

Archives and Indigenous communities can work together: one Koori's perspective

Narissa Timberly

Narissa Timberly is a Koori woman from the south coast of New South Wales. For Narissa, knowing about her family and where her family come from are very important matters. This was something that she always took for granted until she worked in a small Aboriginal Studies resource collection at the Aboriginal Education Centre, University of Wollongong (1998–2003), where on occasion people would ask her if she could help them search for information about their families. Narissa's passion to learn about archives began back then and in 2005 she was awarded the Monash University Indigenous Archives Scholarship, to study for the Master of Information Management and Systems. Through this study she hoped to learn the skills needed for an archivist so she could translate that back to working with communities and individuals in accessing, creating and preserving records. Narissa is particularly interested in how archival records are described and the use of metadata to enable their retrieval. Her research is currently looking at the development of relationships between Aboriginal peoples and archival institutions, the dynamics of those partnerships and the influence they have on the institutions' practices.

The lack of appropriate consultation in research and program development is often a concern for Aboriginal communities. The practices of archival institutions in records access for the purposes of family research are another area of concern. This paper presents the findings of a reflective study of the consultation processes undertaken in three archival initiatives that aimed at improving access and relationships between archival institutions, research and practice, and Indigenous communities. This paper draws upon my own

experiences and the findings of my research. The main finding is that one of the biggest mistakes often made in regards to consultation and archives is to apply the idea that 'one size fits all'; that all Aboriginal peoples and communities across Australia are the same, and if something works for one community then it will automatically work elsewhere. What I hope to do through this paper is to encourage readers to get to know the communities that they work with, and then translate that to the delivery of services, programs or research that engage communities and are therefore able to meet particular community needs. I mostly refer to Aboriginal peoples of the Australian mainland as these groups were the main target audiences for the initiatives that are the focus of this article. In so doing, it was not my intention to exclude Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Introduction

I need to make something clear upfront. No one person can represent the diverse and dynamic multiple cultures and views of all Aboriginal peoples. I am a Koori, but it is not my place to speak for all Aboriginal peoples. What I can do is present my own experiences and the findings of the research I have conducted in the hope that it will assist others.

This paper is based on my study into the issues of appropriate consultation in the development of archival programs and research. There have been no research studies of archival consultation, but there is relevant literature that reports on research protocols and poor practices in the past such as *We don't like research ... but in Koori hands it could make a difference*¹ and *Research – understanding ethics*,² both of which were published by VicHealth Koori Health Research and Community Development Unit. Also there are protocols and guides that I was able to use to support my findings, such as the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies *Guidelines for ethical research in Indigenous studies*,³ and the New South Wales Board of Studies *Working with Aboriginal communities: a guide to community consultation and protocols*.⁴

My journey into the world of archives was new for me. As such I believe it is important that you understand what archives and consultation meant to me and how these understandings shaped my research

methodology, before I embark on my exploration of how archival institutions have worked with community.

Research methodology

Figure 1 illustrates the emotional and physical understandings that I had about archives based on my personal and community experiences.

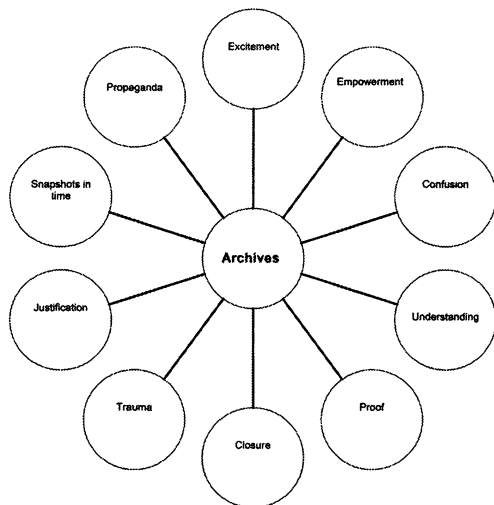


Figure 1. My feelings about the term archives

As you can see, my feelings were mixed in regards to positive and negative understandings of archives. My feelings about consultation were equally mixed, reflecting my previous experiences of consultation (see Figure 2).

I used these feelings to define my reflective study. Through combining Figures 1 and 2, I was able to identify key areas for investigation (see Figure 3).

I focused on how the relationships between community, archival institutions and organisations that provide services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) peoples were developed, and the

outcomes of that collaboration in terms of ‘better access to records’. The area where the three spheres meet – access – is the common ground where progress is made to achieve the goal of improving access to records for ATSI peoples. This is the area where groups are working collaboratively. I do not think progress can be made if the groups do not come together and the initiatives are not supported from the ground up to the highest levels.

