



# A Dialogical Approach to Understand Perspectives of an Aboriginal Wellbeing Program: An Extension of Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action

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## Abstract

This article will aim to demonstrate how we applied a collaborative dialogical research approach to understand perspectives of an Aboriginal wellbeing program by extending Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action to respect Australian Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing. This process aims to disrupt the colonizing discourse by bridging the disconnect between Indigenous decolonizing methods and Western knowledges, toward a dialogical, respectful, appropriate and reciprocally beneficial research project. We discuss how layers of reflexivity (self, interpersonal and collective) have a role in communicative relationality (trust and shared decision making). We propose cross-cultural communicative relationality is strengthened by three key researcher actions; inner listening, relational actions beyond discourse and collective knowledge, along with Habermas criteria for discerning the motivations of action (communicative vs strategic). This article provides researchers from a variety of disciplines a way to respectively research in the critical paradigm while considering Aboriginal ways toward building a relationship that is mutually beneficial.

## Keywords

aboriginal people, Australia, critical methods, research, cross-cultural, reflexivity

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*Don't try and talk for us or about us, but rather share with us and know what is going on.*

(Turnbull-Roberts, 2019, Interview)

with Indigenous research methodologies (Getty, 2010; Held, 2019; Osborne, 2017). Researchers must also understand how their actions can work toward disrupting the hegemonic

## Introduction

Research which celebrates Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing through respectful, dialogical and collaborative processes has scope to decolonize and re-shape research relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples (*Box 1*) (Getty, 2010; Martin & Mirraoopa, 2003; West et al., 2012). The epistemology and ontology of Western ways of knowing have, and continue to, dominate and subjugate Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing through the act of colonization (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991; Kovach, 2018; Rigney, 1999; Smith, 2012). Non-Indigenous researchers who are working in the space of cross-cultural research, need to consider how their Western ontological assumptions can conflict

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**Box 1. A note on terminology.**

**Indigenous:** The authors have used this term to respectfully refer to people who identify as First Peoples from nations, lands and territories around the world, and wish to acknowledge their diverse and rich cultures.

**Aboriginal:** The authors have used this term to respectfully refer to First Peoples from the mainland of Australia and the local community where the research is situated, as this is the term that the community identify with.

**Torres Strait Islander:** The authors have used this term to respectfully refer to First Peoples who are from the Torres Strait Islands of Australia.

Source: Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (2018).

structures of Western research approaches (Getty, 2010; Liebenberg et al., 2018; Nicholls, 2009). By disrupting the dominant way of knowing, researchers can increase their accountability to Indigenous communities and research participants by moving beyond what is needed to “tick the box” through enhanced responsibility and respect (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991; Rigney, 1999).

In his 2018 reflective article, Datta argues that research methods which involve Indigenous people and communities should explore “*a bridge between Western and Indigenous, which is appropriate and beneficial to the local community*” (Datta, 2018, p. 3). Similarly, Indigenous authors (Rigney, 1999; Wilson, 2008) have described “borrowing from” and “drawing on” Western paradigms which fit with the “*ontology, epistemology and axiology of the Indigenous paradigm*” (Wilson, 2008, p. 12). To unsettle the dominant discourse, Western and Indigenous methodologies have been interfaced by Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers to privilege perspectives and voices of the colonized (Barton, 2004; Held, 2019; Leeson et al., 2016; West et al., 2012). In this article we offer our approach toward bridging the disconnection between Western and Indigenous knowledges which extends to cross-cultural realities, communication, and collaborative research.

Our dialogical research approach aims to disrupt the colonial voice by using and extending critical theory through language and Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing. Critical theory and the Indigenous paradigm have a number of commonalities namely motivated by emancipation (Crotty, 1998; Held, 2019). Critical methodologies aim to promote research which exposes, interrogates and challenges conventional social structures including Western knowledge, by working against the oppression of disempowered minority groups (Crotty, 1998; Scotland, 2012). Through critical methods, research participants are the knowledge holders and, along with researchers, they are able to examine their social, cultural and historical realities toward emancipatory change (Held, 2019; Scotland, 2012).

