



Lived experience of wellness: photovoice and learning conversations in an Aboriginal community

Dianne Boxall

School of Psychology, Charles Sturt University, NSW

Aboriginal residents comprise over 20% of the local population of the rural town of Condobolin in the lower Lachlan area of NSW. A holistic approach to wellness places greater emphasis on spirituality, culture, and identity of individuals, family and community than traditional clinical models of health and illness. As such, these Aboriginal people experience the same poorer levels of overall wellness as the wider Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population; however, much of the relevant research has been conducted in remote and very remote areas rather than in rural areas such as Condobolin.

The participatory action research project into the lived experience of wellness within the Aboriginal community of Condobolin was supported by the Memorandum of Understanding between the Wiradjuri Condobolin Corporation and Charles Sturt University who share a vision of wellbeing for Aboriginal people of the inland communities we each serve.

The aim of the study was to conduct cooperative, culturally-appropriate, community supported research to increase knowledge and understanding of what helps create positive change that benefits the lives of Aboriginal people and their experience of living in Condobolin. Elders and community representatives were actively engaged in developing the research project, which involved photovoice and learning conversation methods of enquiry. The questions explored were:

- What is wellness and a good life for Aboriginal people in this community?
- Why do some Aboriginal people experience wellness and a good life in this community while others do not?
- How could wellness and a good life be experienced by more Aboriginal people in this community?

Photographs were taken of places and objects around the town that were thought to affect the wellness of Aboriginal people. Elders and a range of community members came together several times over a 6-month period—in both mixed and separate gender groups—for a series of learning conversations in which the photographs were discussed and factors identified as being associated with wellness in the community. Further photographs were suggested and discussed in an iterative manner. Patterns in the data were identified using thematic analysis, which has a number of advantages in collaborative projects; particularly the potential to inform policy development. The three key themes were:

- Identity – link in the young people
- Reclaiming history – returning to culture
- Education, work and skills – positive engagement

The overarching policy recommendation was that health services need to be designed and delivered in a culturally appropriate and holistic manner. This led to plans for a “Wellness Week” incorporating a culture camp, bush foods and medicines, storytelling, dancing, language, and health information and testing supported by local organisations and agencies.

This project was unique in that it involved the community in ethical and practical research; identified strategies that could help close the gap in Indigenous disadvantage; and has some transferability to the wider Wiradjuri Nation and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population of other regions of Australia.

Presenter

Dr Dianne Boxall is a lecturer in psychology from the Albury Campus of Charles Sturt University. She teaches industrial/organisational psychology, coordinates the fourth-year research project subject, and supervises the research of postgraduate students. At the time of the Aboriginal Wellness Project Dianne was a Research Fellow in the Centre for Inland Health, working under the Memorandum of Understanding between the Wiradjuri Condobolin Corporation and Charles Sturt University. Her broad research areas focus on wellbeing, meaning, and self-identity; particularly for people and communities in inland Australia. Dianne's expertise in research design and wellbeing research has been recognised in collaborations on a wide variety of projects and funding applications, the research outcomes of which have been published and presented at national and international conferences.