Gaawaadhi Gadudha: exploring how cultural camps support health and wellbeing among Aboriginal adults in New South Wales Australia, a qualitative study

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Summary

Background Culture and its practice is a recognised, but not well understood factor, in Aboriginal health and wellbeing. Our study aimed to explore how health and wellbeing are phenomenologically connected to cultural practices, foods, medicines, languages, and Country, through the platform of 'on-Country' camps facilitated by Aboriginal cultural knowledge holders in NSW, Australia.

Methods Our study is based on a collaboration between knowledge holders from freshwater and saltwater cultures, and Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal researchers. Three existing cultural camps on Yuwaalaraay, Gamilaraay, and Yuin-Djirringanj Country were observed as part of the study. Within the camps, eight yarning circles were conducted with 76 participants. Data were analysed inductively using literal code descriptors which were cross tabulated to identify emergent patterns relevant to the study aims.

Findings Three key areas emerged from our analysis: 1) what constitutes cultural health; 2) the way in which cultural camps provide a mechanism for improved cultural health and; 3) the key elements needed to deliver a cultural camp that provides therapeutic benefits. Camps had a positive effect on participants' social, emotional, and spiritual health and wellbeing, often described through experiences of healing or stress relief, connection with Country and each other, and engaging in cultural practices.

Interpretation 'On-Country' camps that are facilitated by place-based knowledge holders, provide a unique and promising platform that supports Aboriginal health and wellbeing through therapeutic, sensory experiences that strengthen cultural health; including cultural identity, knowledge gain and sharing, connection to Country, mob, and ancestors, and engagement in cultural practices. Access to Country and land to conduct camps remains a barrier to their delivery.

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Keywords: Aboriginal; Culture; Health; Qualitative; Australia; Indigenous

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Research in context

Evidence before this study

The concepts of culture and Country are widely acknowledged in policy and discourse as positive to the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal peoples in Australia. However, the way in which culture is mechanised as a health protecting factor for Aboriginal peoples, remains largely misunderstood. Understanding how different aspects of culture contribute to improved Aboriginal health and wellbeing, including identifying the necessary elements needed for its practice, is key to expanding resourcing and access to initiatives that recognise culture-as-health.

Added value of this study

This study explores camps delivered by Aboriginal cultural knowledge holders 'on-Country' as a therapeutic platform that aims to improve cultural health and wellbeing. Through the analysis of 15 h of yarning circle data, our study demonstrates 'cultural camps' as a therapeutic platform that provides safe access to cultural spaces, knowledges, and practices through individual, collective, and sensory experiences 'on-Country'. In doing so key aspects of cultural health are strengthened including identity, connection to Country, family, and mob, and engagement in language and cultural practices, all of which are protective to health and wellbeing.

Implications of all the available evidence

We highlight the potential of cultural camps as a promising platform to improve Aboriginal health and wellbeing. However, issues accessing land to deliver 'on-Country' camps remains challenging. Further research is needed to explore the integration, funding and sustainability of cultural treatments and preventive strategies (such as camps) into health systems.

Introduction

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures practice longstanding interconnected relationships between people and Country.[1] Country' incorporates a "deep, intimate, holistic, complex, localised and reciprocal relationship and connection between Aboriginal peoples and elements of land, sea, waterways, sky, stars, and all entities within."[2] These relationships with culture and Country have always shaped the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal peoples as holistic, encompassing physical, mental, and spiritual aspects.[2]

Early settler colonial accounts of what is now known as Sydney Cove and Botany Bay, New South Wales (NSW) described Gadigal and Gweagal peoples of those places as 'healthy', 'strong' and 'happy'.[3] The process of ongoing colonisation and its persistent influence has been established as a determinant of inequitable health outcomes among Aboriginal peoples. These are attributed to structural health inequities resulting from inequitable housing, socioeconomic marginalisation and racist education, employment and health policies, as well as interpersonal and intergenerational trauma (e.g. genocide, Stolen Generations, incarceration).[4] In short, historical injustices experienced by Aboriginal peoples affect present-day health inequities.[4]

An emerging body of literature has documented some of the ways in which culture acts as a protective factor among Aboriginal peoples in Australia,[5–7] and Indigenous peoples in settler colonial contexts internationally.[8] Included in this is the concept of culture-as-health,[8] and cultural health[2,9] which recognise that health is a cultural phenomenon and should be at the centre of all health and wellbeing initiatives aimed to benefit Aboriginal peoples. In the other articles in this collection, Fields et al.,[10] define the three necessary elements of cultural health as Country, people, and culture and their interdependent and intertwining relationship with one another; while Brady et al.,[11] measures cultural health through inquiry into individual connection to culture, and individual/collective access to cultural knowledges, and resources. In addition the aspects of spirituality, communality, and cultural practices and identity, are discussed in a review of the literature documenting aspects of cultural health included in this series.[12] However, as argued by cultural knowledge holders[10] and scholars,[13,14] research and policy in the field of Aboriginal health tends to focus on deficit-based approaches that compare disease risk factors and outcomes between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people (e.g. the gap), deflecting from the importance of cultural connection and practice as salutogenic (health promoting and protecting)[15] mechanisms.

NSW was the first place in Australia where systematic and violent colonisation was enforced, and as a result cultural knowledges and languages were degraded and, in some cases, destroyed. Yet in other cases they were kept, practiced, and passed down (often in secret) to younger generations.[16] Cultural knowledge holders (herein knowledge holders) are the custodians of the intertwined physical (Country, land, natural environment) and non-physical (language, law/lore, stories, social rules) aspects of culture; they play a crucial role in maintaining, sharing, and ensuring its continuation.

