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A Grounded Theory of Empowerment
in the Context of
Indigenous Australia

Thesis submitted by

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in May 2009

for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in the School of Indigenous Australian
Studies

James Cook University

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Statement of Contribution of Others Including Financial and Editorial Help

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Abstract

Disparities in social and health status between Indigenous Australians and the rest of the Australian population remain of deep concern. There are calls for new approaches as the myriad of policies and programs implemented to address these longstanding inequalities fail to affect significant and lasting change. Internationally, empowerment is increasingly recognized as a fundamental social determinant of health. Despite the apparent relevance of empowerment to the experiences of Indigenous Australians, there has been little systematic research in this context to contribute to policy and program development. This thesis sought to address this gap and examine the concept of empowerment in the context of Indigenous Australia through the stories of thirty-three people who enhanced their health and wellbeing following participation in an Indigenous developed empowerment education program implemented in differing locations.

The thesis begins with an overview of the study including a description of the study's location within a broader public health research program, the James Cook University Empowerment Research Program. As part of this broader program, the Family Wellbeing empowerment program was implemented as a tool for enabling individuals and groups in Indigenous Australian settings to take greater control and responsibility for their health and wellbeing. I describe how I, a social worker working within this public health research program, was aware of how people's own stories of strength and change collected through program evaluations provided a rich source of knowledge of empowerment in the Indigenous Australian context.

Next the thesis examines the context of the issues of concern in this study, the social and health difficulties experienced by Indigenous Australians. A historical overview positions governmental social policy from the colonial era against people's own efforts to improve their situation, highlighting the remarkable tenacity and achievements of individuals and groups, even in the face of difficult social circumstances.

A constructivist epistemology, critical post structural theoretical position and the application of flexible yet rigorous and systematic grounded theory methods constituted the study design. This design provided a framework for the development of theory from people's stories and involved processes of self reflection, engagement with literature, data analysis through sampling, coding and categorising the data for theory building. From here a methodical review of literature was undertaken in order to locate the study's theory within existing literature and to consider the theoretical contribution of the study.

The emergent theory delineates central interconnected and mutually reinforcing elements which enabled people to effect life changes even where many aspects of their social context remained constraints. These elements involve particular beliefs and attitudes and skills and knowledge manifested in agency and leading to achievements frequently linked to the issues identified as indicators of Indigenous disadvantage. People spoke of healing from past abuse, reducing their alcohol consumption, taking on new challenges in relation to education and employment and establishing more harmonious relationships, including improved parental relationships. They helped others to make similar changes and, on occasions, worked together with a common concern of improving the communities within which they lived. The elements identified within the study theory correspond with

international theoretical literature pertaining to empowerment. Within the study theory there is, however, a greater emphasis placed on attributes associated with a belief in God, strong personal values and having the skills to help others. These attributes resonate with Indigenous concepts of culture and spirituality.

This study contributes to the evidence base for empowerment as an integral component of multi-level policies and programs aiming to promote health and wellbeing in the context of Indigenous Australia. Furthermore, the study provides understanding of the specific elements and attributes of empowerment in this context, which can serve as a framework for implementing and evaluating empowerment strategies.

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List of Abbreviations

AAPA	Australian Aborigines Progressive Association
AIATSIS	Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies
AIHW	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
ATSIC	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission
CDEP	Community Development Employment Program
CRCAH	Co-operative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health
CSDH	Commission on Social Determinants of Health
ERP	James Cook University and University of Queensland Empowerment Research Program
FCAATSI	Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders
FWB	The Family Wellbeing Empowerment Program
HREOC	Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission
JCU	James Cook University
NAC	National Aboriginal Conference
NACC	National Aboriginal Consultative Committee
NACCHO	National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation
NAHS	National Aboriginal Health Strategy
NCATSIWA	National Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Workers Association
NHMRC	National Health and Medical Research Council
NTER	Northern Territory Emergency Response
PAR	Participatory Action Research
SIAS	School of Indigenous Australian Studies, James Cook University
SRA	Shared Responsibility Agreements
WHO	World Health Organization

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are advised that this document contains the transcribed voices of people who may have passed away.