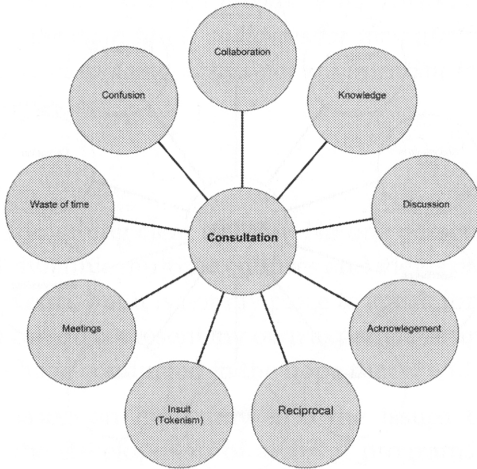


Figure 2. My feelings about the term consultation

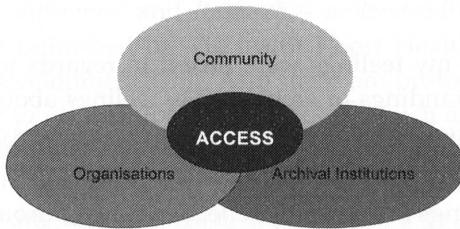


Figure 3. Collaborative goal

I undertook a study of three archival initiatives: Bringing Them Home name index, *Finding your story* publication and the Trust and Technology Project. I hoped to compare my ideas and experiences of

archives and consultation processes with what is currently happening in regards to archival access for ATSI peoples. I based my analysis on the available literature.

In the sections that follow, I give a general introduction and overview of what culturally appropriate consultation is all about, and then share my findings from the study I conducted on the three archival initiatives.

So, what is consultation?

‘Where ignorance is bliss, ‘tis folly to be wise’, no longer applies to consultation with Indigenous communities.⁵ Indigenous Australians have been educating researchers for many years on the importance and value of moving past your own boundaries and comfort zones, and that learning can happen with different perspectives accommodated. I will attempt to illustrate through the initiatives I have looked at that there is so much more to consultation than just talking. It is not good enough to say, ‘Well, we consulted the community’. It has to be real, respected and shared conversation and partnership – not a drop-in fly-out style presentation.

Consultation is a process where all parties need to be actively involved throughout all stages for it to be not only relevant, but also to avoid accusations of the process just going through the motions, as spelt out by Smith: ‘Consultation is not a “rubber stamp” activity – rather, it involves active participation in the planning, design, implementation and evaluation stages ...’.⁶ Likewise, the Board of Studies NSW has defined consultation as ‘An ongoing process involving the establishment of meaningful two-way relationships between Aboriginal people/communities and non-Aboriginal people’.⁷ However, past practice illustrates that other definitions and applications of consultation have been used, resulting in negative emotions within some communities who have been ‘consulted’. These practices have occurred throughout many Indigenous communities, which has resulted in anecdotes about consultation and research, such as:

Is there going to be any positive outcomes or is this just information? Does the community have to deal with this

ourselves? There is no infrastructure to do that. It's just consultation, consultation and then nothing.⁸

They sort of say 'well in the past when our people have sort of cooperated with non-Indigenous people, that knowledge that we've recorded, has been taken away and we've never ever seen it again'.⁹

These quotes sum up my personal thoughts of consultation. When I read them I hear the voices of my aunties and uncles reinforcing these quotes through saying, 'Oh, this fella came and asked lots of questions and I think he has even written a book about it, but I haven't heard anything since'. Experiences like this, where the researcher profits and the participants are left wondering what happened with their personal information has led to distrust.

Consultation is another way to describe a two-way street of learning. Effective communication (consultation) between people from any walk of life starts with the basics of listening and sharing. Listening includes body language, understanding cultural protocols in a comfortable environment, and acknowledging that the individuals you are consulting with are the experts in their community and should be regarded as such. Sharing requires telling a little about yourself and where you come from. Finally, consultation requires partnership as described by the Victorian Community Controlled Health Organisation:

It is important to make sure you identify all the partners in a collaborative project. Even better, include the partners in a formal partnership arrangement such as a Memorandum of Understanding. This makes all the partners equal and gives the partnership and the project a solid foundation.¹⁰

I believe that developing relationships or partnerships in the early stages of consultation can lead to community needs being met in the later stages. Prior research about the community you are working with can also help with the planning and the consultation process. I believe that awareness of history and sociological factors that have influenced the current environment are important for developing an

understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' past and current relationships with archives. Smith extends this further by suggesting that your own understandings and hopes should also be explored:

[B]efore catching a ride on the 'consultative process train' you should carefully assess your personal understandings and think about what you hope to achieve, the strategies you are going to use and how this is going to affect everyone involved.¹¹

The importance of building these relationships before the start of a project is emphasised by Esme Saunders, a Yorta Yorta woman who has extensive experience in Aboriginal education and Aboriginal affairs:

establishing research that is in the Community's best interest – in the Koori Community's best interest. Making sure that consultation occurs before that really gets to a stage of being a part of a research project.¹²

Huebner and Cooper highlighted the importance of relationships and trust for the success of the Victorian Koorie Heritage Archive project:

The ability to meld Koorie culture and technology relies on a relationship of trust with community members. It also relies on a willingness to listen and hear the voices of Koorie individuals and communities and from a perspective of understanding the foundation of Koorie culture.¹³

Historical and sociological factors

Aboriginal communities have been active in changing the way in which research is conducted with their communities. The reason for this push is due to the history of the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples since colonisation. I would like to take this opportunity to look at this relationship. Lorna Lippmann has observed:

Once they [Aboriginal people] were out of sight and their resistance broken, the settlers could get on with

the serious business of exploiting the land to their own profit.¹⁴

There was a concerted effort to either eradicate or assimilate the Aboriginal peoples of Australia, with official policies remaining in effect into the mid-1970s, even after the success of the 1967 referendum. Once it was realised that the original inhabitants of this land were not going to simply disappear, efforts to control and manage Aboriginal peoples ensued. As a result, there are vast amounts of surveillance and policing records produced by government in the course of their efforts to control and manage Aboriginal peoples that are now held in our archival institutions.

