Quop Maaman: Aboriginal Fathering Project

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Information Sheet Three

The importance of culture, country and language

There is a strong link between the maintenance and practice of Aboriginal culture and good health among Aboriginal men and fathers. Research around this relationship is mounting, with solid evidence showing that factors of good health and practiced culture contribute to positive Aboriginal fathering.

The absence of involvement in culture is clearly not good for Aboriginal fathering. Research has long demonstrated that a recipe for social disaster and ill health is to strip Aboriginal people of their capacity to maintain language, customs and traditional cultural practices. This relationship between health and culture is also documented in other international research. A study on abstinence among First Nation Americans, for example, concluded a correlation between drinking and cultural loss. Another, looking at African-American fathers, showed that negative conception of one’s cultural group is linked with higher levels of psychological distress, alcohol use and poor physical and mental health.

On the other hand, involvement in cultural practice has been successful in remedying a range of health conditions. Social psychologists have shown that strength in one’s own cultural identity helps protect against and treat negative health behaviours, particularly for Aboriginal men. For example, using language development and cultural practice as treatment has proven positive in drug and alcohol literature concerned with Indigenous people. Increased immunisation rates and decreased drug use correlate with evidence of strong cultural identity.

Many have highlighted the link between positive and cultural socialisation and the improved health of Aboriginal men. This is because identity and culture are important individual and community resources for healthy communities. This research points out that culture provides ‘collectively validated ways to think about and value oneself, and ultimately behave towards the physical and social world’. Culture also functions to help one contend with the vast array of uncertainty and anxiety confronting us, helping to contend with isolation and identity.

A weakening of cultural practice is likely to produce symptoms similar to those of post-traumatic stress disorder. Disturbingly, though not surprisingly, there is a higher proportion of Aboriginal men experiencing conditions associated with this lack of cultural practice. As mentioned earlier, Aboriginal people are disproportionately represented in prisons, and experience higher rates of infant mortality, suicide, drug dependence and substance abuse, and general medical conditions, as well as lower life expectancies. They also have higher rates of self-reported hopelessness, helplessness, and disorientation as well as anxiety, irritability and insomnia, and are much more likely to die from the consequences of a

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4 Brady 1995; Spicer 2001
mental disorder. By implication then, cultural reinvigoration and opportunities for exposure to cultural practice represent an important step towards restoring social and psychological health\textsuperscript{10}.

A range of medical studies of Aboriginal men’s health has consistently found a correlation between good health outcomes and culture. For example, one study found a significant improvement in carbohydrate and lipid metabolism amongst diabetic suffers after a short return to culture and a traditional life\textsuperscript{11}. Similarly, an investigation of nutrition-related risks in Aboriginal men’s diets found that there was vast improvement in those who maintained culture and tradition\textsuperscript{12}. Another study clearly found that people who reported engaging in land management practices had a lower risk of heart disease.

A two-year study carried out in conjunction with a remote Arnhem Land township and surrounding homelands tested the correlation between core activities in caring for country (time visiting country, burning, gathering of food and medicinal resources, ceremony, protecting sacred areas, and producing artwork) with measurable health outcomes. It was found that such activities were significantly associated with: marginally higher income, lower educational attainment, less consumption of takeaway foods, more frequent consumption of bush foods, more frequent exercise and greater participation in caring for country activities. Furthermore, ‘cultural practice’ is associated with: more frequent exercise and bush food consumption, lower BMI, less abdominal obesity, less diabetes, lower blood pressure, lower HbA1c level, higher HDL cholesterol level, normal ACR, lower psychological distress and lower CVD risk. On the other hand, the same activities were not associated with smoking, alcohol use or frequent consumption of store produce or takeaway foods\textsuperscript{13}.

Another study similarly found that work associated with land management in the south of Australia led to good health\textsuperscript{14}. Another found that remote-living Aboriginal Australians and

\textsuperscript{10} Halloran 2004, pp. 6–7
\textsuperscript{12} O’Dea 1984
people who were more ‘in touch with culture’ were more likely to enjoy their health\(^{15}\). An earlier study had confirmed the positive impact the Aboriginal Homelands Movement had on people’s health status\(^{16}\). Ten years later a follow-up study found that there existed a lower than expected morbidity and mortality rate for those who lived in this remote area\(^{17}\).