While knowledge holders fulfill important roles in their communities and on their Country, they often work outside health and social systems to ensure cultural and epistemic autonomy.[17] This limits the resourcing and reach of cultural initiatives that incorporate the reciprocal and interdependent relationships between culture, Country, and people, often because they are grounded in place-based experiences, practices, and pedagogies. Such approaches do not neatly fit

within the rigidity of Westernised health policy, funding initiatives, clinical systems and practice, and have therefore received little attention in the Australian context.[17] Our study aims to address this gap, by exploring the impact of place-based cultural camps (herein camps) facilitated by knowledge holders, as a platform for salutogenic and therapeutic benefits. We do this by qualitatively exploring the ways in which (cultural) health is associated with Aboriginal peoples' experiences of participating in camps on Country.

Study aims & context

This is the first study to explore how culture shapes Aboriginal health and wellbeing through the mechanism of camps facilitated by knowledge holders (TF, WF, MO) in NSW, Australia. The practice of holding camps already existed in the study locations and were organised and facilitated by the knowledge holders, welcomed all Aboriginal nation groups, and respect gender sensitive norms and practices. The aims of the broader study are published elsewhere.[18] This paper focuses on one of those aims: to explore how health and wellbeing are phenomenologically (e.g. through lived experience) connected to cultural practices, foods, medicines, languages, and Country, through the platform of camps facilitated by Yuwaalaraay, Gamilaraay, and Yuin-Djirringanj knowledge holders.

The camps provided a unique platform to study cultural health in place, including the ways in which it can be engaged with or strengthened during camp participation. Indicators of cultural health (see also Brady et al., Biles et al.)[11,12] include pride in cultural identity; cultural knowledge (e.g. sites, foods, medicines, stories); knowledge and practice of Aboriginal language; attachment to mob (a group of Aboriginal people associated with a particular place or Country) or nation; connection to Country; connection to ancestors; and access to cultural resources (e.g. knowledge and/or knowledge holders; Country; cultural/food/medicine sites).

A cultural camp was held in three different locations across the Yuwaalaraay, Gamilaraay (Northwestern region of NSW), and Yuin (Far South Coast region of NSW) nations between April and November 2022 (total camps n = 3). The camps were held at locations that were considered 'cultural landscapes' e.g. physical sites minimally impacted by colonisation, including natural and sacred sites protected from urbanisation or development.[2,9] Keeping with traditional cultural protocol, men and women camped in separate areas, with a male or female knowledge holder and camp facilitators for each group. Camp activities focused on connection to Country and cultural landscapes, ceremonial activities, cultural food and medicine knowledges, and language reclamation, and were between 3 and 5 days in length. Some activities were culturally codified by gender, for example weaving was a cultural activity that occurred in the women's camp, while wood tool creation occurred in the men's camp. While other activities were combined, for example visits to sites of cultural significance, collection of cultural foods, and *Yulugi* (dance-focused ceremony in Gamilaraay/Yuwaalaraay) and *Bunaan* (Yuin-Djirringanj).

Methods

Our study was conceptualised in close collaboration with knowledge holders from Yuwaalaraay, Gamilaraay, (TF, MO) and Yuin (WF) Aboriginal Nations of what are now known as the Northwestern and Far South Coast regions of New South Wales (NSW) Australia. A detailed account of the governance approach and methodology for research by the Gaawaadhi Gadudha Research Collaborative and location of these groups is published elsewhere.[18] Here, we present more details of the qualitative methods and the associated insights derived from our research. Ethics approval to conduct the study was obtained from the Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council (#1851/21).

Cultural governance

To challenge colonised and deficit-based approaches to Aboriginal research, the intercultural Gaawaadhi Gadudha Research Collaborative (herein the Research Collaborative) applies a cultural governance model in preference to 'advisory' or 'reference group' models. Our approach to cultural governance recognises place-based knowledge holders as leaders in their respective nation and language groups, and ensures culture is at the centre of the research. Knowledge holders lead the Collaborative and its research in their respective locations and are supported by other members of the research team. Gaawaadhi Gadudha translates to 'from the river/freshwater to the ocean/saltwater' in a combination of Gamilaraay and Yuin-Djirringanj languages and represents the cultural connection and collaboration between freshwater (Yuwaalaraay, Gamilaraay) and saltwater (Yuin) knowledge holders (TF, MO, WF). Further details of governance processes are published elsewhere.[18]

Participant cohort & recruitment

As the camps preceded this research initiative, not all people who attended the camp were participants in the research (see Table 1 for total camp attendees). Camp attendees were invited by knowledge holders and camp facilitators to participate in the research at their own discretion. It was not compulsory to participate in the research study to attend the camp. Prior to the camp, all registered attendees were sent information about the study via email, and provided with contact details of the camp facilitators and a member of the research team if they had questions. At the beginning of each camp, a briefing of the research was provided, and camp