The importance of archives and archival institutions to ATSI peoples was highlighted through the 1991 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody¹⁵ and again in 1997 with *Bringing Them Home*, the report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families.¹⁶ The effects of forced removal from family were officially documented for all to see. From this came the recognition that archival records can be invaluable to ATSI peoples in helping to tackle the effects of past government actions and that something needed to be done to provide, or improve, access to these records. The recommendations of the *Bringing Them Home* report put the provision of better access to records for ATSI peoples on the agenda of Australian archival agencies, that is, access to records that went beyond the production of publications and guides. Please note that this statement is not meant to diminish the value and significance of these publications, as they are an important part of the framework for later initiatives. In addition they provide researchers with the administrative history of government control that is essential in deciphering who did what and what information is where.

To better understand the archival response to these inquiries and the changing environment as it relates to ATSI peoples, I looked at what the National Archives of Australia and various state archives had done to make their collections more accessible to ATSI peoples. These initiatives are presented in appendix 1 ('Timeline of significant events'). I have chosen three initiatives from those identified in this appendix as examples of collaborations between archival institutions and

Aboriginal communities to investigate in more detail how successful these collaborations were and how effective their consultation was to the initiative.

Consultation and collaborations

The three initiatives I have chosen to look at are the *Finding your story* publication, the Bringing Them Home name index and the Trust and Technology Project. I believe that each of these three collaborative efforts was possible, if only in part, because of relationships that existed before the initiative itself, that is, there was already some shared understanding of the past, and what was hoped to be achieved through the initiative before it started.

For each initiative I will consider the prior environment (previous relationships and events leading up to the initiative), the initiative description, and the findings, that is, my reflections on the consultation aspect of the initiative.

Finding your story

Prior environment

The Victorian Koorie Records Taskforce (VKRT) was set up in response to recommendation 23 of the Bringing Them Home report to promote:

co-operation between record-holders and record-searchers and to address the obstacles facing Indigenous people wishing to access records relating to themselves and their families.¹⁸

While the VKRT consultations were specifically about access to records, they recognised that there were other issues that had an impact on access and therefore did not stop participants from venting other issues during their workshops. This was an important aspect of their consultation process as it showed that the VKRT valued the participants' voices and opinions. It also demonstrated that they were not there just to get the information they needed to achieve their purpose, but were also interested in building relationships into the future.

The transparency demonstrated by publishing its consultative process and transcripts was something that I had not previously encountered. Providing the participants with the *Community forums summary report* also gave the participants feedback and an indication that their concerns were being listened to, and that their knowledge and experiences were valued. It also revealed that many concerns were shared by participants across the state.

One of those findings was a 'strong consensus on the need for services to be designed and provided by members of the Stolen Generations themselves'.¹⁹ The formation of the Victorian Stolen Generations Taskforce, which was to be chaired by Jim Berg, the former Koorie Heritage Trust CEO,

would investigate how best to address the hurt and devastation flowing from forcibly removing Indigenous children from their families.²⁰

The Victorian Stolen Generations Taskforce engaged a consultancy firm to gather input from members of the Stolen Generations, including information about what services people had accessed and their experience with that service. Some were positive, some were negative. This input provided an overview of the current environment and, importantly, led to the acknowledgement that the Stolen Generations:

have the right to be given time to take control of their healing. Most importantly, they have the right to have a say in how services should be designed to assist them, which is partially the reason why to date there have been flaws in service delivery – lack of consultation.²¹

The initiative

In 2005, Public Record Office Victoria (PROV) published *Finding your story: a resource manual to the records of the Stolen Generations in Victoria*. This publication was produced in response to a demand from Victoria's Aboriginal communities who 'wanted more information on the location of *their* personal and historical records and ways to access them'.²² The introduction to the publication observed:

Finding Your Story has been produced by Aboriginal Affairs Victoria, Public Record Office Victoria and the

Victorian Koorie Records Taskforce as a reference tool for individual Indigenous Victorians seeking information on their separation. It will also assist agencies continuing to help the Stolen Generations on their journey of discovery and healing.²³

In the foreword, Jason Eades (who was the Chairperson of the Koorie Records Taskforce) says that this resource was 'useful and practical because it has been written and presented in a clear, concise and culturally appropriate manner achieved by extensive consultation and input from Koorie user groups'.²⁴

