Fault lines or Songlines? The influence of remote Aboriginal communities in shaping social research priorities in child protection.

Susan Moore
Abstract
The first in a portfolio of publications the author identifies her social work experience within remote Australia as the catalyst for the development of the research topic, *Keeping kids safe in remote Aboriginal communities: exploring community driven approaches for the protection of children from sexual abuse*. Review and reform of Australia’s child protection systems rarely critique the theoretical foundations of the now overloaded, overwhelmed and fracturing system. The study explores in depth the issue of child sexual abuse through the eyes of Aboriginal people from remote communities of the Northern Territory (NT), those same communities impacted by the 2007 Australian Government Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER). It was not the first, nor has it been the last time that governments would conflate remote Aboriginal communities with child sexual abuse to justify a broader political agenda. The research aims to forge space within the existing western dominated knowledge base that underpins child sexual abuse to position and amplify remote Aboriginal voices. It is only through the lived experiences of this ancient culture that a strong foundation can be considered for the protection of children within remote areas from sexual abuse.

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The fusion of culture and country influences my personal and professional life through the unlocking of pathways between head, heart and soul. My approach to social work practice, theory and the shaping of research is greatly influenced by my association over the past three decades with Aboriginal friends, colleagues and community members. Pivotal to my personal and professional growth is the specific collaboration with Aboriginal peoples of the Pilbara region of Western Australia (WA) and of the Northern Territory (NT). By no means can I claim expertise of Aboriginal culture. I can however speak from the experience of working alongside Aboriginal people in the delivery of statutory and voluntary services such as child protection, the Family Court and sexual assault counselling. Social research presents opportunity for the extension of practice experience to the deeper exploration of social issues.
and their theoretical underpinnings. The paper outlines the commencement of PhD candidature and the influence of culture and remoteness that informs the research process.

**Influence of Country**

Aboriginal people are connected physically, spiritually and socially to country with specific roles and responsibilities as defined by their kinship system. Country holds significant meaning for the continuity of Aboriginal custom, law and culture. Ancient landscapes that geographically locate my social work practice include the geological formations of the Pilbara, Kimberley and Central Australia, the woodlands, wetlands and waterfalls of tropical Northern Australia and the diverse flora and fauna that serve as contemporary reminders of the fusion of past and present. The humbling climatic extremes of the desert regions or the dry then humid cyclonic weather patterns, lightning storms and monsoonal rains that define tropical coastal regions each profoundly impact the rhythm of life, work and being in remote Australia. Country and culture continue to have a powerful and humbling effect on my own way of being, knowing and doing. My responsiveness to the expertise of Aboriginal people recognizes the influence of culture, customary law and kinship obligations as shared between the generations through Songlines that shape and inform Aboriginal culture. Such connection to country is absent in the theories and assumptions that shape western policies and service systems.

Can the protection of Aboriginal children from sexual abuse be contemplated without taking into account cultural beliefs about the meaning and causes of such abuse if such causes are informed by cultural and spiritual events across time and place? Should a child be removed from their family and country as a result of statutory intervention? What are the longer term consequences for the development of a child who loses their connection with country? How have western psychological theories come to dominate in the decision making for children considered to be at risk from harm?
Locating self in practice and research

While acknowledging the cultural expertise of Aboriginal people, my area of expertise is located within an experience of dominant western culture and the systems that intersect with vulnerable populations. Informed by post-modern practice, social work practice requires critical reflection and reflexivity responding to the complexity of social issues that present. From social work practice there is both obligation and opportunity for the development of theory (Fook).

Locating myself within research involving Aboriginal people requires the exploration and transparency of my own heritage and position of white privilege (Young, Mckenzie, Omre, Schjelderup and Walker) built upon the bleak history of colonialization. My very white Anglo heritage can be traced to 1300s England. My history incorporates the relocation through transportation of my convict and free-settler ancestors to what would have seemed a remote, isolated and distant land with the associated hardships and challenges. One such ancestor, Eleanor Frazer was sentenced to transportation arriving with the First Fleet in 1788. Significantly, she was the first woman in the colony to be granted freehold title, the gifting of (Aboriginal) land, in Concord, Sydney. A son born to her is believed to be the first born white child within the colony. My heritage speaks directly, and somewhat uncomfortably, to the tensions surrounding the historic and continuing fusion of cultures, power, resistance and survival between Aboriginal people and colonial settlers. And so the seeds of white privilege are sown.