Camp name	Camp location	Camp attendees[a]	Yarning circles	Yarning circle participants	Camp activities
Dhariwaa *Walaay*	Narran Lakes Nature Reserve, NSW *Yuwaalaraay Country*	130	4	Women Circle 1 (n = 10) Men Circle 1 (n = 9) Women Circle 2 (n = 10) Men Circle 2 (n = 6)	Cultural site visits; sharing of cultural stories; language; gathering/consuming cultural foods; cultural medicine knowledges; yarning around fire; weaving (women); tool making (men); *Yulugi* (dance)
Gomeroi *Walaay*	Wilgabah, Wallabadah, NSW *Gamilaraay Country*	60	2	Women Circle (n = 9) Men Circle (n = 10)	Sharing of cultural stories; language; yarning around fire; weaving (women); tool making (men); cultural art workshop (women)
Yuin *Dhugan*	Mystery Bay, NSW *Yuin Djirringanj Country*	90	2	Women Circle (n = 12) Men Circle (n = 10)	Cultural site visits; sharing of cultural stories; language; gathering/consuming cultural foods; cultural medicine knowledges; yarning around fire; weaving (women); tool making (men); *Bunaan* (dance)
Total		**280**	**8**	**76**	

[a]Not all camp attendees were study participants.

Table 1: **Camp specifics & study participants.**

Fig. 1: **Yarning circle fire at the Dharriwaa Walaay. The sacred spirit of the fire supports those around the circle to yarn openly and truthfully.**

attendees had the opportunity to clarify any issues; they were also invited to approach camp facilitators or a member of the research team if they were interested in participating in a yarning circle.[19] In some instances, camp attendees were also approached by camp facilitators and invited to participate in a yarning circle. Those who agreed to participate were given a written consent form to sign, which was also explained verbally by a member of the research team. A total of 76 people participated in a yarning circle (women n = 41) (see Table 1). All participants identified as Aboriginal and were ≥18 years of age.

Data collection

The primary data collection method for this study was yarning, a term used to describe an informal and relaxed discussion.[19] While informal yarning circles happen as part of camp activities, a 'research' yarning circle was organised within the camp environment. Each yarning circle (total n = 8) was facilitated by either a camp facilitator, a knowledge holder, or a member of the research team (TF, MO, MR) all of whom identified as Aboriginal, were the same gender as participants (e.g. male facilitator for men's yarning circle) and were experienced in facilitating yarning circles. Yarning circles were held around a fire (Fig. 1) which is a significant element to the cultural practice of yarning.

Culturally, the sacred spirit and warmth of the fire supports open and truthful yarning for those sitting around it. An acknowledgement of Country was given at the beginning of each yarning circle, localised cultural protocols were also given and followed. For example, the yarning circles at the Dharriwaa Walaay and Gomeroi Walaay followed the Yuwaalaraay/Gamilaraay concept of *winangal-i* which means to listen with respect, love and understanding for the speaker, the space, and time. Facilitators were given a yarning circle guide (Supplementary 1) that included questions and prompts which explored cultural connection; resilience; access to culture; and cultural leadership. In keeping with the 'relaxed' nature of yarning as a research methodology[19] the yarning circle guide was used only as a guide, and organic conversation between participants was encouraged. All yarning circles were gender separated (Table 1), audio recorded using several professional microphones, and later transcribed verbatim by a member of the research team or a professional transcription service. Yarning circles were between 1.5 and 3 h in duration.

Data analysis

Transcribed data was imported in NVivo 14 (QSR International). An inductive approach to coding was applied to the data using literal one-word descriptors for codes by members of the research team (AY, AZ, BJB, JK, MR, NS, SMT, YK), drawing on terms and concepts

used by the participants where possible. This method was applied to encourage consistency and avoid potential misinterpretation of the data by the research team, particularly non-Aboriginal researchers' interpretation of Aboriginal participants' lived experience. Each transcript was coded by an Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal researcher. The research team met on a fortnightly basis to discuss, refine, and gain consensus on the meaning of codes. Consensus on the meaning of codes was reached through collective discussions among the research team. Knowledge holders (TF, WF, MO) also contributed to refining the meaning of the codes, and validation through the provision of sociocultural context. Once a coding framework was determined, codes were cross tabulated using NVivo 14, to analyse where and how coded concepts were connected, and to identify emergent patterns across the data. Due to the depth and complexity of the data set, analysis focused on the codes that (a) had the most data, and (b) were directly relevant to the research question. Data found at the intersection of relevant codes were summarised. For example, where data was coded at both 'camp' and 'culture', a summary of how the two codes were related was written by a member of the research team. Each member presented their summaries back to the team to ensure consistency and consensus which was reached through discussion. Revised summaries were then mapped visually, and discussed and refined further among the broader research team and knowledge holders in an analysis workshop.

Role of funding source
The funders of our study had no role in the study design, data collection, data analysis, interpretation, or writing of this manuscript.

Results
Three key areas emerged from our analysis of the data and are grounded in the voices of the participants in this study. These include:

- What constitutes cultural health;
- The way in which cultural camps provide a mechanism for improved cultural health, and;
- The key elements needed to deliver a cultural camp that provides therapeutic benefits

Each section provides a summary of participant perceptions and experiences which include an exemplary quote in text, and additional quotes in Tables 2 and 3 to show the spread of data across the different camp contexts.

Overall, camps provide a unique 'on-Country' platform that enable opportunities to strengthen cultural health. These include immersion in and connection to culture and cultural landscapes, cultural practices (e.g. collecting wood for tool making, weaving, yarning around the fire, *Yulugi/Bunaan*, language, collecting foods and medicines); cultural values (e.g. sharing knowledge, inclusivity, acceptance, collective participation in the work of running the camp, hosting other nation groups, and ensuring cultural safety); strengthened cultural identity and unity, and connection to mob and nation group.