The agencies working together to produce this resource demonstrate the collaborative environment where Aboriginal and mainstream service providers are working together and learning from one another to make records more accessible. It is hoped that this collaborative work will result in 'a streamlining of these systems into one set of Common Access Guidelines, to be applied by government and non-government record-holding organisation alike'.²⁵

Finding your story goes beyond being a finding aid as it provides a brief historical overview to aid in understanding the political climate of the time. The need for this kind of understanding is stressed by Rosie Baird, who observes that when

dealing with the displaced children, the emphasis is firstly on education and knowing the broad history of removal and government policies, and coming to terms with the language and racists comments used at the time.²⁶

Additionally, the artwork presented on the cover of the folder features thought-provoking images that people can identify with, and maybe on a subliminal level 'these images serve as a reminder that this resource manual is about people as much as it is about locating records'.²⁷ I believe this pertinent point would not be so easily overlooked if organisations and community members worked more closely together.

Findings

I believe that the process leading up to the publication of *Finding your story* validates the view that working relationships can be developed

through consultation and collaboration that benefits everybody. With reference to Figure 3, this project has overlapped in all spheres to improve access to archives for Aboriginal peoples. The project has created an ongoing relationship as the resource links researchers to various organisations. Importantly, though, the resource needs to be updated and contacts maintained by the different service providers for these relationships to be maintained. Ongoing relationships are integral to the continued success of any initiative such as this publication. If the contacts break down, then the resource, and the relationships developed, would risk becoming outdated, and therefore complicate the researcher's journey rather than aiding it.

Bringing Them Home name index (National Archives of Australia)

Prior environment

I have had no success in finding literature on the consultation processes undertaken before the development of the *Bringing Them Home* name index (BTHNI). I believe it came about from previous initiatives of the National Archives of Australia (NAA), such as the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Commonwealth records: a guide to records* (1993), and the exhibition *Between two worlds: The Commonwealth Government and the removal of Aboriginal children of part descent in the Northern Territory*. The then Director-General of the NAA, George Nichols, observed in the foreword to the accompanying publication to the exhibition that the project 'is significant for the Australian Archives because the groundwork was laid in full consultation with Aboriginal people'.²⁸

The initiative

The BTHNI was an initiative funded to act on recommendations of the *Bringing Them Home* report relating to accessing archival records. Advice was sought from state archival agencies, the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) and the community. Initial consultations were held with the Northern Territory Aboriginal Advisory Group (NTAAG), which at the time was the only

established advisory group. The Northern Territory memorandum of understanding kick-started the BTHNI consultations. According to the evaluation of the Ministerial Council of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, the BTHNI 'built on consultative procedures already established between National Archives and Indigenous organisations.'²⁹

The initial consultations on this project covered 'matters such as appropriate levels of detail in indexing, priorities for indexing and the way in which the resulting indexes would be available'.³⁰ The decision to use the funds for the purpose of a name index came from the community. As Paul Macpherson explains:

The groups and communities consulted expressed the near unanimous view that compilation of the index was the most important thing that the Archives could do to assist with family reunion, and that resources should be directed primarily to indexing, at least in the earlier years of the project.³¹

Consultations did not cease once the project began, but continued throughout. According to the literature, the Aboriginal advisory groups were the main contributors to the ongoing development of the BTHNI; however, community advice was also sought through demonstrations of the database to Indigenous community groups between 2002 and 2003.

The Aboriginal advisory groups are still meeting regularly which is a result of good consultation practice. The NAA has learnt through working with the NTAAG that 'you can't use the group for consultation on every Indigenous issue ... they would not want to give advice on issues affecting, for example, people in another state or region',³² which acknowledges the diversity of Indigenous communities across Australia. This demonstrates an understanding of the limitations of who can provide what at the consultation table. This goes for all parties; I believe it is very important to recognise this in the preliminary talks.

Meaningful consultation and collaboration between NAA and the Indigenous communities have produced an extremely valuable resource. Moreover, the continued achievements of the BTHNI are a testament to the value of ongoing consultation.

Findings

Based on my readings, the NAA does support collaboration with Indigenous communities and the BTHNI is testament to that. However, a question still remains: why were these collaborations not more publicly documented? It is as if the outcomes are more important in regard to findings than the process that led to them; it is the process that provides a wealth of knowledge and understanding to this particular initiative. Going back to my ideal collaborative goal illustrated in Figure 3, the project has overlapped in all three spheres.

Importantly, too, as staff from the Link-Up organisations also have access to the name index database, I believe that the partnerships developed will be maintained. Aside from a referral role, I am not sure how much ongoing input will be forthcoming from the state archives (aside from those in Victoria, South Australia and the Northern Territory) and AIATSIS.

Trust and Technology (T&T) Project

Prior environment

In 2002 Jim Berg, a respected member of the Aboriginal community, approached Ross Gibbs, then Director of PROV, with a notion to bring archival science and Indigenous knowledge systems closer together. What he had in mind, as explained in the T&T Project's final report, was:

the proposal for a research project which applied the perspectives of Koorie communities, recordkeeping practitioners and researchers to the challenge of developing trusted archival systems for Indigenous oral memory.³³

This began a collaborative research project that joined Aboriginal perspectives and expertise with archival practice and expertise, to develop a usable archival system for Indigenous oral memory.