Critical theorists argue that language, which shapes and moulds our realities, contains power relations which are used to empower or weaken (Scotland, 2012). Although language can be used to disempower, Jürgen Habermas purports through

this Theory of Communicative Action, that language can also be emancipatory, if it is free of coercion and motivated toward mutual understanding and shared decision making (Habermas, 1984, 1987; Rasmussen & Görtzen, 1990).

Through communicative practice and language, researchers can begin to think about how their actions may change the dominant research dialogue to privilege Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing. In Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (*Box 1*) ways of knowing, being and doing, which emerge from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander realities, are becoming more commonly adopted as stand-alone research methodologies and methods in their own right (Barker, 2008; Bessarab & Ng’andu, 2010; Doyle et al., 2017; Dawson et al., 2017; Martin & Mirraboopu, 2003; Whap, 2001). For example, Dawn Bessarab and Bridget Ng’andu’s (2010) “*Yarning about Yarning as a Legitimate Method in Indigenous Research*” demonstrates a style of communication and method of research, which is not only rigorous and credible, but which is also valued and familiar to Aboriginal people. Through the well-known protocols of active listening, mutual respect and layering knowledge, yarning is a method of research which is consensus-building, meaning making and innovative (Yunkaporta, 2019). As an example, this method can foster the beginning of a changing dialogue, in which the participant is not the silent object of study, but the subject, who becomes part of shaping the dialogical process. This article will discuss how Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal researchers can apply a dialogical research methodology to privilege and respect Aboriginal ways through research methods which include yarning.

## Locating Researchers With Community

We are a group of Aboriginal (KR), and non-Aboriginal (LU, LB, KD and KF) researchers who are working together. We do not discount that there is a divergence of opinions among Indigenous scholars as to whether or not non-Indigenous people should be involved in research with and for Indigenous people (Kovach, 2018; Nicholls, 2009; Rigney, 1999). Instead, we hope to provide a respectful way forward via a communicative relationality, with a critical consciousness and shared purpose, which privileges Aboriginal knowledges (Krusz et al., 2019). We see a communicative relationality as an interweaving of communicative practice (Habermas, 1984), reflexivity (Nicholls, 2009) and researcher actions (Bassendowski et al., 2006; Kendall et al., 2011), underpinned by trust and shared decision making, which are achieved through communication.

The methodology discussed in this article underpins a research project, exploring the strengths of a community well-being program which has been running for over 15 years with high community engagement, as a foundation of LU’s study toward a PhD. The wellbeing program takes place on Gumbaynggirr country on the Mid North Coast of New South Wales, Australia.

LU’s initial engagement with the community was established through an invitation to contribute as a practicing

dietitian to nutrition and cooking sessions as part of the well-being program. A high level of community interest toward understanding the strengths of the wellbeing program was revealed through collaborative dialogues with program participants, Aboriginal Health Service Staff and KR. From this, a collaborative relationship was formed between the community and the research group to develop a research project through communicative processes which was respectful, practicable and beneficial to the community.

KR is a proud Dunghutti woman with family ties to Birpai, Gumbaynggirr and Bundjalung Nations. KR has been the well-being program coordinator for the past 3 years. She has over 20 years of experience working in Aboriginal community health settings. Her strong leadership and community connections as an Aboriginal Health Worker, through the Aboriginal Health Service, have enabled interlinkages between Indigenous and Western knowledge sharing methods to ensure ongoing Aboriginal leadership, ownership, and relevance to the Aboriginal community throughout the project. LB, KD and KF are LU's research supervisors who each have experience working collaboratively with Aboriginal communities and Aboriginal Health Services in a variety of health and research settings.

As a research group, we have strengthened our existing relationships through reciprocity and shared decision making to grow our research project. KR reflects on the importance of existing cross-cultural relationships for research in the following quote:

This is how we've got to connect, to work together. I help you and you help me... Me and you already have that relationship. If everybody else had that, it would be a better world. (KR's verbal reflection)

## Our Collaborative Dialogical Approach

The communicative process we are writing about was not a pre-planned, well-defined methodical procedure. There was no "recipe" to follow to address the research need identified by the local Aboriginal community. Instead, it is something that has evolved over the past few years through existing relationships between community and researchers. We have developed our methods collaboratively, as a cross-cultural research group and with community, through twisting and turning, listening, talking, reflecting, reading, checking, trying and re-trying.