The camp environments were immersive, enabled by their physical location in cultural landscapes that are minimally impacted by colonisation, providing a safe space in which connection to Country could be fostered, and culture practiced. Key to this was ensuring a sense of cultural safety while navigating Country, cultural landscapes, and engaging in cultural practices, which was enabled by the presence, leadership, and authority of knowledge holders. For example, a smoking ceremony is held at the beginning and end to properly welcome and farewell attendees to and from Country, as a way of respecting culture and place (cultural protocol requires a custodian from that place to conduct this); knowledge of sacred sites is needed to ensure cultural protocols are followed (e.g. no men at women's sites and vice versa); knowledge of foods and medicines is needed to ensure people are given information about safe preparation and consumption; and knowledge of cultural practices such as dance, weaving and woodwork, are needed to teach and pass on these skills.

Cultural health

> *"It's evident that our culture is our number one tool for us to heal."*
>
> *(Gomeroi Women's Circle)*

Culture was discussed by participants as connected to intertwining physical and metaphysical aspects of the health and wellbeing of individuals (e.g. social and emotional wellbeing, spiritual health, identity), collectives (e.g. family, nation group, mob), and Country. Participant quotes reflective of the differing aspects of cultural health are outlined in Table 2. Metaphysical aspects of being culturally healthy included a sense of strength or pride in cultural identity; being able to learn and pass on cultural knowledge; and a sense of connectedness to family and mob. Conversely, participants spoke of how a lack of connection to culture negatively impacted identity, self-esteem, and mental and spiritual health.

> *"To heal trauma in Indigenous populations we need to strengthen cultural identity … culture strengthens identity, and identity strengthens who we are as people. So, culture is everything, and it should be everything."*
>
> *(Yuin Women's Circle)*

Learning and sharing cultural knowledge and language, particularly with younger generations, was

Sub-theme	Participant quotes
Cultural identity	*"We talk a lot about mental health and the way that people think about themselves and their identity lacking any sort of connection to culture. And it's really harmful for people's identities, for people's self-esteem and overall mental health." (Dhariwaa Men's Circle 1)*
Learning & sharing cultural knowledge	*"Our culture was, you know, oral culture passed down through. And then you had a responsibility to hold the knowledge and use the knowledge and pass the knowledge on. And it happened, happened for years and years and years. And I want to be able to do that because as a man, I feel that's a responsibility that, you know, older people had and did." (Dhariwaa Men's Circle 2)*
	"Being able to pass all my knowledge and skills onto them and being able to instil that to them so they have strong cultural identity. Also then give all that knowledge into our younger people to say, this is who you are to be able to stand up, to stand tall and to stand strong and knowing that their belief in who they are and where they come from." (Dhariwaa Women's Circle 1)
	"We got to take that lead now, and we got to pass it on to the young ones as well, so they can come up as leaders too." (Yuin Men's Circle)
Connection to family, mob, ancestors	*"Connecting with nature, talking with mob, with family. Having those coping mechanisms each day to be able to connect back with culture." (Yuin Women's Circle)*
	"Culture means a lot to me, you know, I'm very proud to be an Aboriginal man. And like I said, have that blood running through me. Over the last couple years, just sort of connecting our family tree or my family tree and seeing where all my grandparents come from and what land they come from and the connections we have." (Gomeroi Men's Circle)
	"When I travel, I look out in the bush and I know where we're going. I see our culture. I see our history. I hear and feel our ancestors." (Gomeroi Women's Circle)
	"Who are you, where you from, who your mob is. That's our culture. To get down and be able to talk about your relationships, straight up off the bat, who you are connecting and linking." (Yuin Women's Circle)
Connection to Country	*"By going on Country, it's important for our health and wellbeing and for any sicknesses." (Gomeroi Women's Circle)*
	"I feel more fulfilled as a person on my cultural journey to learn, experience it and feel it, and you can talk on the phone or whatever, but until you come out and do it on Country, you know, you haven't really connected. (Dhariwaa Men's Circle 2)
	"The love that our communities represent when we're all together, our togetherness and our connectedness and our sense of belonging to Country and to each other, we are all one when we come together." (Dhariwaa Women's Circle 1)
	"The water hole out at [name withheld] creek. That's me healing hole. It's always been our healing hole. I go out there once a week, that's where I go to heal and talk to the old people and guide, direct me, and protect me." (Gomeroi Women's Circle)
Cultural practices	*"My role is empowering young men. And I suppose giving them that power, rejuvenate their strength around culture, language stories, song, dance. The always finding what their strengths are, whether it's around dancing, making artefacts, and just looking for that, looking for their strengths as young people, as young men." (Dhariwaa Men's Circle 1)*
	"Kinship is such an integral part of our way of being in relationality with each other, and those conversations happen when we are sharing cultural practices." (Yuin Women's Circle)
	"Like how close we were to probably losing everything out here. We use language, throwing it back into the face of those people who tried physically to remove parts of culture, to remove language." (Dhariwaa Men's Circle 1)

Table 2: **Cultural health themes and additional participant quotes.**

discussed as an important contribution to cultural health and survival in the context of ongoing colonisation. Being able to learn cultural knowledge was associated with strength in individual cultural identity, which is a protective factor to social and emotional wellbeing. The ability to pass on cultural knowledge was seen to enable and strengthen cultural identity among the younger generations.

