

Our community: our future

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Abstract

Introduction

Deficit thinking about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities abounds in rural health and social care policy and practice. There is a focus on what these communities have not got rather than what they do have. It is implied that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 'communities' are homogeneous and that they operate similarly to non-Indigenous communities. Policy makers then use a 'deficit model' of Indigenous socioeconomic need as measured by standard social indicators. This approach overlooks the strengths and passion that the great majority of community members demonstrate in caring for their family, community, their environment, and their land. This paper presents a brief snapshot of the work undertaken by Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers and practitioners to develop a better understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. The work provides a foundation for the development of Indigenous specific tools for communities to use to assess and develop their capacity.

Method

Primary Industries and Resources SA, in association with The Centre of Rural Health and Community Development in Whyalla, developed a community capacity assessment template for rural communities in South Australia. However, it was acknowledged that automatic application of this tool to Indigenous communities would be inappropriate given the differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous community life and understandings of what 'community' means. We synthesised our own and other research about community functioning, social care, and community health development with knowledge from experienced practitioners.

Results

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have very clear views about the key components relevant to assessing community functioning. This paper will give a snapshot of these.

Conclusions

The benefits of a structured Indigenous-specific community capacity assessment tool are considerable. It would enable communities to assess their capacity to use in applications for funding, to confirm and legitimise their strengths, watch the progress of their communities over time and to target resources to overcome limitations. We are hopeful that our preliminary work will result in the development of such a tool.

Introduction

Our intent in presenting this paper is to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities' work within a positive environment to identify the processes that makes the community cohesive, collaborative, and well-functioning. A community's social capacities are fundamental to enhancing individual and collective health and wellbeing, engaging in social and economic development, and in solving local problems. What is working well in most Indigenous communities currently is survival—in one word it is 'survival'. It must be more than survival if our communities are to thrive and our health is to improve.

In this paper we will explain how an Indigenous-specific tool may assist communities to identify the key aspects of community functioning that are important for communities to do well. The need for a focus on the positives has never been more critical as policy and funding programs continue to focus almost exclusively on the negatives. Talking about dysfunctional communities may be accurate in situations where violence and abuse are widespread. But such a focus overlooks the strengths and passion that the great majority of community members demonstrate in caring for their family, their community, their environment, and their land. We want to add to positive discussion about the strengths of Indigenous communities.

Understanding what is meant by 'community' and 'community functioning'

A tool to assess community functioning rests on being able to define 'community' and 'community functioning'. We use an understanding from our colleagues Cummins, Gentle, and Hull¹

Aboriginal family relationships are at the core of an Aboriginal interpretation of 'community' and the family relationship or kinship system is not necessarily confined to a geographic territory. In Aboriginal society every person has a place. This provides order and certainty to understanding responsibilities. However, not everyone will know their place. Those people who have been removed throughout the last 200 years, the stolen generation, are still finding their way home. There are also people who have been denied their Aboriginality for one reason or another. For those people who find their way home there has always been a place for them which could never be filled until their return'.

Family relationships are at the core of an Indigenous interpretation of 'community' and the family relationship or kinship system is not necessarily confined to a geographic territory and the connections are not weakened by distance.¹ A similar perspective was shared by another colleague 'Our place in our community is established as soon as we're born and we have our status there and a say in what happens there, it doesn't matter if we're living there or not we're still a part of that community' [personal communication May 2007]

Our definition of what is meant by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community functioning hinges on this understanding of the primacy of family relationships, roles and responsibilities, and connection to land in social and business life. However, people from family and language groups are usually living in disparate places. It is rarely the case that an Indigenous 'community' consists only of people from the one family or language group. The implications of this are that an Indigenous person may be part of many communities. For example, a person may be part of a culture community because of family relationships and connection to land. There may also be membership of a 'historical community' in the place where the person grew up and there is a shared history. Then there is membership of the community in the place where the person currently lives.

While people may use the term ‘community’ to describe all the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in Whyalla, or Mt Isa, or Ceduna there may be people from many family and language groups living there. All of the family groups living in a ‘community’ may or may not interact, and Champion² and her colleagues have explained how this occurs in Whyalla, South Australia.