To begin our methodological design process, we collectively reviewed various methods and methodologies as a research group. The research group contemplated both Indigenous (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010; Martin & Mirraboopa, 2003; Ungunmerr, 1988) and Western (Bridges & McGee, 2010; Crotty, 1998; Habermas, 1984) approaches to consider if some might sit more comfortably with our shared research purpose (Doyle et al., 2017).

We took our initial ideas to the community for discussion at Elder's Health Days and Aboriginal Health Service staff meetings. The research was also discussed in more intimate settings, including at the wellbeing group and, with

smaller gatherings of community members. After initial discussions, research methods and alternative ideas were often talked about in community settings without prompting from the research group, which further shaped the research approach.

Ultimately, there was no one research approach which could encompass our collective research goal. Instead, our dialogical approach, aims to respectfully apply Indigenous and Western knowledges to work against colonizing discourses toward emancipatory actions (Doyle et al., 2017).

Our methodology and data collection methods were collaboratively designed with community and intertwine with each other, so it is not practical or possible to separate one or the other. Through this article, we will aim to demonstrate how our methodological process extends Habermas' notion of language, to consider actions which reflect Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing. This process aims to disrupt the colonizing discourse, by bridging the disconnect between Indigenous decolonizing methods and Western knowledges, toward a respectful, appropriate and reciprocally beneficial research project.

Through closely examining and reflecting on three layers of reflexivity; self, interpersonal and collective, we are interested to explore whether our approach can move us toward a communicative practice in our research. Throughout this article, we will contemplate the complexities and tensions of a communicative relationality toward consensus through the view and critiques of Habermas' and his Theory of Communicative Action (Habermas, 1984, 1987).

While the methodologies around this research are health centered, there may be other disciplines which connect with this critical framework which has a foci on cross-cultural realities, communication and collaborative research. This article will add to the critical methodologies which researchers will be able to apply in cross-cultural settings.

## Toward a Communicative Relationality Through Habermas and Researcher Actions

For this article, we are curious to consider how a communicative relationality may develop between those of different realities when attempting to design and undertake a cross-cultural collaborative dialogical research project. There is an undeniability of cross-cultural difference which springs from our experience of working with an Aboriginal community. LU reflects on this in the following quote:

I think that my trusting relationships are both formed and strengthened through an acknowledgement of difference, that is, a transparent appreciation of each other's ontologies and epistemologies. By taking the time to listen, share, think, and ask about what we don't understand research participants and I have aimed to move beyond a superficial rapport, toward a relationality built on trust and shared decision making. What I am interested in exploring is the complex layers of communication which have fostered and

maintained these relationships. (Excerpt from LU's reflexive journal)

Our research methodologies have been informed by Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action (Habermas, 1984, 1987), in which he sets the task for modern philosophy to understand human subjectivity through communication and language. Habermas argues that our ability to communicate has a universal core that includes basic structures and fundamental rules that all people must grasp to speak a language (Habermas, 1984). Thus, the process of interpretation and reaching understanding is through the use of language (Habermas, 1984). Communicative action can disrupt and extend understanding of Aboriginal health through the use of language and fits with the notion of decolonizing research with Aboriginal people (West et al., 2012).

Through his theory, Habermas proposes certain criteria in which to understand action as either rational or irrational; communicative or strategic (Habermas, 1984). This provides a lens to reveal the manipulation and strategic distortions of communication through exposing the true, undisclosed motivations of teleological action toward system success. Thus, it can be argued that communicative action provides an opportunity for equal voice, critique and mutual decisions toward a positive change in research (West et al., 2012).

Those involved in a communicative practice do so on a "level playing field," with each participant considered as an equal, interacting in open dialogue and responding to critiques. This process requires a trusting relationship between all members as they work toward a consensus about their subjective thoughts and actions within the world. Habermas describes this idea as the lifeworld, in which actions are arrived at through an equal and communicative process (Habermas, 1984). On the other hand, Habermas' describes action which aims to maintain the dominant status quo as outcome-orientated and strategically driven. This form of action does not attempt to reach consensus through understanding, but is instead motivated by the system to maintain power (Habermas, 1984, 1987).