> *"It's something that I think for myself and my little family, I need to learn as much [culture] as I can and pass it on to them so we can keep it alive."*
>
> *(Gomeroi Men's Circle)*

A sense of kinship and seeking connectedness with family, mob, and ancestors, were associated with being culturally healthy. Some participants saw connectedness to family and mob as a coping mechanism, protective to mental and spiritual health. Connectedness stemmed from knowing one's 'bloodline' or 'family tree', which was also linked to holding knowledge of culture and Country.

> *"It's [culture] in every facet of what I do. Like just especially my health, my mental health. If I sort of haven't connected to Country or connected to mob or family, yeah something just doesn't feel right."*
>
> *(Dharriwaa Women's Circle 1)*

Physical aspects of cultural health included a sense of connectedness or 'belonging' to Country, which was associated with being physically present on Country, or in cultural landscapes (e.g. physical sites minimally impacted by colonisation, including natural and sacred sites protected from urbanisation or development).[2,9] Connecting to Country was perceived by participants as conducive to 'wellbeing' and 'healing', and a protective factor for 'mental' and 'spiritual' health. Connectedness to family, mob, and ancestors, was seen as intertwined with belonging to Country. Learning and

Sub-theme	Participant quotes
Improved health & wellbeing	*"Camps like this bring us together. There's gotta be more of 'em. And not only for mental health, there's a lot of that and we base it around that." (Dhariwaa Men's Circle 1)*
	"Healing ourselves, healing from trauma, intergenerational trauma, stress stuff like that. And you go away feeling good, your spirit feeling good, feel that healing working. Healing that spiritual side, and healing as one mob, the stronger we are." (Yuin Men's Circle)
	"I'm happy that my nephew encouraged me to come out here. Cause I was having a lot of stress. And ever since I been here, the stress has left me." (Dhariwaa Women's Circle 1)
	"I feel really embraced by all the women that are here. I just feel like incredibly grateful to be here. And it's just so healing." (Dhariwaa Women's Circle 2)
Sensory experiences in camp context	*"Culture is sitting here with my feet in the dirt, and remembering all the camps that I done with my parents on the bean paddocks, on the riverbank, sleeping in the Mia Mia, the bark hut." (Yuin Women's Circle)*
	"The kids that are interested in artefacts are the kids that are interested in birds or plants here. And that might be the way to make sure that they continue to get that, you know, and that might sustain them up to the next [camp] while keeping the interest up high." (Dhariwaa Men's Circle 2)
Learning or sharing language & cultural knowledge	*"I just take away a little bit of language, meeting mob and connect to Country and that." (Dhariwaa Men's Circle 1)*
	"I start to learn a lot about our medicines. So I don't look at the trees the same anymore." (Gomeroi Women's Circle)
	"I was happy to, you know, speak our language this morning on our Country still, even though it's my first time here." (Gomeroi Men's Circle)
Camp participation as cultural renewal	*"It's continuity of our culture so we don't lose the practices. And that's literally what I feel this camp is about as well. It's so it doesn't get lost." (Dharriwaa Men's Circle 1)*
	"You see culture alive, it's not just us. For a long time it felt like, well we was alone, holding the dance and holding a lot of the stuff. But now I can see, just even in this circle there's plenty of people." (Yuin men's yarning circle)
	"Camps like this are a really lovely way to sit down and yarn with and make relationships with other mob to find our family and kinship ties and form connections, and I really value that because I think that kinship is such an integral part of our way of being." (Yuin Women's Circle)

Table 3: **Cultural camps as a mechanism for cultural health themes and additional participant quotes.**

holding cultural knowledge enabled connection to Country, as one participant described not being able to practice culture would mean having no 'purpose' on Country.

> *"Not being able to practice my culture, I don't think I would be able to live because I would have no purpose here on Country. Because my culture is everything to me, it is my spiritual, it is my health, it is my mental capacity, it's just everything that I live for."*
>
> *(Yuin Women's Circle)*

Participating and engaging in 'cultural practices' on Country, including dance, weaving, tool-making, collecting/consuming cultural foods, walking Country, and engaging in ways of being, knowing and doing that reflected that of the 'old people' (ancestors), was described by participants as a source of strength, pride in identity, a way to connect to the ancestors, and a way to ease challenging emotions such as anger (Fig. 2).

> *"He went and got a clap stick and started, got the axe with that. And that eased him that took away the anger."*
>
> *(Dharriwaa Men's Circle 2)*

Participants explained the importance of learning associated with practicing culture, and being able to control the way it was practiced; while also reflecting on the ways it enabled cultural continuity and colonial resistance, particularly through the renewal of languages. These perspectives reinforce the intertwining and interdependent nature of cultural health as both endogenous (e.g. an inner sense of connection to culture, family/mob, and Country) and external (e.g. whether culture is being practiced, or Country is available or accessible).

Cultural camps as a mechanism for cultural health

Many participants spoke candidly about the camps being conducive to mental, and spiritual health, and wellbeing, which was often referred to as experiences of 'healing' or relief from 'stress'.

> *"We need this, this is what it's all about. This is how we used to heal. Healing happens in circles in our culture. Everything happened around fires, around gatherings and this is bringing it back to where they used to send the message sticks out and everyone would come."*
>
> *(Gomeroi Women's Circle)*

Some participants additionally spoke of the 'healing' impact camps had in the context of a chronic health conditions, which was intertwined with reconnecting with Country and mob. While others spoke about the impact of camp attendance on substance abuse issues.