The initiative

The T&T Project began in 2003 as an Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage Project application, with a partnership between Monash University, PROV, Koorie Heritage Trust Inc. (KHT), the Victorian Koorie Records Taskforce (VKRT) and the Indigenous Issues Special Interest Group (IISIG) of the ASA. Linkage projects look past more familiar research modes, where the research and collaboration end basically at the point of published results. Linkage grants often foster long-term alliances between the research partners. This scheme 'supports collaborative research and development projects between higher education organisations and other organisations, including within industry, to enable the application of advanced knowledge to problems.'³⁴

The team was fully aware at the outset of the importance of consulting widely across the cultural landscape of Victoria. All Indigenous cooperatives received a flyer asking for people to be part of the research; this was then followed up by phone contact. Further participants became involved through word of mouth; some were involved with cooperatives and others were not. A community advisory committee was established by the project partners to:

provide the project with feedback, both positive and negative; ... assists us with identifying community priorities; identify and advise us of protocols for both research and community; and allow for inputs to research perhaps highlighting extra questions or issues that we need to address.³⁵

The projects aims were as follows:

- To explore the emphasis that Indigenous people place on oral memory, and what this implies for providing archival services to this group.
- To examine how Indigenous people interpret trust in relation to key issues such as authenticity, intellectual property, and access.
- To investigate the current service models of government and other archives, to see how well they currently meet the needs

of Indigenous people for access to oral memory.

- To model Indigenous community-oriented archival services.
- To examine how archival techniques and information technology can be used to build archival systems that meet the needs of Indigenous people.
- To build a prototype preservation and access system which will demonstrate how the needs of Indigenous communities might be met.³⁶

Part of developing trust is tackling the issues associated with the way Indigenous Australians have been spoken about in the records and the many untruths that they contain. Unless you have Indigenous commentary to tell you otherwise, these fallacies may go unchallenged. One of the main challenges for the T&T team was to recognise 'the limitations of existing archival systems in relation to representing and preserving Koorie knowledge that has hitherto been transmitted orally.'³⁷ This also requires an understanding of the importance of 'linking recordings of oral narratives and memories to other forms of records of Koorie people, including archival and institutional records',³⁸ that is, associating information that can be trusted by the Koorie community with the 'official record' in a way that qualifies and questions the latter.

The team learnt a great deal from the consultation they undertook, significantly that what they originally perceived to be a great idea was not exactly what the community wanted, which required the 'redevelopment of stage 3 to specify a Koorie Annotation System rather than build a prototype archival system for oral memory as originally proposed'.³⁹ The Koorie Annotation System (KAS) would allow the community to tell their story alongside the archival record with the aim of setting the record straight. KAS will be able to upload sound, still and moving images to a webpage that also features digital reproductions of original records, and 'to provide a system where Koorie people can comment on, organise, store, and preserve digital records of their culture to serve their own needs'.⁴⁰ The KAS thereby has the potential to bring vast amounts of records together, making access to records easier.

It is widely known that our people have been researched to the hills and back. To me, research is research regardless of who is conducting that research and what the proposed outcome is. I personally do not distinguish between the various types of researchers I have encountered in my experience. The bottom line for me is that someone has come to me and asked me or my family questions, and regardless of who they may represent I want to know what has been done with that information they collected. To rectify this kind of concern, the T&T team 'developed an information dissemination strategy which included sending periodical progress reports to participants'.⁴¹ This is a crucial aspect of their project that I believe assured participants their contributions were valued and that the project was still running. The importance of knowing what has come out of your contribution to the research is highlighted in other literature, too - in the community report from a workshop entitled 'We don't like research ... But in Koori hands it could make a difference', one participant commented:

the thing is, our people are tired of these things, they're saying: 'What, again? What do we actually get out of it?'
Inquiries don't mean a thing if nothing gets changed.⁴²

The challenge for research teams is to dispel these perceptions from the outset. There are many factors that are outside the control of researchers in a university setting that need to be overcome to make research more respectful to Indigenous Australians. As Shannon Faulkhead has observed, the 'system encourages so-called hit-and-run scholarship'. Additionally, Faulkhead contends that 'we need to work to transform our own research designs and practice, as well as our research governance frameworks, ethics regime, and models for ownership of and rights in research data'. In Faulkhead's view, the T&T team concluded:

[C]ommunity and academia can work together, but it needs to be in partnership, not as one within the other. This may involve partnership projects where research methods, results and outcomes are collectively owned.⁴⁵

Like academia, archival science has its own set of operating procedures that do not adequately cater to the needs of Aboriginal peoples and require a shift in thinking to be able to change. While McKemmish

et al. talk about archival progress for records access by Aboriginal peoples, they also acknowledge that broader issues have not yet affected practice – the shift in thinking has not yet occurred:

These wider issues include the challenge that different memory and evidence paradigms might pose to western archival science, and the implications of acknowledging communities as co-creators of records for archival practice in relation to appraisal, selection, preservation and description of archives.⁴⁶

These are some of the issues the T&T team faced. The challenges came down to different ways of seeing and knowing, which Russell described as ‘irreconcilable ontologies’. As Faulkhead et al. explain:

Our experience suggests it is possible by working and learning together to achieve a different perspective that both transcends and transforms our own worldview, as well as that of the community with whom we are working. This, however, is not always easy within a perceived mainstay of the western knowledge system, academia.⁴⁸

The value of having Aboriginal researchers on the team cannot be underestimated either, as summarised by Esme Saunders. In her view, the ‘key concept associated with empowering Koori research is Community consultation and participation’, which means involving ‘local Koori Community researchers’ as ‘*people participating in the research itself*’.

The T&T team were very fortunate to have a Community Liaison Officer who provided an ongoing link to community. Valuing the knowledge of Aboriginal researchers is paramount to a cohesive research team. The T&T team found that the role of the Community Liaison Officer was at one stage seen by some as essentially administrative and by others research, but to the credit of the team it was rectified as soon as it was identified as a problem, and the Community Liaison Officer position became a more hands-on role. This was a perfect example of academia versus community, where cultural and community research practices clash with academic research practices. As Faulkhead et al. explain, the ‘project process was not unethical according to current academic frameworks, but it did not fully meet the requirements of Koorie research protocols’.⁵⁰

I believe if you really want your research to follow Indigenous protocols, the Community Liaison Officer role is perhaps the most integral to the whole project. It all goes back to respect and knowing your community. As observed by the T & T Project Community Liaison Officer Diane Singh, 'I find that a lot of community members, if they know you or they know of somebody who you can speak to, it's really good to get the names of people that they know and then they're a little bit more trusting also'.⁵¹ From my readings, I would concur with Singh that the T&T Project has been embraced by the community because it 'kept the community fairly well up-to-date'. Having participated 'in surveys and things in the past and once you cross those lines and put true or false and give it back, you never see nor hear from it anymore', Singh continues, 'so I think, really and truly the [T&T Project] committee's been trying to do everything in its power, and more I think'.⁵² As this comment demonstrates, the fact that the community was kept up to date with developments of the project is testament to the team's commitment to the community it was working with.

Findings

The value of cross-cultural or cross-institutional collaboration cannot be underestimated. The knowledge that each participant brings to the table is invaluable. In today's society we all need to work together - a project like the T&T Project demonstrates the hurdles, and suggests how they can be overcome to mediate between the Western structure of archival practice and Aboriginal community needs. I think this project is likely to maintain and nurture the relationships developed with both community and organisations. With reference to Figure 3, the T&T Project has overlapped in all spheres; however, with this initiative the organisations may eventually break off, once the project is up and running. This is not to say that there will be no contact between the developers and the community using the end product - from my understanding the end product would be for the community to control. The team did something that the other projects did not do: they openly published the learning process they went through during the project, and demonstrated how this learning was actioned through

change. By doing so, other research teams and organisations can learn from this and share.

Conclusion

Reprise: what makes for good consultation?

Through my study I have looked for key characteristics of good consultation. While I touched on some of them in the earlier section of my paper dealing with the nature of good consultation, I have developed them further in appendix 2. It is not exhaustive, but it covers the kind of characteristics that I was looking for, and is supported by the literature I was able to identify relating to community consultation.

Searching for consultation guidelines was difficult. As indicated above in my comments on the three initiatives, there does not appear to be any great interest in reporting on the consultation process relating to two of the archival initiatives studied. It appears to be regarded as just a process, a means to an end, and not a critical aspect of reflecting on the value and meaning of the end product. This is also a huge flaw in much current research practice that I have encountered.

From my personal experience I knew what I did not like, and I felt heartache for my relatives who had told their stories or provided information with little or no acknowledgement. They received not so much as a copy of the end product, nor were they provided with an understanding of what the information was going to be used for. I then drew from my study of the three initiatives, the experiences relayed by people involved with these projects, to get a broader picture of experiences with consultation. Lastly, I looked to various sources to encapsulate those key characteristics (see appendix 2).⁵³

I believe disclosing how you got to your end product, by releasing a report on the process of consultation engaged in, would be very beneficial to the community. I also think that if a community was unsure about what had happened, its members could refer to the report. A good example of how a report like this could be structured is the *Eurobodalla Aboriginal cultural heritage study*.⁵⁴ This report presented the findings and listed the participants, indicating who attended which

meeting and any restrictions on the information they provided. This type of report provides for full disclosure of the consultation process while respecting the need for confidentiality of some information.

What can we learn from the consultation undertaken by the three initiatives?