Habermas' theory can illuminate the motives of each participant in a conversation, debate or argument. Each person has a particular agenda for starting and then continuing a communication, even if their purpose may or may not be clear to them at the time. Hence, each person's action has some teleological structure, including those acting communicatively, as each person brings some of their own intentions, feeling and desires to a conversation (Bolton, 2005; Habermas, 1984). However, if people participating in a communication are truly aiming toward mutual understanding, then what becomes important is the mechanisms of *how* a communicative action is separated from a strategic action (Bolton, 2005). According to Habermas, language through linguistic expression is the medium for reaching an understanding (Habermas, 1984).

The application of language is central to communicative practice. Habermas refers to this form of argumentation as explicative discourse, appraised by the comprehensibility of a symbolic expression to reach mutual understanding through

linguistic means. The violence of colonization widely suppressed the speaking of Aboriginal languages including Gumbaynggirr, the traditional language of the lands on which this research is taking place. We acknowledge that it has only been through the hard work and dedication of community that the Gumbaynggirr language is being restored, taught and more widely spoken, with words and phrases now more commonly used for greetings and in everyday conversations.

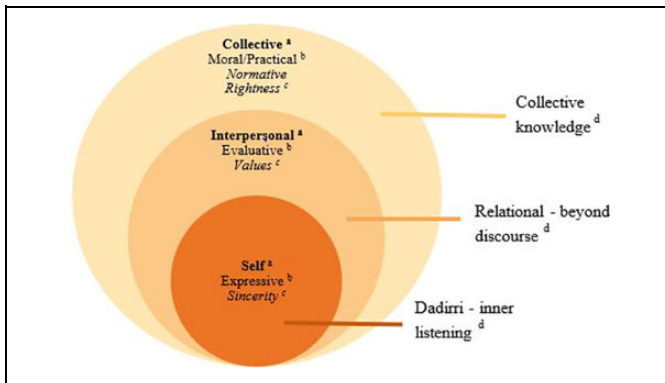
For our research, shared language and everyday communications are based around English. While we are all "speaking" English, there are considerable cross-cultural differences between dialect, syntax, semantics and pragmatics, further detailed by Diana Eades' (2013) book. The features of "Aboriginal English" demonstrate that Aboriginal ways of using language remain a strong and significant part of Aboriginal culture (Eades, 2013). Hence, it is important for non-Aboriginal researchers to spend time with community, to listen and talk with them, to begin to appreciate, learn and understand the intricacies and complexities of language.

Habermas proposed that language, which he refers to as "speech acts," is regulated by norms, expressive self-presentations and evaluative expressions which are orientated toward understanding and consensus as the constituents of a communicative practice (Habermas, 1984). To determine the true motive of action, each of these expressions must be able to be critiqued through corresponding validity claims, which are each explained below, then applied and depicted (*Figure 1*) in the context of our research.

Cultural normativity, considered through moral-practical expressions, is critiqued by whether what is being said is reliable, insightful and "normally right" in the context of the expression (Habermas, 1984). This differs from considering cognitive-instrumental expressions of facts in the objective world (Habermas, 1984).

Evaluative expressions convey our own desires and feelings through values. The validity of this expression is critiqued by adequacy of our standards of value, rather than by empirical truths or normative rightness (Habermas, 1984). Expressions regarding one's own subjective state are the therapeutic critique for which participants understand their perceptions based upon sincerity, as to whether the "speech act" is honest and self-critical. Therefore, if the speaker's motives are transparent and they believe in what they are saying then they can be deemed rationally and communicatively motivated (Habermas, 1984).

Habermas' theory provides a lens in which participants and researchers can discuss, critique and understand each other's points of view toward their own lifeworld. However, like those before us, we have a niggling uneasiness, as while Habermas' theory provides an opportunity for participants to engage in a process of equitable dialogue and mutual decision making, the challenge of defying traditional epistemological assumptions remains (Braaten, 1995; Pajnik, 2006). By considering Aboriginal ways, we may afford to deepen our understanding of the complexities of cross-cultural communication and bridge the disconnect between Indigenous and Western realities.



**Figure 1.** Our interpretation of how layers of reflexivity (A) interlink with Habermas' communicative practice expressions (B) and validity claims (C) with researcher actions for cross-cultural communicative relationality (D).