> *"I was really sick, leading up to the camp, spent two years with a condition that really rocked me. I had to give up full-time work. I couldn't drive. I was flat on my back. I couldn't walk, and I was really, really sick. Coming out here was exactly what I needed just to reconnect to*

Fig. 2: **Scenes from the cultural camps. Top left image: women walk around the base of the sacred Gulaga Mountain as part of the Yuin dhugan; Top right image: plant knowledges are shared by knowledge holders (including Ted Fields on far left) at the Dharriwaa walaay; Bottom left image: *Yulugi* at the Dharriwaa walaay – Yuin dancers led by Warren Foster Snr (far right); Bottom right image: women walking on Country at the Gomeroi walaay.**

Country and just stop, sitting around yarning with the other women and the experiences over the week was just so healing for me."

(Dharriwaa Womens Circle 2)

"When I'm home, I smoke a lot of ganj [cannabis], but since I've been up here, I haven't even worried about it."

(Dharriwaa Men's Circle 2)

The tangible and sensory aspects of culture and Country (e.g. seeing, touching, smelling) is a significant aspect of the camps, participants spoke of how these aspects intertwine with place-based traditional stories and songlines, and physical elements of the ancestors of that place, which included shell middens, stone tools, artefacts pre-colonisation. Some highlighted the importance of sharing these tangible experiences and knowledges with the younger generation.

"Improving our young people, with connecting with the environment and their senses, using the eyesight there, smell it, touch."

(Dharriwaa Men's Circle 1)

"When we went out there we heard that story about the seagull and the pippie, he flew the pippie out there to the lake. And where we was camping we found a big mob [of pippies] there, and we connected them songlines together and did a dance where those pippies are in the lake."

(Yuin Men's Circle)

Engaging in cultural practices is central to the design and delivery of the camps. This included teaching and practice of dance, song, story, weaving, and woodwork (including identifying and gathering the correct wood for the tool being made). Participants described how cultural practices enabled a strengthened connection to Country, and to mob. One participant highlighted how conversations that enabled relationality and kinship happened during cultural practices at the camp that involved weaving or food sharing and preparation.

"They [conversations] happen over weaving, they happen when we are cleaning the abalone shells, when we are making our stringy bark rope, they happen when we are sharing a meal, when we have a yarn and a cup of tea, and that to me is culture. It's those acts, those behaviours, those rituals, those patterns that are ancestral and presently practiced that allow us to be in relationality with each other and with Country, and that's how we stay strong as Blackfellas."

(Yuin Women's Circle)

Camps provided an opportunity for participants to strengthen and share their knowledge (often intergenerationally) of language and cultural foods (Fig. 3) and medicines by providing access to Country, knowledge holders and language practitioners.

"Respect the land. And even little things like the yabbies, you know, go down and catch a few, having a bit of fun and have a feed, but always leave some, to carry on."

(Dharriwaa Men's Circle)

"Love to sit around and have a little yarn with my kids, you know, language and that yeah, this is my second camp now."

(Dharriwaa Women's Circle 1)

As a space, the camps were described as different or separate from 'everyday realities' that required resilience in the face of daily challenges such as ongoing colonisation and racism. Participants described the healing experienced at the camp as contributing to the strength needed to live the 'everyday'.

"Because it is hard when we get out of this camp, we go back to reality exactly who we are in our job roles and in our lives."

(Dharriwaa Women's Circle 2)

Fig. 3: **A participant collects Daygalbaarrayn (Darling Lily) a cultural food at the Dharriwaa Walaay.**

Participants perceived their engagement as contributing to cultural renewal by addressing the loss of knowledge and connection (e.g. growing up 'off' Country without culture). The camps provided access to culture so that it is not 'lost' and offered a platform to foster kinship and mob connections. Through these processes people and mob were perceived to grow stronger, culturally and through colonial resistance.

"This is our culture, our Country, our art, this is who we are as people and this is what we need to get back to. The more we do this [cultural camps] imagine who they coming up and facing when we walk away together as one people. We are not all individuals. [We are] one walking this Country."

(Dharriwaa Women's Circle 1)

Cultural camp elements that support therapeutic experiences

There are several necessary elements that allow the camps–as a therapeutic platform that are conducive to experiences of 'health', 'wellbeing' and 'healing–to operate in a way that is safe and respectful for those attending, the culture being practiced, and the Country and landscapes they occur within. Participants discussed issues and challenges around accessibility of these components, which included Country, culture and knowledge holders, and people and connection.

Country

Access to Country was identified as a crucial element to the therapeutic nature of camps, due to experiences of 'healing' being linked to connection with cultural landscapes e.g. 'the bush', 'nature', 'medicines,' and physical elements of the ancestors (e.g. shell middens, artefacts). Participants voiced the challenges of accessing Country physically due to settler colonial land ownership ('stolen land'), bureaucracy surrounding land managed by government (e.g. National Parks), and colonised systems and ways of doing.

> *"We fight the colony daily to have access to our Country, to protect our Country, to fight for what was stolen from our Elders."*
>
> *(Dharriwaa Women's Circle 1)*

> *"National Parks ain't doing their job, Forestries, well they just chop trees anyways. There should be land management, and we should be employed and running those ranger projects, us the people, who it actually means something to care for it, it's our Mother you know. We are close as to the land. And that there is where a lot of the trauma and depression comes from, is not having access."*
>
> *(Yuin Men's Circle)*

Others spoke about access to Country from a cultural perspective, drawing on cultural safety, protocol, and knowledge as important elements of accessibility.