The current service and program arrangements for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are premised on a Western rather than an Indigenous perspective of community. That is services, programs, and governance arrangements are mainly located in a geographic area and are not for a specific clan, family, or Traditional Owner Group. That is one reason why service centres such as Whyalla have different groups of Indigenous people living there. The pattern of service delivery concentrated in regional centres is likely to continue to be the case and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will continue to congregate there for this reason. Therefore our definition of community functioning is about functioning in a particular place—a rural town, a remote community, a regional centre, or an urban neighbourhood.

Research about how Indigenous communities function^{3, 4} has enabled us to understand community functioning positively as: the strength of the community to grow and develop promoting positive social change through strong relationships across and within families and language groups: ‘A strong group advocating and supporting the implementation of cultural identity in all aspects of community functioning including recognising, acknowledging, and reinforcing positive commentary of those individuals for their contribution’. (Research participant).

The problem approach to service provision

In spite of this positive approach that Indigenous people take to community functioning, it is easy for outsiders to see the negatives. For example, people drinking are rowdy and easily seen. People on drugs are a missing link in the community and people don’t appear to be working but sitting around. Those people who fall foul of the law are seen as being harassed by the police. But these are only a few elements, observable from the outside, and these are at the surface of community life. It is easy to concentrate on these observables rather than digging down and trying to unpick the positives. We also need to find out the positive elements of the ways that communities function as a way of counterbalancing some of these aspects. While the search for evidence about how to address problems in Indigenous communities is absolutely essential and demands quantitative measures it must be balanced with a deep understanding of the complexities of social life. Prominence must be given to concepts such as social life, reciprocity and sharing, caring for country, and relationships.

The dominant discussions in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs currently are based on seeing communities as sets of problems and deficits and devising programs or interventions targeting individuals to overcome those problems. An example of this is a program where health checks are provided to all children under five or a suicide prevention program for adolescents operating in a school. While these programs may have value they are based on a compartmentalising of problems and addressing each one as discrete. This is common in Western ways of knowing which tend to break down aspects of a situation in order to find out the most efficient and effective ways to deal with them. Policy makers must make clear the cause-and-effect chain that operates and in doing this they may use evidence from research about groups of individuals rather than communities.

The developmental approach to service provision

We know that there is no simple linear cause and effect chain in Indigenous social life—just as there is not in non-Indigenous social life. All elements of community functioning are related and therefore it is likely that if a community changes one element then this will flow onto everything else.⁵ The developmental approach to service provision and development is an active acknowledgement of the inter-relationship between the processes of community functioning and the conditions which produce socio-emotional wellbeing, health, and positive economic activity. Using a developmental approach there is an expectation that a new service or initiative will have positive impacts for an individual or family but also that it will impact on a community. The community impacts are noted (positive or negative) and positive impacts are strengthened so that there is a flow on of benefits for other parts of the community.

First Nations approaches to health in Canada are based on an understanding of the inter-relationship of aspects of community life and its effect on health. The whole of community approach which the Canadian Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples⁶ took was to assume that if conditions are improved in one area this will affect all areas of community and individual functioning. This approach is conceptually consistent with a holistic understanding of health and socio-emotional wellbeing. There are several useful examples of a developmental approach to health, social care and economic issues in Australia and Canada.

In Far North Queensland and the Torres Strait some years ago a genuine partnership was formed between Government officers and members of Indigenous communities to provide child care services to children and their families living in those areas.⁷ The program was initiated as a Queensland Government initiative to address social justice issues enabling equity of access to child-care services for these children. From the outset, communities got involved in a meaningful way and took responsibility for the style of service, its funding, and who would organise it. Communities were connected through a network which they organised. Communities gained other outcomes in addition to the provision of innovative child care. These included improvements in children's school readiness, increased links between other communities, opportunities to gain formal child care qualifications, and opportunities for other services. Mothers and fathers had time and space to do other things within the community including gaining paid employment.

Key aspects of community life

The developmental approach to overcoming health, economic and socio-emotional wellbeing issues in Indigenous communities requires a sound understanding of how the community functions—its strengths or capacities and its limitations. We have done some preliminary work in identifying themes that encompass the important aspects of community life. This information has come from the experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in rural, remote and urban communities in three Australian states, from literature reviews of Indigenous peoples writings about social life, and from sociological concepts and theory about how communities function. Separately and together we have implemented health and social care programs and undertaken research about social and health issues in Indigenous communities. From all of this work we identified the following elements that help us understand how a community functions; a sense of community identity; participation in local, cultural, country, and family connections; clear and shared social and cultural norms; sharing, networks, and reciprocity; infrastructure/ structures and organisations; community resources; caring for community; caring for the environment; external relationships; managing community affairs, community leadership, and a concept discussed by Pearson⁸ future imagination and vision.