The way consultation is initiated with Aboriginal communities will depend on various elements, such as: the level of prior knowledge about the local community, for example having knowledge about a community's structure; an awareness of local Aboriginal networks; knowledge of local liaison workers and Aboriginal bodies, for example, land councils, housing companies or medical centres; and lastly, pre-existing working relationships. This kind of knowledge is also an important element in the success of an initiative. Going back to my ideal Figure 3 collaborative goal, you need all of the characteristics of good consultation to make your collaboration work. Working with Indigenous representatives from other organisations is crucial in getting to know your local community. However, the connection should not end there: you still need to go out to the community.

Working relationships are ideal, but to meet community needs you must ask the community what it is they want. If you take the other organisations out of the picture, you are missing vital elements in the broader perspective, and this would mean you were looking inwards rather than outwards.

In today's information world, when the ownership of a record may lie with a non-government organisation (NGO) or records may not be in the custody of the archives yet, it takes a coordinated approach to meet community access needs. All the initiatives examined in this paper have demonstrated the importance of all elements represented in Figure 3 in regard to the collaborative goal being given an equal and respected place in their development and continued usability. All three initiatives have also emphasised that all project members, Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, have an equal and valued contribution to make.

Some of my concerns regarding the term *consultation* were endorsed by the literature, and others were allayed. The readings and findings have demonstrated that, when communities' voices are respected, my

feelings about the term *consultation* have gone from a mostly wary view to a more accepting one.

The three initiatives have all aimed at making archives more accessible and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples aware of their existence. Ultimately it is hoped that access to the records will lead researchers to their families.

An issue not elaborated upon in this paper is the influence of identity. The Victorian Stolen Generations Taskforce identified this issue, and advocates that Stolen Generations members are a unique group and as such require special services to meet their needs:

Services designed and funded to address their specific needs are embedded in existing community based organisations. There is no organisation for Stolen Generations to come together as a group and determine appropriate advice to guide government service responses to their needs. This cuts out members of the Stolen Generations from any meaningful input into policy or service design.⁵⁵

There are many and varied perspectives that all need to be heard around the consultation table. Through researching the three initiatives I have gained a broader picture of the impact that these initiatives have had on the Aboriginal and archival communities. Further research involving consultation with community members using the characteristics listed in appendix 2 would be a useful way of pursuing the issues further and evaluating those key characteristics.

For the archival institutions to be able to better meet the needs of Aboriginal peoples using archival records for family research, they must engage in consultation with the community. However, if archives are to truly embrace proper community consultation, then there needs to be a shift in thought and practice within the archival community. In particular, archives need to recognise that subjects have rights to the record. As McKemmish and Piggott observe, recordkeeping and archival practice have displayed a tendency 'to treat other parties to transactions as *objects* of the activities and *subjects* of the record, rather than parties to transactions, in its appraisal, description and access activities and processes'.⁵⁶ This tendency is related to the 'drop-in

fly-out' or 'rubber stamp' styles of consultation where Indigenous 'problems' and non-Indigenous 'solutions' seem to define the research and the consultation process. As Lyn Anderson has stated:

The majority of research carried out in the past concerning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and much of present research is based on definitions, by non-Indigenous people, of what are perceived to be Indigenous problems. Coupled with this are non-Indigenous defined solutions. Thus Indigenous peoples become 'objects' of research in situations where problems and solutions are defined outside Indigenous frames of reference.⁵⁷

The best way to overcome this, I believe, is for the archival institutions to work in partnership with their local community and maintain collaborative relationships that develop from effective consultation.

Effective consultation is all about listening, hearing what people have to say; not just sitting there, but really reading what is going on in the room, listening and picking up the subtleties of non-verbal communication – sharing a little about yourself, showing yourself as a person, not just as the expert or academic, so that you can build a personal connection. Respecting, valuing and appreciating one another are a good mix to lay the foundations for a strong, effective collaborative experience. As demonstrated through this paper, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander expertise and archival expertise can interweave through effective consultation and collaboration.

Lastly, following Nakata's 'When I read descriptions of us as "cheeky little native upstarts", I would do a thumbs up for my people',⁵⁸ we cannot forget the strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who have been researched and written about in such insensitive and disrespectful ways.

Appendix 1. Timeline of significant events

Year Significant event

- 1991 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCIADIC) report released (recommendation 53 relates to archives).
- 1993 *My heart is breaking: a joint guide to records about Aboriginal people in the Public Record Office Victoria and the Australian Archives Victorian Regional Office* published.⁶⁰
- Between two worlds: the Commonwealth Government and the removal of Aboriginal children of part descent in the Northern Territory* exhibition began touring. The exhibition was a contribution to the International Year for the World's Indigenous Peoples.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People in Commonwealth Records: A guide to records in the Australian Archives, ACT Regional Office*, published as a response to RCIADIC.⁶¹
- 1995 *Between two worlds* book published.⁶²
- ATSILIRN publishes *The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander protocols for libraries, archives and information services*.⁶³
- 1996 National Archives of Australia implements a freeze on the destruction of all records in its custody that could be of use to Indigenous people tracing their family and community connections in response to RCIADIC recommendation 53.⁶⁴
- Australian Society of Archivists (ASA) releases 'Policy statement on archival services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people'.⁶⁵
- Indigenous Issues Special Interest Group formed in ASA.
- Research guide, *Aboriginal deaths in custody: the Royal Commission and its records 1987-91* published.⁶⁶
- 1997 NAA Memorandum of Understanding with Northern Territory Aboriginal People and Northern Territory Stolen Generations Combined Reference Groups, the KARU Aboriginal and Islander Child Care Agency and the Central Australian Aboriginal Child Care Agency.⁶⁷

Establishment of the Northern Territory Aboriginal Advisory Group, chaired by the NAA.