> *"I've found it difficult though. I don't like going out on Country by myself. I feel like I'm being watched in the bush. Whereas I want to be, you know, a part of a family and Country."*
>
> *(Gomeroi Men's Circle)*

Culture and knowledge holders

Knowledge holders were central to participants' access to safe and rich experiences on Country and in cultural landscapes. This includes being able to navigate Country (both physically and culturally), confidently learn and engage in cultural practices and language in the context of Country—all of which contributed to therapeutic/healing experiences in the camp environment (as described above).

> *"With Uncle [cultural knowledge holder] passing down knowledge, and other teachers are my other Pop [Grandfather] and another couple of Uncles, they have different roles, different outcomes, and experiences with culture. With one of the Uncles I'll be learning dances. Even looking after the land making some scar trees, getting some bush tucker, going and getting wood and that, campfires."*
>
> *(Yuin Men's Circle)*

Some participants spoke about the importance of knowledge holders in the context of cultural loss (due to colonisation). Others highlighted the importance of sharing culture to keep it, noting that it was the 'job' of knowledge holders to do this, while noting that knowledge holders needed to be supported in their work.

> *"Its fortunate that [cultural knowledge holder] knows [culture], but it's different Gamilaraay and it's a shame that we don't know any of that language, we were told not to sit around our old people. You might know this or to listen to them talking about in their lingo. And we don't know, it's so sad that we lost all that."*
>
> *(Dharriwaa Women's Circle 1)*

> *"Just coming back home knowing and having them [cultural] leaders there it's a real big impact and a big role, well it's their job to look after us, teach us, pass it down."*
>
> *(Yuin Men's Circle)*

People and connection

The communal environment of the camp supports the practice of collective cultural values, including sharing and participating in the work of running the camp. Communality, and being physically present in a cultural landscape are key aspects of the camp platform that offer therapeutic benefit, in that a culturally safe space is provided for people to connect with each other, and with Country.

> *"This week is about ngaya ngarra-li to be able to be, to know, to feel and just sit. You don't often get these experiences anymore to be able to sit around, especially our women, and share and to reconnect with culture, especially on Country."*
>
> *(Dharriwaa Women's Circle 1)*

Participants highlighted the importance of connecting with other camp attendees on Country, and

discovering family or kin connections. These connections were seen to extend beyond the camp space.

> *I would like to see more people come out and more camps, you know. That'll bring in the intergenerational connection. This is what it's all about, it's connection.*
>
> *(Gomeroi Men's Circle).*

> *Camps like this are a really lovely way to sit down and yarn with and make relationships with other mob, to find our family and kinship ties and form connections and I really value that."*
>
> *(Yuin Women's Circle).*

> *"So I find coming out here and connecting to Country and the people and the aunties and families, there is a lot of love out here, and out there that we don't know is there."*
>
> *(Dharriwaa Women's Circle 1)*

Discussion

Our study aimed to explore how and in what ways, health and wellbeing is phenomenologically connected to cultural practices, foods, medicines, languages, and Country, through the platform of cultural camps facilitated by Yuwaalaraay, Gamilaraay, and Yuin knowledge holders in NSW. Our results reiterate what is known to be true historically, and what previous studies have reported—that the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal peoples is deeply connected with the intertwining elements of Country[2,7] and the freedom to express, practice, and maintain culture.[20,21] However, our study also presents novel findings that evidence the provision of camps, as a unique and promising platform that supports and promotes health and wellbeing through therapeutic experiences on Country. Specifically, three core elements of the camps observed as part of our study, defined them as conducive to therapeutic experiences; (a) their physical location in a cultural landscape[2,9] that allowed an immersive on-Country experience in a natural environment minimally impacted by colonisation; (b) the presence, guidance, and leadership of respected knowledge holders who were from the place where the camp occurred; and (c) a collective safe space that fostered kinship, mob, and nation group connections.

Holding the camps in a cultural landscape allowed deep sensory experiences that were conducive to a sense of healing, stress relief and improved social, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing. This occurred through immersion in a natural environment (e.g. land, water, animals); visiting sacred story sites; connecting to physical elements of the 'old people' (ancestors of that place) including ancient artefacts (e.g. stone tools, campfire remains), scarred trees (e.g. trees that had been cut for coolamons or ceremony), and shell middens; and engaging in place-based cultural practices such as collecting foods and medicines, or wood (for tool-making) and stringy bark (for weaving). Having knowledge holders lead the camps, ensured cultural and physical safety, and supported cultural knowledge gain and intergenerational transfer, resulting in strengthened cultural pride and identity (protective to social and emotional wellbeing)[20] among participants, through a sense of contribution to cultural survival, regeneration, and continuity, and an associated sense of colonial resistance.

The results of our study suggest that camps provide therapeutic experiences and social, emotional, and spiritual health benefits for Aboriginal peoples. An associated paper in this collection[11] provides further quantitative evidence of this impact, triangulating the lived experiences of participants reported here. There are few examples of camps as a Country or 'land-based' platform for Indigenous health and wellbeing initiatives.[9,22,23] Systematic reviews on the topics of connection to Country as a health promotion program or activity,[7] Indigenous traditional healing programs,[17] and the cultural determinants of Aboriginal health,[21] have further evidenced this lack. A recent scoping review by Yamane et al.,[8] identified only six studies that reported on the impact of culturally-grounded (e.g. rooted in specific cultural values, beliefs, and ways of knowing) Indigenous health and wellbeing 'interventions'. This confirms that the potential of culturally centred and land-based initiatives, such as the camps explored in our study, are a largely untapped opportunity to improve the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal peoples.

