonstrations of respect for this integral part of our national heritage is still very much required to combat it.

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