Community level cultural connectedness and suicide by young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

Raymond W Lovett[1,2] and Makayla-May Brinckley[1]

Cultural participation can be a buffer to racism and a tool to heal

The loss of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people to suicide has devastating immediate and lasting effects on families and communities. At the population level, suicide is a major public health problem in Indigenous Australian communities; it is the fifth most frequent cause of death, and a large proportion of suicide deaths are of young people.[1]

It is important to recognise that suicide as described in the health literature often does not centre our mob. Gap reporting, the starting point for the research article by Gibson and colleagues in this issue of the *MJA*,[2] continues to regard the non-Indigenous Australian community as the standard.[3] This point is even more important in the context of this article, as cultural social capital and the experience of racism are factors not relevant to the experiences of most people in this country.

Gibson and colleagues[2] investigated the relationship between community cultural connectedness indicators and age-adjusted suicide rates for young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Queensland. They found that the youth suicide rate was 44% lower in areas with greater community participation in cultural events, described by the authors as "cultural social capital". Conversely, the rate was almost three times as high in communities in which at least one-quarter of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people reported discrimination during the preceding year than in areas with lower levels of discrimination.

While these findings are important, the concepts underlying the analyses highlight a number of problems in the literature. The first is a failure of population and administrative systems in Australia to provide data related to the concepts of what constitutes a "good life" for young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and for Indigenous people more generally. The two major results of the study by Gibson and her colleagues[2] provide an opportunity to reflect on what cultural social capital and exposure to discrimination mean in Australia. Key concepts for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander wellbeing must be determined from within their communities.[4,5] The cultural determinants of wellbeing have been investigated in several studies, including the Yawuru Wellbeing survey,[6] the Mayi Kuwayu Study,[7] and the What Matters Study.[8]

Second, the findings by Gibson and colleagues[2] highlight the failure to advance concepts of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander childhood and youth development beyond approaches based on Western ideals. Identity formation is a critical developmental stage during the years in which we lose many young people.[9] Cultural social capital in this context comprises what many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people value about their individuality, family, community, and nations, and as a society: the features that matter to them and give meaning to their lives.[10] Cultural social capital in this sense builds a sense of identity, agency, empowerment, and belonging. The child and adolescent development literature is replete with evidence that identity formation is foundational to the concept of a "good life".[9,10] The impact of identity disruption, and the imposition of the majority concept of a good life on the sense of self, cause internal conflict in our young people. Importantly, it does not have to be this way.

The report by Gibson and her co-authors[2] adds weight to the recent centring of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture in our national policy agenda.[11] But recognition of the impact that colonial processes continue to have at our very heart — on our identity — is still limited. A deep understanding of the ongoing impact of trauma on our people, only recently bought to light, is also missing.[12] The extent and impact of the historical and contemporary discrimination, racism and trauma experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples explains why culture — in this instance, cultural social capital — is not reported at high levels across Australia, and shows how discrimination disempowers and impairs positive identity formation through marginalisation.

Centring and identifying culture as salutogenic (health promoting) and as a buffer against discrimination understands and uses the strength of identity, a concept of a "good life" free of colonial control and entails a sense of agency. The findings of Gibson and her colleagues[2] remind us that it is simply not enough to be aware of discrimination or how it is embedded in our societal systems. We should increase cultural participation as a buffer to discrimination and racism, to continue to heal our communities.

[1] National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health, the Australian National University, Canberra, ACT. [2] Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Canberra, ACT. ✉ raymond.lovett@anu.edu.au

1 Australian Bureau of Statistics. 3303.0. Causes of death, Australia, 2016. Updated 27 Sept 2017. https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/3303.0~2016~Main%20Features~Australia's%20leading%20causes%20of%20death,%202016~3 (viewed May 2021).

2 Gibson M, Stuart J, Leske S, et al. Suicide rates for young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people: the influence of community level cultural connectedness. *Med J Aust* 2021; 214: 514–518.

3 Thurber KA, Thandrayen J, Banks E, et al. Strengths-based approaches for quantitative data analysis: a case study using the Australian Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children. *SSM Popul Health* 2020; 12: 100637.

4 Butler TL, Anderson K, Garvey G, et al. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's domains of wellbeing: a comprehensive literature review. *Soc Sci Med* 2019; 233: 138–157.

5 Salmon M, Doery K, Dance P, et al. Defining the indefinable: descriptors of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' cultures and their links to health and wellbeing. Second edition. Melbourne: The Lowitja Institute, 2019. http://hdl.handle.net/1885/148406 (viewed Apr 2021).

6 Yap M, Yu E. Community wellbeing from the ground up: a Yawuru example [Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre report no. 3/16]. Aug 2016. https://bcec.edu.au/publications/community-wellbeing-ground (viewed Apr 2021).

7 Jones R, Thurber KA, Chapman J, et al; Mayi Kuwayu Study Team. Study protocol: *Our Cultures Count*, the Mayi Kuwayu Study, a national longitudinal study of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander wellbeing. *BMJ Open* 2018; 8: e023861.

8 Howard K, Anderson K, Cunningham J, et al. What Matters 2 Adults: a study protocol to develop a new preference-based wellbeing measure with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults (WM2Adults). *BMC Public Health* 2020; 20: 1739.

9 Stangor C, Walinga J. Adolescence: developing independence and identity. In: Introduction to psychology. First Canadian edition. Victoria (BC): BCcampus, 2014; pp. 297-305. https://opentextbc.ca/introductiontopsychology (viewed May 2021).

10 Walter M, Martin KL, Bodkin-Andrews G. Indigenous children growing up strong: a longitudinal study of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2017.

11 Australian Department of Health and Ageing. National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan (NATSIHP) 2013–2023. June 2013. https://www1.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/content/b92e980680486c3bca257bf0001baf01/$file/health-plan.pdf (viewed May 2021).

12 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Stolen Generations and descendants: numbers, demographic characteristics and selected outcomes (Cat no. IHW 195). Canberra: AIHW, 2018. https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/indigenous-australians/stolen-generations-descendants/overview (viewed May 2021). ■