As discussed by the participants in our study, and elsewhere within this special collection[10,12] culture on Country remains a challenge to the delivery and uptake of camps. Ongoing colonisation and an everchanging political environment have limited and prevented access to Country, through privatisation and state institutionalisation (e.g. Crown Lands, National Parks) of lands and waters, making continuity of place-based cultural practices and knowledges challenging, and in some cases impossible.[2,24] While legislation such as the Native Title Act (Commonwealth)[25] and the Aboriginal Land Rights Act (NSW)[26] exist in NSW, these legislations have produced very little tangible outcomes for Aboriginal peoples,[27] as they privilege white versions of history and legality, that attempt to assimilate Aboriginal law/lore and relationship to Country into a Western property framework.[28] Further, while connection to, and caring for Country is now broadly recognised as linked to Aboriginal health and wellbeing, the necessity of land rights in this process is rarely discussed in Aboriginal health discourse and policy. Put simply, land rights are essential if Country is to be accessed autonomously, and gains in health equity and improved health outcomes among Aboriginal peoples are to be achieved.

A lack of recognition of land rights in the Aboriginal health discourse reflects a broader epistemic and praxeological issue, that silos matters of health into clinical systems and spaces. This is largely due to the

dominance of allopathic and deficit-based approaches that underpin health system ethos and program delivery. Allopathic ways of knowing and doing do not incorporate an understanding of relational ontologies and place-based healing, health, and wellbeing that occurs outside clinical environments, and—in the example of our study—in cultural landscapes on Country. While Aboriginal healing modalities such as camps, are practiced in NSW, they are not integrated with health systems, and are often provided on an ad-hoc basis due to the limited availability of cultural practitioners, knowledge holders, resources and funding, and physical access to sacred sites and Country. Currently, Aboriginal traditional cultural healing programs are not supported by mainstream government health systems in Australia,[17] differing from comparable contexts such as New Zealand where they are more widely recognised.

As evidenced in our study, knowledge holders are integral to delivering camps that provide therapeutic experiences and mental, spiritual, and physical health benefits. Yet currently, they are not acknowledged as a valuable health asset in NSW or Australia,[17] posing a barrier to their continued work and its integration with health systems. Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services (ACCHSs) are important for providing biomedically informed preventive and promotive care and clinical services in a culturally safe and appropriate manner. However, these types of health care differ from cultural modalities of health, healing, and medicine,[29] which (as in the case of our study) are delivered by knowledge holders and cultural practitioners (rather than clinicians); and require spending time 'on-Country', engaging with languages[30] and cultural knowledges, practicing traditional healing methods, and utilising cultural foods and medicines all of which occur outside of clinical spaces.[2,21] Yet while ACCHSs do not typically provide traditional cultural modalities of health care, they are well-positioned to work in collaboration with knowledge holders and cultural practitioners to improve health and wellbeing through cultural health practices. The results of our study suggest that further rigorous research is needed to establish empirically supported cultural treatments and preventive strategies (such as cultural camps) and explore how collaboration with ACCHSs and knowledge holders/cultural practitioners might occur in ways that maintain cultural integrity and autonomy.

Our study and its findings are limited to the context of NSW Australia, and specifically to Yuwaalaraay, Gamilaraay and Yuin culture, knowledge holders, and Country. In conducting this study, our data collection methods, analysis, and interpretation were guided by place-based knowledge holders. While there may be learnings from our findings that could be applied elsewhere, the strength of our study is that it is place-based and does not attempt to draw generalisable conclusions.

Conclusion

Camps that occur in cultural landscapes (on Country), and are facilitated by place-based knowledge holders, provide a unique and promising platform that supports Aboriginal health and wellbeing through therapeutic, sensory experiences that strengthen cultural health; including cultural identity, knowledge gain and sharing, connection to Country, mob, and ancestors, and engagement in cultural practices. However, accessibility of the components necessary to deliver cultural camps remain a challenge to their delivery. Recognition, of the importance of access to Country, land rights and cultural renewal in health research and policy agendas are needed for advancements in Aboriginal health equity and improvements in health outcomes. Further research is needed to explore the integration and funding of cultural treatments and preventive strategies (such as camps) into health systems.

Contributors

AY: Conceptualisation; Methodology; Formal analysis; Investigation; Writing—Original draft; Writing—review and editing; Supervision; Project administration; Funding acquisition.

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BB: Conceptualisation; Funding acquisition; Formal analysis; Writing—Review and editing.

EdL: co-conceptualisation, writing—review and editing.

MR: Conceptualisation; Funding acquisition; Methodology; Investigation; Formal analysis; Writing—Review and editing.

All authors read and approved and take responsibility for the final manuscript. AY, BJB, SMT, NS, JK, AZ, and MR verified the dataset and have access to the raw data. AY took final responsibility for the decision to submit for publication.

Data sharing statement

The study protocol is available elsewhere.[18] The study materials are made available in the Supplementary File. Individual participant data is not made available to external part.

Declaration of interests

None declared.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

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