Bringing them home (BTH) report of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission released (recommendations 21 to 30 relate to archives).⁶⁸

My heart is breaking exhibition tours nationally.

1998 Work begins on NAA Bringing Them Home (BTH) name index.

Review of the *Commonwealth Archives Act*.

1999 Updates to the *Between two worlds* exhibition.

2000 Federal funding for BTH name indexing concluded; project now funded by NAA.

Guidelines produced by NAA for the records destruction freeze.

NAA Memorandum of Understanding with the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA).⁶⁹

Establishment of the Victorian Aboriginal Advisory Group, chaired by VACCA and representatives from NAA and major Victorian Aboriginal organisations.

NAA records destruction freeze in response to RCIADIC and BTH report (recommendation 21) 'has now been extended to cover records still in the custody of selected Commonwealth agencies considered likely to have relevant records'.⁷⁰

Education Kit *Between two worlds* developed.

2001 Bringing Them Home indexing milestone: 250,000 Indigenous names indexed. Milestone pin produced for all involved in the project.

Formal establishment of the Victorian Koorie Records Taskforce (VKRT) by the Victorian Government, now auspiced by Public Record Office Victoria (PROV).

ASA annual conference strongly supports all BTH recommendations.⁷¹

- 2002 NAA Memorandum of Understanding with South Australian Indigenous people and Nunkuwarrin Yunti, Link-Up program.⁷²
ASA submission to the Progress Toward National Reconciliation inquiry.⁷³
Council of Australasian Archives and Records Authorities (CAARA) 'Policy statement 10: Management of records relating to native title claims'.⁷⁴
- 2004 CAARA 'Statement of principle: Access to records of Indigenous Australians affected by past separation policies'.⁷⁵
Aboriginal Liaison Officer appointed by PROV.
Bringing Them Home Indigenous Archives Scholarship Scheme established at Monash University (response to recommendation 28 of BTH report).
Australian Research Council Linkage Project *Trust and technology: building an archival system for Indigenous oral memory* commences.
- 2005 PROV publishes *Finding your story: a resource manual to the records of the Stolen Generations in Victoria*.⁷⁶
- 2006 *Tracking family: a guide to Aboriginal records relating to the Northern Territory* published.⁷⁷
VKRT releases *wilam naling ... knowing who you are ... improving access to records of the Stolen Generations: a report to the Victorian Government from the Victorian Koorie Records Taskforce*.⁷⁸
- 2009 Final report, *Koorie archiving: trust and technology*, made available on the web.⁷⁹

Appendix 2. Key characteristics of consultation

With the information available to me I have checked off whether these characteristics were evident in the initiatives I have researched, represented by either ✓ yes or ✗ no. The blank areas indicate that I do not have enough information to indicate whether these characteristics were present. A tick and a cross together indicates that some of the literature suggested the characteristic was covered and some did not.

| Key characteristics of consultation | <i>Finding your story</i> | BTH name index | Trust and technology |
|---|---------------------------|----------------|----------------------|
| Involvement of community in early stages | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Have Indigenous researchers on the team | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Respect the diversity of Indigenous communities | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Respect the dynamic nature of Indigenous communities | ✓ | | ✓ |
| Gender balance in consultation group | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Consultation has been conducted with the appropriate groups | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Full disclosure of intent | | | ✓ |

| | | | |
|--|-------|---|---|
| Negotiate roles and responsibilities and develop protocols or MOUs for the research period | | | |
| Hold meetings at an appropriate location | X & ✓ | | ✓ |
| Provide a comfortable atmosphere (put on lunch, reimburse travel costs, payment for time, and so on) | | | ✓ |
| Provide information prior to first meeting | | | ✓ |
| Ask permission to advertise project | | | |
| Community driven | ✓ | ✓ | X |
| Use appropriate language | | | |
| Flexible with time | | | |
| Share a bit about yourself | | | |
| Negotiate how the knowledge shared in the consultations will be documented | | | ✓ |
| State who will have access to that knowledge | | | ✓ |
| Allow for written or verbal submissions | | | ✓ |

| | | | |
|--|---|---|---|
| Provide feedback along the way | | | ✓ |
| Participant confidentiality respected | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Don't promise what you can't provide | | | |
| Involvement of community in all stages | | | |
| Take it back to the community to view and edit prior to publication | | | |
| Give something back to the community | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Give a copy of results or product to all involved in the project | | | ✓ |
| Evaluate the consultative process throughout the consultative period | | | ✓ |
| Report on the consultative process | | | ✓ |

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