In our collaborative interpretation of Habermas' theory, we have considered how each form of expression builds our understanding of communication through a self, interpersonal and collective reflexive process. These expressions are coupled with three researcher actions; Dadirri—inner listening, relational actions beyond discourse, and collective knowledge, to move toward supporting a cross-cultural communicative relationality. To this, we have interlinked Habermas validity claims of sincerity, adequacy and normative rightness (*Figure 1*), to illustrate the complex nature and considerations of communication in critical research.

We have discovered through ongoing engagement and dialogue, that certain aspects of communicative practice were well known to the community, although not through the terms Habermas established. Characteristics of communicative practice which were already familiar to the community included acknowledgment of differing lifeworlds (self), yearning toward mutual consensus (interpersonal), and equal participant roles in dialogue (collective). Through three key researcher actions (*Figure 1*) and ongoing discourse the community connected to Habermas' theory through familiar and comfortable linkages. Hence, our dialogical approach has enabled us to move from considering research theory to a respectful, collaborative and accountable research practice to understand perspectives of an Aboriginal wellbeing program.

## Self

Habermas (1984) proposed that expressions regarding one's own subjective state are the therapeutic critique for which participants understand their perceptions based upon sincerity, as to whether their "speech act" is honest and self-critical. Hence, if the speaker's motives are transparent and they believe in what they are saying then they can be deemed rational. Our interpretation of this proposition is that the self has a therapeutic element that includes expressions of sincerity and the action of "Dadirri," or deep listening (*see Figure 1*). As researchers we have actively and thoughtfully taken time to listen and

become self-aware, and we have become more cognizant by letting thoughts sink quietly into our minds (Ungunmerr, 1988). Through awareness and quietness, our approach has involved being still and observing, as well as; thinking, reflecting and waiting, without hurrying. We have waited for the right time, the right people and the right place in which to share our sincere thoughts. This process has allowed us to gain new understandings through dialogue in which the self, via internal thoughts, can reflect and engage in dialogue. These actions have become central to our research practice and our reflexive process. KR reflects on her own practices in the following quote:

I've got to slow down and think sometimes about what I say... I think about how I might make it better, what I say, how I say it and how I do things. I reflect back on it... I think reflecting is an important skill, it's how we learn. (KR's verbal reflection)

We reflect that a researcher's own internal dialogue which is self-aware, "*unmasks the complex political/ideological agendas hidden in our writing*" (Richardson, 1994, p. 523). Researchers cycle through processes of uncovering, questioning and repositioning their hidden or subtle assumptions which motivate them toward their research (Finlay, 2003). For our research, this process has taken time and is ongoing. It is a process in which we have acknowledged, listened to, and acted on inner tensions between our own agenda and that of what we have set out to do. The following reflections highlight LU's initial colonial thinking about her role as an experienced dietitian and novice researcher which has since been disrupted through our dialogical process.

From the first moment I began to think about this research project and talk with the local community I could see a "health need." The people who I met during the course of my discussions had complex chronic health conditions such as type two diabetes and kidney disease, and I felt as a researcher and clinician, I could help them. (Excerpt from LU's reflexive journal)

Through the development of self-awareness, the researcher can question the power and privilege in research relationships, which may highlight why the researcher included or excluded particular elements (Nicholls, 2009). However, for researchers working with Indigenous communities, it is ethically, morally and socially inappropriate to rely solely on their own internal dialogues when designing, undertaking and disseminating research (Rose, 1997). If non-Indigenous researchers situate knowledge based only on "first person" deliberations, their dialogues are strategically motivated and they will recolonize research through empirical epistemological traditions (Habermas, 1984). Instead, in this discourse around "self," we are suggesting that a researcher can unsettle their own epistemological and ontological assumptions through becoming self-aware, listening and waiting; toward honesty, transparency and sincerity as illustrated in the following quote:

... it was actually me who needed help and guidance and, I was lucky to receive it. There have been some key people along the way including—my cultural mentor, Elder and friend Aunty Karen Roberts, as well as my research supervisors, these people have helped me reflect on the complexities and intricacies of cross-cultural research. I learned that rather than rushing in to “help” fix what I considered to be “a problem,” I needed to slow down, think, write and listen. (Excerpt from LU’s reflexive journal)