Family stories and a private collection of photos reflect further the influence of culture and country upon my ancestors. Images depict the relationships between my ancestors and Aboriginal people of Northern Australia during WWII. Through his photographs, my mother’s Uncle, Jack Taylor, introduced me as a child to the existence of a rich traditional Aboriginal culture. Juxtaposed with the images in his collection of military parades, British submarines and weaponry are the images that depict healthy children dancing in the shallows, traditional ceremony, warriors with ceremonial scarring, healthy, traditionally dressed men and women, skinning of a
buffalo, totem poles, crocodile hunting and children eating mangrove worms. These were not children in need of protection.

Other photographs depict Aboriginal prisoners with a notation on the back ‘all murderers’ working at the barracks alongside the troops. I cannot attest to the nature of the relationships between my uncle and Aboriginal people during his time in Darwin. Stories told to me by his sister, my grandmother, Hazel Colliver, suggest he was made a *blood brother* to a tribe from Northern Australia. At one time he was joined in Sydney by an Aboriginal woman from Northern Australia, perhaps at the time of the evacuation due to the bombing of Darwin. Uncle Jack’s photographs serve as a reminder of the fusion of my ancestors through history with Aboriginal people and the possibilities that such relationships can create meaning and solutions for complex social issues. It is this legacy of relationship and collaboration that underpins my approach to social work practice and research.

Collaboration influences my pursuit of a deeper understanding about the agency of Aboriginal people in the nurture and protection of their children, the impact of western society upon the safety and well-being of Aboriginal children and the adequacy of current systems in supporting Aboriginal families and communities in protecting children from sexual abuse. Can alternate theories be identified through the privileging of Aboriginal world view? Can such alternate theory inform culturally relevant approaches to child protection that complement or replace existing approaches? Is it possible to achieve the aspirational goal of building safer communities for children within remote communities? What lessons from Aboriginal culture could be applied more widely?

**Working remote**

Social work within the remote Australian context demands of the practitioner willingness and an ability to contextualize, adapt and innovate their approach to practice. In part this is due to the lack of resources and infrastructure within remote communities. Many communities are small (with populations of several hundred or
even less in relation to homelands or outstations) and may only provide access to primary health care, sometimes police, primary but rarely secondary education. My early career transition from metropolitan Sydney to the mining and Aboriginal communities of the West Pilbara was confronting. It challenged my values and culturally bound assumptions yet created space for incorporating new knowledge and innovative practice approaches. Apparent from the outset was the limitation of western knowledge and service delivery paradigms, particularly in the field of child protection.

Working within remote Australia with Aboriginal people saw the realization of my personal and professional goals. Climatic extremes such as heat, cyclones, 4 wheel driving on red, dirt, corrugated roads significantly contributed to the challenges of remote living... Remoteness necessitates the development of alternate or nuanced application of mainstream service models that more adequately address the needs of Aboriginal people and communities. Statutory child protection is one such area whereby communities by necessity must and can be engaged in a community level response to the protection of children. The protection of children sits among the many other competing economic and social priorities of the community.
Lessons from remote social work practice

Child protection and criminal justice frameworks that scaffold the mainstream response to sexual abuse are premised upon definitions of criminal offences. Such definitions lead to the narrow and for some inaccessible protections that may be afforded by the criminal justice system. Underpinning the approach is Australia’s support of the rights of the child to be protected from harm. While not detracting from the seriousness of the sexual abuse of children, existing legislation cannot be the only available response. Being encouraged that is best left to the experts can
immobilize available family and community approaches to protection of the child and consequence for the alleged offender. For example, upon disclosure by a child of abuse or the commencement of an investigation parents are instructed not to continue conversation with the child for fear of jeopardizing the criminal investigation or alerting the alleged offender too soon. Such instructions can serve to interfere with family or community responses to what has occurred.

Where sexual abuse is intra-familial, child protection agencies may take action to remove a child from the family should protection not be guaranteed by the non-offending members of the family. When sexual abuse presents within a remote Aboriginal community, the impact is felt across the community. It is my experience that on some occasions there is retribution or broader engagement in decision-making by the community in accordance with customary law. Such community based approaches may not be revealed to authorities should such approaches constitute a breach of the law. Although for the purpose of the research participants are not required to reveal customary practices, the existence or otherwise of culturally informed retribution is of interest when exploring the range of broader community approaches to the protection of children. At the very least it indicates mobilization and action towards the protection of children.

Through grounded theory methodology, the study explores alternate conceptual frameworks of child protection as identified by Aboriginal people from remote communities of the NT. It is critical that Aboriginal voices are amplified within formal research and literature to ensure culturally relevant paradigms more strongly influence practice, structures, policy and further research.

