A GROUNDED THEORY OF EMPOWERMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIA
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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- Prof. Komla Tsey and Assoc. Prof. Wendy Earles
- Professor Yvonne Cadet James
- JCU SIAS and UQ colleagues
- NHMRC
INTRODUCTION

- At first glance the story of Indigenous Australia is one of marked despair;
- History of dispossession and exclusion
- Reflected in social and health statistics;
- Inability of govt policy to effect lasting change;
- Across society people feel helpless and overwhelmed;
- Alternate stories of resistance, survival and empowerment: most often an untapped source of knowledge.
INTRODUCTION

- Life stories collected from participants of FWB empowerment program are one such source of knowledge;
- Rich descriptions of Indigenous Australians making transformative life changes even within problematic social environments;
- This study sought to draw on FWB participants’ stories of life change to develop theoretical understanding of the concept of empowerment in the context of Indigenous Australia.
EMPOWERMENT

- An often contested and misused term;
- A multi-level construct that involves people assuming control and mastery over their lives in the context of their social and political environment (Wallerstein, 1992).
A framework for multi-level empowerment

- **Personal or psychological:** Improved perceptions of self-worth; empathy and perceived ability to help others; capacity to deal with emotional responses to change; ability to analyse the root causes of problems; belief in one’s ability to exert control over life circumstances; a sense of coherence about one’s place in the world.

- **Organisational empowerment:** Stronger social networks; community/organisation competence to collaborate and solve problems; participation in organisational decision making; perceptions of support, satisfaction and community connectedness;

- **Structural empowerment:** Actual improvements in environmental or health conditions as evident by changes in public policy; systems level changes; community’s ability to acquire resources to create healthier environments.

Source: Adapted from Wallerstein (1992)
THE EMPOWERMENT RESEARCH PROGRAM

- A 12 year research program;
- Empowerment - a highly relevant social determinant of health
- Lack of evidence re how to operationalise and evaluate the concept.
- Understanding empowerment through the experiences of Indigenous Australians;
- Learning from established Indigenous initiatives and programs (FWB, men’s groups, women’s groups, community controlled organizations).
Family Wellbeing Program

- Developed by Indigenous people (AEDB, 1993);
- Values based;
- Narrative approach: new conversations based on resilience, strength and competency;
- Theoretical knowledge introduced to help people take greater control and responsibility and bring about personal, family, organisational and community level change;
- VET sector Certificate 3 Qualification.
FWB Program Topics

Group agreements  Beliefs and attitudes, Change
Leadership       Understanding violence
Basic human needs Balancing the body and Mind
Relationships
Life journey
Conflict resolution
Managing emotions
Grief and loss
Crisis

Creating emotional health and wellbeing
### Study Data: FWB evaluation interviews 1999 to 2000

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Methodology

- Constructivist epistemology;
- Critical post structural theoretical position;
- Systematic grounded theory methods: sampling, coding, categorizing, theory building;
- Theory located within existing international empowerment, and related literature in the context of Indigenous Australia, to consider the theoretical contribution of the study.
Elements of empowerment for study respondents
Many people were still suffering the consequences of history, living in stressful situations;

Some acknowledged that, at times, their own and others’ attitudes and behaviours had a negative effect on individual and collective health and wellbeing;

Even people living in very difficult circumstances had some sources of support within their social environment.
The Broader Life Environment

- She was stolen and taken away from a mother's love. She was taken as a seven-year-old girl, brought to another land, long way, speak a strange language, brought up into the white man's world (Esme, Site 2);

- You see our people on the streets laying about. You see, because their spirit ... they don't know they can't stand up anymore because of our spiritual feelings ... we haven't got it that belonged to the land ... it was cut off. (Esme, Site 2);

- It's just drawing energy from each other to keep going forward y'know? (Thomas, Site 2).
Beliefs and Attitudes

- Autonomy, responsibility and optimism;
- Self-esteem, pride and identity;
- Belief in God;
- Personal values, including respect and acceptance, forgiveness and compassion.
Beliefs & Attitudes

...all of a sudden it hit me – this is entirely up to me, what I want out of life, its up to me, no one can help me (Ron, Site 2)

...being a Christian, I had the power of God to give me the strength to go through it (Anthony, Site 2)

...very strong about who I am ... I’m not a ‘half caste’ but a person of ‘Aboriginal descent’ (Alison, Site 1)

I have a caravan in my yard (side of the house) so these young kids can have somewhere safe for them to sleep or just to be on their own for a while (Joy, Site 1) Just respect for other people – it is all about respect for other people (Ron, Site 2)
Skills & Knowledge

- Life experience;
- The ability to manage emotions;
- Analytic skills to understand and resolve problems;
- Communication skills;
- Skills for helping others.
Skills & Knowledge

Wow man I’ve been through so much in my life, you know! I think that I really benefited from that (Norma, Site 3);

...I also try to be more aware of always being more positive, creative and harmonious with my thoughts (Trudi, Site 1);

...just listening to what they’re saying and trying to get them to reflect on what’s good for them at that time. Do they want to keep going through the situation of being abused, what steps can they take to maybe try and work out a better life or lifestyle for them... (Norma, Site 3).
Agency

- Addressing emotional issues: confronting and expressing emotions;
- Building a future: reflecting on goals & planning for personal/community futures;
- Building relationships: being more assertive, demanding respect, spending time with loved ones; new relationships;
- Helping others: family, work, community;
- Changing systems: housing, service development.
Agency

I feel better with myself now having got that off my chest, because it was affecting me, and not only me but my children who need me…” (Trudi, Site 1);

I started spending more time with my children and family, like you’ve got to have some time with them…like playing with them and taking them out… (Gail, Site 2);

I didn’t expect these kinds of changes but it showed me that once ordinary community members get knowledge then they are able to act in a more constructive way to deal with issues such as housing. Knowledge is power (Tom, Site 2).
Achievements

- Personal growth and change;
- Stronger relationships;
- Changes in others;
- Community change.
Achievements

What I actually love most of all, is that I feel so free, alive, energetic, focussed, …aware of the many things around me (Trudi, Site 1);

I guess I used to drink a lot and that and now I don’t drink that much. It feels like we’re a family again (Rose, Site 2);

When I was growing up, we always seen the European people, we looked at them in hate, that was the mentality you know? I didn’t know that European people could be good, this sort of changed my way … I can relate to our European brothers and sisters (Thomas, Site 2);
Community Change

- In Site 1 participants established a healing centre;
- In Site 2 a housing action group was able to bring about changes to local government town plans, new local government commitments to provide basic infrastructure to outlying areas, a mediated settlement with traditional owners for land for housing development, and increased funding for housing.
LINKS TO LITERATURE

- Literature validated the theoretical model;
- Synergies with broader empowerment literature;
- Evidence based preventative health programs, identified as best buys, foster similar elements and attributes;
- Greater emphasis on belief in God, personal values and skills for helping others;
- Differences resonated with Indigenous concepts of culture and spirituality.
RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

- One of the few attempts to systematically understand the nature of empowerment;
- Provides empirical evidence for knowledge long held by Indigenous Australians about the elements of empowerment as they experience it;
- Provides a framework of empowerment to effectively operationalise and evaluate empowerment based programs, as part of multi-level strategies for Indigenous Australian health and wellbeing.
RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

- All around the country people are doing interesting and important work but often this is not documented or researched;
- This work and that of the ERP, is being used extensively;
- FWB is only one of a multitude of possible prisms through which empowerment can be explored; scope for further research;
- ERP research provides a model for research planning.