A researcher’s “self” communication must extend beyond speech and language. To the Ngangikurungkurr people of Daly River in the Northern Territory of Australia this process is called Dadirri. Dadirri is a “spiritual gift” and way of life (West et al., 2012). Dadirri is a quiet stillness and waiting, reflection and listening, it is about “*observing the self as well as, and in relationship with others*” (Atkinson, 2002, p. 19). Atkinson (2002) considers that Dadirri can also be a way of life for researchers, by sharing something of themselves and building a reciprocity through the sincerity of their words and actions. The significance of Dadirri for all Australians is described by Miriam Ungunmerr, a prominent Aboriginal writer:

*What I want to talk about is another special quality of my people. I believe it is the most important. It is our most unique gift. It is perhaps the greatest gift we can give to our fellow Australians. In our language this quality is called dadirri. It is inner, deep listening and quiet, still awareness... This is the gift that Australia is thirsting for. It is something like what you call “contemplation.”* (Ungunmerr, 1988)

This is a personal journey through deep listening, stillness, waiting and watching to extend our “self” dialogue beyond what we say. Through the consideration of “self,” the research group have encouraged community participants to reflect through the use of Dadirri and shared dialogue. As part of their reflection, the community participant’s intentions, actions and privileging of rich Aboriginal axiologies formed part of their own Dadirri journey. In this reflexive process represented by “self,” researchers and participants become external observers to their own actions, judging their own trustworthiness and authenticity.

As researchers we must practice cultural humility just as our participants do; by being flexible in our thoughts and by situating ourselves as the “learners,” rather than “knowers” in the research process (Foronda, 2019). LU describes how this process highlights the complexities of intertwining Indigenous axiology, health and culture through her own “Dadirri” journey in the following reflection:

This began to deepen my understanding and appreciation of my own self-communication. Now I could begin to explore my own tensions in relation to cultural differences regarding health, communication and “ways of doing,” and also consider my own communication, and whether or not I came across as sincere and trustworthy in my actions. This wasn’t an easy process, nor did I get it right every time, but it is a process. A process of exploring why there was a tight knot in my belly after interactions with

community or research supervisors. A process which shifted me away from being the “expert” toward being a learner, in situations which I didn’t always know the answer. And, a process in which I became accountable to the community for my each and every action, thought and word. (Excerpt from LU’s reflexive journal)

## Interpersonal

Habermas considers that rationality is closely linked to knowledge (Habermas, 1984). He argues that rationality is related to how people acquire and use knowledge rather than the actual possession of knowledge (Habermas, 1984). In Western research, a cognitive-instrumental approach to rationality becomes separated from communicative rationality (Habermas, 1984). Through an objective lens, a conversation between participant and researcher before or after the “data” is collected is considered as an insignificant, unimportant or bothersome variable to exclude from the research “facts” (Habermas, 1984). However, a research approach which demonstrates relational skills and moves toward a communicative focus provides researchers with a more appropriate way of research with Aboriginal people (Nicholls, 2009).

*Your methodology has to ask different questions: rather than asking about validity or reliability, you are asking how am I fulfilling my role in this relationship?... This becomes my methodology, an Indigenous methodology, by looking at relational accountability or being accountable to all my relations.* (Wilson 2001, p. 177)

For our research, interpersonal communications through yarning have fostered the idea of shared values which have bridged the disconnect between Aboriginal and Western knowledges. Yarning is an Indigenous way of storytelling and is a culturally appropriate method to explore, plan and do research (Bessarab & Ng’andu, 2010). Bessarab and Ng’andu (2010) describe four types of yarning; social, research, collaborative and therapeutic, which have each played an important role in the development and undertaking of our research. Our yarning has extended beyond Habermas’ “speech acts” toward inclusivity and openness (Pajnik, 2006; Young, 2000); building trust through fulfilling our role in the research relationships (Bessarab & Ng’andu, 2010). KR considers how cross-cultural yarning is a sincere and inclusive approach.

A lot of our Mob weren’t brought up like that. They don’t understand research questions... I’ll say it in a way where they can understand. (KR’s verbal reflection)

Yarning fits with Nicholls (2009) description of “*relational-reflexivity*,” which requires the researcher to be accountable toward participants and community. LU reflects on how this relational action was established in our own project:

I have started to learn how to communicate with group members to introduce the idea of research and commence our yarning interviews. The development of trust within the members of the group

has involved taking the time to meet, listen, share and talk, but to also be clear about my position and my role. Unlike Western methods, I have needed to build a relationship with each participant prior to asking them to participate through our interactions in the group. Thus through a communicative relationality participants have opportunity to judge the adequacy and acceptability of my actions and decide whether or not they would like to be a part of the research. (Excerpt from LU's reflexive journal)

A considered approach which distinguishes the importance of relationships, communications and the context in which the research has been undertaken is a key responsibility for researchers. For us, the "getting to know you" conversations, the development of trust, respect and the sharing of stories (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010; Kovach, 2010; Wilson, 2008), actually form part of, and have strengthened, our research relationship. The quote below illustrates the complexity and importance of relationships beyond the demand of academic work.