Deconstructing child protection systems
In her promotion of a national research agenda, Professor Scott (2005) refers to the child protection system as an “experiment of the 1970s in response to the need to do something to address child abuse and neglect - but it was an experiment that had largely failed.”
Deconstruction of the theoretical and practice assumptions of contemporary mainstream child protection systems reveals its reliance upon legislative approaches underpinned by human rights theory, specifically the United Nation Convention of the Rights of the Child. Theories drawn upon in relation to child sexual abuse fall predominantly within psychological theories that explain the victim impact, treatment approaches and the behaviours of offenders and subsequent treatment approaches if convicted. Theories from neuroscience explain the impact of trauma and adverse childhood incidents on long term health and wellbeing. Forensic science informs the gathering of evidence of child sexual abuse to support the investigation and criminal prosecution of a complaint. Should the threshold of evidence for a criminal proceeding not be reached, the criminal justice system is unavailable as a response to protecting the child who has been sexually abused. Whether or not a matter proceeds through court, the responsibility for the protection of children remains vested at the family and community level. No theoretical frameworks however exist, or are recognized within the literature to support and inform a community owned approach to the protection of children. It is through experience of working in remote Aboriginal communities that the challenges and opportunities for strengthening protective community based strategies are realized.

**Exploring community capacity for child protection**

Within remote communities should sexual abuse occur, the offender may be known or unknown to the child and family, an outsider or someone from within family and kinship network or otherwise living within the community. As reflected throughout society, the position of power held by the offender and the place of the child in the community may determine the capacity for a community level response. Unlike the case of remote Aboriginal communities, expectations of community as agents of protection are not assumed within metropolitan areas where geographic proximity may be the only factor binding a community. Interventions are only considered at the level of family rather than community. Remote communities are characterized by deeper connections and mutual obligation within and between communities that promote opportunity addressing child protection at a community level.
The opportunities for a community based approach more readily presents itself within remote Aboriginal communities who mobilise in relation to dilemmas or issues impacting the community. Communities, for example within remote Western Australia formally met with government agencies at bush meetings to hold government to account for the actions or inactions in areas such as children, families, housing and youth justice. The influence of remoteness and key Aboriginal influencers throughout my career afford me opportunities to critically reflect upon the strengths and limitations of existing legislative, policy and political foundations of mainstream child protection services through multiple lenses.

In conceptualizing the early stages of my research, I consider a metaphor for community capacity to be a termite mound. Visible to others from the outside is only that small portion of the colony above ground. Less visible is the level of activity below the ground to ensure the survival of the colony. Explored through the research will be the nature of activity within remote communities that serve to support the safety and protection of children from the many and varied presentations of child sexual abuse. Until such approaches are recognized, mainstream legislative approaches to child sexual abuse will remain inadequate and communities exposed again to outside intervention that does little to protect children from sexual abuse.
The impact of injustice and harm to children continues to stir my mind, heart and soul. My capacity to address the complexity of historic constructs of injustice as a frontline social worker or leader within executive levels of government is frustratingly limited. Change from within is necessarily hamstrung by the constraints presented
through dominant western discourse and the subsequent structural roadblocks to change. The exploration of community development and children’s rights for child protection practice (Young et al.) reflects a paradigm that goes some way to acknowledge community capacity although remains premised upon the assumption of a child protection practitioner being pivotal to the intervention. My approach to the research may well inform child protection practice, however what may be suggested is an alternate paradigm for remote Aboriginal community controlled approaches to a range of significant social issues impacting communities. Research provides one avenue through which to consider alternate paradigms for child protection not possible through the constraints of employment within child protection or other mainstream agencies.

**Politics, child sexual abuse, remote Aboriginal communities**

As a social worker within Centrelink during the NTER – more commonly referred to as *The Intervention* – I was involved with the roll out of the associated juggernaut of legislation and policy that heralded re-entry by the Australian Government into the affairs of remote NT Aboriginal communities. The utilization of powers over the NT mirrors the child protection investigation process whereby by the state intervenes into the lives of families who are unable or willing to protect their children. The Little Children Are Sacred Report (Wild and Anderson) chronicles the problem of sexual abuse within remote communities upon which the Australian Government took action. The Australian Government response, however, was significantly wider in scope. Although the catalyst for the NTER was the sexual abuse of children in remote communities, the reforms to follow evidenced curiously little interest in a research informed approach for addressing the protection of children from sexual abuse. An approach that left communities confused and further vulnerable to the wide-ranging interventions that targeted remote communities of the NT. Australian government welfare reforms, suspension of the Racial Discrimination Act, removal of land permits, prohibitions on alcohol and pornography, health checks and other welfare conditionality measures were supported by the machinery of the Australian Government. Unprecedented resourcing for service delivery to remote
areas had little bearing on the problem of child sexual abuse. A concept drawn from my clinical practice, I consider the NTER to have been a paradoxical intervention. Despite the flawed theoretical and political underpinnings of the approach, some space was claimed by Aboriginal people within remote communities for the discussion of sexual abuse and many other social and economic issues. Such voices included mobilizing against the stereotyping of all Aboriginal men as being sex offenders, some voices gave accounts of their experience as both victim and offender of intergenerational sexual abuse, some spoke of the challenges of protecting children from exposure to adult sexual behaviour within overcrowded housing.