These elements can be grouped into three themes. The first of these is 'achieving social cohesion' which involves a discussion about community identity, community participation in local, cultural, country, and family connections, the process of establishing and maintaining social norms, and sharing, networks, and reciprocity. The second theme is related to the way that communities manage their day-to-day affairs. This involves understanding the processes involved in bringing groups together to develop community-wide solutions to development issues, the presence of leadership, community control of resources and organisations, maintaining external relationships, and caring for the environment. The final and possibly the most important theme is being able to imagine a community future. We suggest that these elements could be the basis of an Indigenous-specific tool to assess community functioning.

Non-Indigenous community capacity tools

Mainstream approaches to understanding community functioning generally assess community capacities in order to 'build capacity'. Community capacities are defined as the resources that are inherent in the community and the community's capability to use them. Community capacities include, for example, leadership skills, social structures such as clubs, hospitals, and community organisations, and how people organise their relations with each other and the outside world to get things done. Several frameworks have been developed to measure and profile community capacity. Most of these are specific to particular social fields, or sectors, such as health and health^{9 10} and natural resource management.¹¹ In general, approaches to developing community capacity identify community sectors such as the health sector or organisations and measure the capacity of these according to set criteria. Both quantitative and qualitative profiles of community capacity have a place. With quantitative measures, we can analyse how various capacities are associated with other quantitative measures such as health status, economic growth, service levels, and service access. They also provide an opportunity to precisely measure changes in capacity over time, devise interventions to increase it, and assess outcomes of these interventions.

There is an electronic template that takes a whole-of-community approach that was developed by PIRSA in association with the Centre for Rural Health and Community Development.¹² This template was devised to measure a community's capacity for the development of primary industries but now it is being adapted for use in other situations. People from different sectors in a community come together with a facilitator and use this template to assess, through a workshop process, the strength of particular capacities in particular sectors, their importance in relation to particular tasks, how confident they are about their assessments, and the contribution that each capacity makes to total community capacity. The information is recorded on a four-point Likert scale and is collated and presented to the community in the form of bar charts which are available electronically.

A snapshot of what an Indigenous specific community functioning tool may look like

Indigenous people from their lived experience of community life have a deep understanding of how their community functions. However, it is very likely that individual understandings may not be discussed collectively where there may not be a sufficiently positive environment to do this. Community life involves a complex interweaving of aspects of daily life and to be able to unravel all of these may seem like an impossible task. However, there is a strong interest in developing a process in several Australian states and territories and it is the view of some Indigenous experts that it can be done. Perhaps it is more easily done that making assessments of factors that are 'adapted' from mainstream instruments.

In order to assist communities to take a developmental approach to service planning and implementation we suggest that an Indigenous specific tool or program to assess community functioning should be developed. First it will help communities focus on their positive aspects—their strengths—as well as respond to the problems. Frequently Aboriginal health is described as a series of problems and deficits and the solution is seen as providing more services. Providing more services is not necessarily the answer. For most people, but particularly Indigenous people, how a service is provided, its style, its funding, and who manages it are aspects that are often more important to service users than the service itself. The community can get the most from its services if it can express how aspects of community functioning influence service provision and uptake.

Having a simple program will enable the collection of 'hard data' about community functioning. This enables the community to note changes in aspects of community functioning over time, to advocate to funding bodies for particular programs, and to note and celebrate strengths. The latter is most important.

What we want to do eventually is to have people within the community come together to document their views about the aspects that make the community cohesive, collaborative, and working well. We would like communities to be able to use a simple method to assess community functioning at a particular point in time and then come back again and look at what growth there has been or what positive changes have occurred. The information could be gathered through a facilitated workshop process and recorded on software or a hard copy and distributed to community members for their use. An assessment of community functioning could be done on a regular basis to see if there is any change in how the community is functioning.

One example of the usefulness of a community functioning tool is in community planning. What is needed in any kind of planning activity is the ability for a community to understand the current separations between family and language groups and how these separations may be overcome in order to plan for the community as a whole.¹³ Providing more services may be of limited benefit if the community has not resolved how everyone who needs to will have access to the service. Another example is when individually focused programs are introduced that may conflict with community social norms about sharing and reciprocity. Usually individually focused programs only provide resources for the targeted group—for example individuals with a disability. It is important for a community to articulate how sharing and reciprocity can operate in these situations.