One study on the connection between Aboriginal cultural attachment and health found that those with strong involvement in culture have significantly better self-assessed health. The study also found that Aboriginal men with weak or moderate cultural attachment were more likely to have been arrested in the past five years. Furthermore men with strong cultural attachment are less likely to involve themselves in ‘risky’ alcohol consumption\(^{18}\).

This work is important for a number of reasons. It provides empirical confirmation that there are negative impacts on Aboriginal men’s wellbeing if employment, economic and other social outcomes are pursued in the absence or at the expense of culture. It also strongly supports the conclusion that community-based and culturally driven solutions to health and wellbeing are positioned solidly to succeed for men. At the very least it demonstrates that projects that include elements of Aboriginal cultural practice are likely to be an integral part of finding solutions to men’s ill health. It clearly demonstrates a statistical correlation between cultural practice and better health outcomes.

Particularly sobering is the evidence that involvement in the practice of culture serves as a strong elixir to mental illness. It demonstrates that persistence of a sense of self and culture through time guards against challenges such as youth suicide. Data from this kind of research generates solid evidence that there is a correlation between lower suicide rates and a commitment to cultural continuity and use of Indigenous languages\(^{19}\).


This is the case for both those who live in places where ancient ‘culture and law’ is practiced as well as in situations where more ‘modern’ Aboriginal cultural forms have emerged.\textsuperscript{20} This means that ‘law ceremony’, performance, the arts, music, film, theatre and more contemporary ‘cultural’ forms all provide opportunities for Aboriginal men to buttress or support cultural development. There exist a number of specific Australian studies of community-based projects that support these conclusions\textsuperscript{21}. Providing opportunities for music, performance, fine arts design, filmmaking, language resource development and other digital recorded work had enormous positive consequences for Aboriginal men involved. This includes crime prevention, literacy development, intergenerational exchange, and improvements in school attendance, employment, involving in the creative arts industry and physical health\textsuperscript{22}.

At the same time the loss of Indigenous language speakers and cultural knowledge holders is rapid and accelerating. This is consistent with global trends confronting Indigenous communities where last speakers of language are passing away. Now many Indigenous languages in Australia are listed on UNESCO’s Critically Endangered Language list.

‘Bringing out stories’ is important for encouraging healthy men in a number of ways. Combining storytelling with tactile and active work (for example, making theatre) helps storytellers recall their lives at the same time as giving life to the audience. This kind of work demands people exercise a range of sensory tools. Much of the tacit learning and retention that takes place in this environment is very powerful. The imagination is enriched by the opportunity to see, hear, feel and in this case, reconfigure the stories. In this way storytelling acts as a form of mnemonics, improving and bringing to a more public forum men’s memory and experience of dealing with serious challenges. At the same time, it helps stimulate men’s imagination for how things might be different, creating for them a sense of possibilities, stretching their minds to take on new insights and new ways of configuring a future.

\textsuperscript{20} Dockery (2009)
Storytelling combined with performance is also an important practical way of overcoming men’s tendency to recoil from social interaction when things get tough. By creating spaces for men to tell their stories, men can extend the depth of their relationships while building their repertoire for communication and doing things differently.

There is also much evidence that stories can be helpful in Aboriginal men’s healing and therapy, contending with pain and helping sufferers purge and divest their old histories. Storytelling also helps spark imagination and encourages men to think about their world in different ways. As one researcher put it, ‘Someone, somewhere, sometime, took it into his head to utter the words “once upon a time”; and, so doing, lit bonfires in the imaginations of the his listeners’.

One of the most important achievements of a story is that using story, ‘communicates new possibilities, illustrates new perspectives, takes people to new places in imagination, and connects imaginatively and metaphorically with a sense of new meaning and purpose’.

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25 Parkinson (2009), pp. 19–20