From its inception the politics of the NTER at the national and community level would be seen as a distraction from meaningful conversations that could have supported a greater level of protection to children from sexual abuse. Lessons from my practice serve as reminders of power, voice, agency and capacity of remote Aboriginal communities to address complex issues. Simultaneously, the complexity of child sexual abuse presents particular challenges for any community, and indeed broader society, seeking to ensure the safety of its children.

**From practice to research**
Research informed practice at the micro, mezzo or macro levels is drawn from such disciplines of psychology, sociology, history and science. Interventions may be realized in practice at the level of the individual, family or community. Change may also be influenced in the areas of policy, program development or legislation. Social work research is commonly seeded through a dilemma experienced at the coalface of social work practice. From critical reflection and reflexivity emerge new approaches to practice. Also, from within practice experience research topics are identified and further developed. Research provides opportunity for deeper formal inquiry into the problem or social issue, the theoretical constructs of the problem and possible of the development of cultural appropriate approaches to the resolving the dilemma.
The opportunity to undertake a substantial research project provides scope for the research findings to influence broader systemic change. Change through such research can have wider impact than the incremental changes emerging from smaller scale reviews, evaluations or practice approaches and even more formal reviews of child protection systems. Country and the influence of Aboriginal people upon social work practitioners in remote settings form the cornerstone of locating the research problem and the research methodology to best reflect the goals of the study. The Aboriginal people who continue to impact my practice have been pivotal to the conceptualization of the research topic and methodology to ensure the ongoing privileging of Aboriginal voices in relation to the important aspiration of protecting all children from sexual abuse.

Lessons from my practice continue to influence and develop a collaborative approach to the research. Many conversations and the first participant interview endorse my need to adopt a position of ongoing critical reflection and reflexivity evidenced by continuing to adapt my language and approach through feedback of the aboriginal mentors and research participants.

Ongoing reflection upon my own assumptions and stereotypes is a critical component of the research. Already, for example, I am reminded that geographic isolation is not necessarily indicative of social isolation for Aboriginal people. Family continues to maintain connections and dialogue when they are not in the community through technology, social media and the grapevine. From the position of an outsider, dominant discourse can negatively conflate concepts of remoteness with disadvantage, which is not necessarily the experience of Aboriginal people. Themes of language and value may continue to emerge through participant interviews.

**Research**

The study’s focus on the protection of Aboriginal children from sexual abuse in remote communities has two distinct purposes; to strengthen the protective capacity of remote communities; and, to support such communities to strengthen their
approaches to protection as required. The challenge for Australian society is whether room will be made for involvement by Aboriginal people in re-visioning the problem and contributing to the solutions required to address the problem. The research topic has been shaped and developed in relation to child sexual abuse,

“a complex issue that cannot be understood in isolation from the ongoing impacts of colonial invasion, genocide, assimilation, institutionalised racism and severe socio-economic deprivation” (Funston). My professional background includes experience within child protection and therapeutic services with children and adults impacted by childhood sexual abuse. Working with Aboriginal people from remote communities has assisted me to appreciate the limitations of applying mainstream frameworks within such communities but also the possibilities that present for creative and adaptive social work practice. It was this confluence of factors that led to the exploration of community development approaches to child protection that supplemented the available statutory approaches.

Early career involvement with grass roots community approaches to child protection have led to the exploration of alternate theories that underpin child safety in remote communities that may in turn influence into the future alternative and culturally relevant service approaches to child protection.

Through the amplification of the voices of a culture deeply grounded and connected to country, the forging of space within the dominant theoretical and structural discourse of wicked problems will result in a greater recognition of community agency in their development of solutions. Alternate theories are hoped to better inform the systems and responses to the problem, and importantly acknowledge or better engage remote communities in the building of safer communities for children. Grounded theory suggests the development of a literature review based upon the emerging themes contained within the data. The initial exploration of literature reveals the diverse knowledge bases that underpin child sexual abuse and
protection from multiple perspectives however lacking from the literature is a grander metatheory that speaks to the protection of Aboriginal children from sexual abuse.