Key points about a community functioning tool

There are several key points that we stress in developing an Indigenous-specific community functioning tool. First, it should recognise that all elements of community life are inter-related and overlap. Therefore it should not be an assessment based on specific sectors in the community as is the PIRSA tool. It should focus on the key elements that underpin community life across the spectrum of activity which will affect the implementation of programs in all sectors. This will enable communities to make changes to, for example, increase levels of grass roots participation that will affect programs in all sectors. However, it is unlikely that any community can assess all the aspects of community functioning at any one time. It would be appropriate for a community to select what it considers to be a key issue—for example, increasing social cohesion, and focus on the elements that relate to social cohesion—community participation, community identity, social norms, and processes of sharing and reciprocity.

Secondly, we think that the process involved in assessing community functioning should be a collective one, rather than an individual response based social survey, so that people's perceptions are

shared and negotiated to have an agreed upon collective assessment at a given point in time. However, there may be limited interaction between people from different families and language groups in some 'communities' and the first step, and a crucial one, is getting different groups together when this is necessary to plan on behalf of the whole community. This generally requires facilitation from within or external to the community.

When assessing elements of community functioning such as 'community participation', or 'caring for the environment' the community will consider organised involvement but also naturally occurring interactions such as people taking an interest and telling each other about what is happening. These every-day activities where people go about their lives and 'talk-up' (or 'talk-down') particular initiatives are probably just as important as formal participation in organisations.

Community members can gain information about how their community functions in a numbers of ways. The first of these is to identify the stories that a community tells about itself. The stories, reflecting the dominant community traditions, values and attitudes, help define the community for members and distinguish it from other communities. Communities have both positive and negative stories and some are carefully hidden from outsiders. It is important for a community to understand what the stories highlight about social norms, or caring for the environment, or community participation.

It is important for the community to gain information about community functioning from different families, age groups, community Elders, and acknowledged leaders but also from those who do not usually have a voice in community affairs. Community leaders have a perspective about community strengths and limitations but those who are recipients of programs and who are experiencing serious social and wellbeing issues may have a different perspective.

Future directions and collaboration

Ours is a work in progress which has as its purpose identifying and documenting the positive aspects of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community functioning and sending good messages about it. It has a lot of work underpinning it from our practice and research that can add benefit to the community. We know people are working on this in other states as well as internationally. We would like to collaborate and get some processes happening nationally. In addition, secure funding is required to ensure that the work is done correctly and carefully.

We believe we can get more people to participate in community life if they identify the positive elements in their community and what works and what does not work. By participating, people are starting to highlight their community identity and there may be a lot more unity by us pulling together all these positive elements. Identifying the gaps gives us an opportunity to lobby the government to fix those gaps rather than waiting for an external agent to come along to define the negatives through the deficit model. We can get a clearer picture of where the negatives and the positives fit with each other and we can inform the agencies working on the negatives to develop the positives as well.

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Presenter

Alwin Chong is a Wakamin man from north Queensland and is currently the Senior Research and Ethics Officer for the Aboriginal Health Council of SA (AHCSA). He joined the organisation in 2001, after nine years with the University of South Australia. AHCSA is the Aboriginal community controlled health sector peak body that provides leadership, advocacy and sector support, with a commitment to Aboriginal self-determination. It is the health voice for Aboriginal peoples across South Australia, representing the expertise, needs and aspirations of Aboriginal communities at both state and national levels based on a holistic perspective of health. The primary role of the Senior Research and Ethics Officer is to monitor and promote appropriate research and research practices for the Aboriginal community controlled health sector and to also manage and coordinate the Aboriginal Health Research and Ethics Committee (AHREC). A core element of this process is to assist regions and communities to develop a research agenda that enables researchers to focus on health issues that the community believes will have some value or benefit to them. Alwin's major interests are men's role and involvement in maternal health, men's health in general and the utilisation of the positive elements of Aboriginal communities to enhance these issues. He is currently working with several other researchers on the concept of how an Indigenous-specific tool may assist communities to identify the key aspects of community functioning that are important for communities to do well. Focus is on the positive environment to identify the processes that makes the community cohesive, collaborative, and well functioning.