**Limits of whiteness**

Research limitations include cultural and racial bias that could be reflected in the nuances of participant interviews. This could include the questions asked, directions of conversations, missed opportunity or interpretation of data and the packaging and communication of the findings. Research findings will also reflect the inherent cultural and power biases of the researcher and speak to the need for the shaping and conduct of research into the future by Aboriginal peoples from an Aboriginal standpoint.

Support to identify researcher racial bias will be provided by the Aboriginal Research Advisory Group members who provide various points of reference and guidance to throughout the research. I reflect the position of other in relation to Aboriginal culture, but an insider of the white dominant mainstream services that impact upon Aboriginal children, families and communities.

My approach to working with Aboriginal peoples acknowledges my white privilege and my part within the dominant welfare systems that have endeavored to protect children from harm. It is with expertise of such systems that I recognize the limitations and the need to explore the ways that Indigenous ontology can offer an alternate approach that is underpinned by constructed alternative theory. The personal is political and my responsibility is to recognize the racial contexts of the agency of social work practice in relation to Aboriginal peoples and community *(Walter, Taylor and Habibis)*. The outcomes for the research must necessarily be handed back to the Aboriginal peoples who have so generously and patiently guided my own personal and professional development. Such guidance has also been demonstrated by those parents, families and communities who have fought loudly and defiantly to protect their children, families, culture and communities from a system that has historically cultural safety.
Grounded theory processes and outcomes

Grounded theory is both a research methodology and outcome of research that requires of the researcher a capacity to be open to the many and varied knowledge bases that are discovered through careful analysis of the voices and experiences of the research participants central to the topic.

Constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz) provides a vehicle through which to honour the many and varied Aboriginal voices. Through blending creativity and responsiveness within the research process, Aboriginal people continue to shape and inform the research outcomes. Ethics of care and responsibility are central to such research (Bainbridge, Whiteside and McCalman) and support outcomes of inclusion, self-determination and social justice. Consistent with a strengths-based approach (McCashen) the research assumes capacity and agency of Aboriginal people over their own circumstances.

Opportunity exists within the research design for deep exploration of the theoretical foundations and assumptions that underpin mainstream systems and the gaps in knowledge that may inform an alternate theoretical foundation for the protection of children in remote Aboriginal communities. Grounded theory data analysis requires multiple levels of coding and synthesis of concepts to ensure the voices of participants are thoroughly explored and heard within the research process. The process of checking out, consulting and checking back ensures continued influence by Aboriginal voices in the analysis of data and the findings. The approach ensures the fusion of inclusion and collaboration congruent with my social work practice.

Early research reflections

Songlines reflect an Aboriginal world view, incorporating the stories that explain and guide. It is likely that stories relating to the protection of children will reflect the historic intersection between the Aboriginal and western society. Stories accommodate the complexity of historic, structural and spiritual dimensions of complex social issues perhaps more than those offered through western theories. Themes emerging already include family and community agency, multiple roles and responsibilities held by community members. What confronts small remote
LAND DIALOGUES: Interdisciplinary research in dialogue with land

communities is responsibility for managing not just the child or children who are at risk, but also the behaviours of those who are offending. Emerging in the early stages of research conversations is the diversity in definitions of what may constitute child sexual abuse and subsequently the differential and complex responses that may be invoked. Also apparent are the conversations and problem solving that involves relevant family and community members whether they are living on community or elsewhere and the decision making in relation to action can take time and may incorporate reporting and statutory agencies. Decisions may involve the child or offender leaving the community and may be complementary to existing legal processes such as police investigations.

Conclusion
Informed by the Songlines of Aboriginal communities, the exploration of alternate paradigms for community based approaches to child protection may assist in developing signposts to guide and strengthen community responses to a complex phenomenon. The research must be informed by the stories that locate social problems within broader cultural and historic frameworks, rather simply apportioning fault and blame to the Aboriginal people of remote communities where such complex social issues exist. The fusion of culture and country that informs my social work practice continues to influence my approach research and ensures the ongoing collaboration with Aboriginal people in guiding the research process. Aboriginal voices through this vehicle will be further supported in their determination of community based and informed approaches to the protection of children from sexual abuse. Such theories may assist in the stabilization of mainstream systems that are perched precariously on a fault line restricted in their capacity to make significant inroads to the protection of children from sexual abuse.