*The concepts or ideas are not as important as the relationships that went into forming them . . . an Indigenous epistemology has systems of knowledge built upon relationships between things, rather than on things themselves.* (Wilson, 2008, p. 74)

Furthering this idea, we suggest here that the communication process involves complexities beyond verbal discourse between participant and researcher. Habermas' critics believe there needs to be a willingness to move beyond the typical models of discourse, to encompass other actions such as emotive narratives (Young, 2000), creativity, imagination (Braaten, 1995), non-linguistic communication and the acknowledgement of individuality and difference (Braaten, 1995; Pajnik, 2006).

For our research, acknowledging the conversations and actions that enrich our lifeworld which have included everyday greetings, humor, story-telling and non-verbal actions have become part of the shared experience between participants and researchers. Words and phrases from traditional languages and "Aboriginal English" have been shared by the community to describe foods and cooking methods, grounding deep connections to Aboriginal ways of knowing and being as part of our collective dialogical process (Eades, 2013; Martin & Mirraboopa, 2003). We demonstrate commitment to "showing up" through consistency of being present at weekly cooking classes or community events, and consider this an important contribution and further responsibility to the shared lifeworld (Turnbull-Roberts, 2019). The following reflection illustrates how LU views other actions which transcend typical discourse toward relationality.

I see these processes at work every day in our wellbeing group, every person has a relational connection to each other. Each person greets others and asks about their health and happiness. There is a ritual around preparing a meal, saying grace, and sitting down together to eat. It is only through understanding the nuances of the group traditions and values through observing, listening, waiting

and sharing that a dialogue can begin. (Excerpt from LU's reflexive journal)

## Collective

When entering into research with Aboriginal people it is important for researchers to reflect on how Aboriginal ways of knowing might inform language and communication (Kovach, 2018; Martin & Mirraboopa, 2003). Martin and Mirraboopa (2003) describe the ways of Quandamooka people as an ontology "at one" with the land, water, sky, spirit and traditional law, which guide ways of knowing, being and doing. Knowledge is life stage and gender specific, and is dependent on expanding and contracting spatial, political and social dimensions, with no one person or system being able to know everything. They describe that each individual's way of being is through their own Entity, entrusted by other Entities (human, earth, sky, water, animal) to fulfill their role as custodians. Hence, each entity is known to and, forms part of the collective knowledge and collective conversation (Martin & Mirraboopa, 2003). As the following reflection articulates, for our research, we set about building a collective communication through active engagement, negotiation and dialogue with community members and researchers.

Building a collective communication through this research project began from the initial dialogues with community and my research supervisors. My cultural mentor, local Elders, community members and the Aboriginal Health Service staff contributed to building a network of conversations as we planned the research. One thing led to another, one person to another, and one yarn to another. There was no one authoritative voice, rather, ideas were shared, suggested or strengthened about how the research would work for and benefit the Mob. I was re-checking, going back and making sure my interpretations of these dialogues were true representations of the community. Our dialogues occurred over time, and there seemed to be no definitive end to our collective planning. (Excerpt from LU's reflexive journal)

Creating a network of representative voices, with different life experiences and views takes time in order for all involved to begin to understand the collective knowledge (Bridges & McGee, 2010; Martin & Mirraboopa, 2003). The extra time taken to collectively design the research may cause tensions between researcher and their academic demands regarding funding and publication deadlines (Ninomiya & Pollock, 2017). However, we see this non-linear process as imperative to deepening trust between the community and researchers so that the community feel confident that the research is beneficial to them. Furthermore, these relevant and significant collective dialogues which occur over time, enhance the worthiness and rigor of the research process (Tracey et al., 2013).

To foster a collective communication toward understanding the rich data which has been contributed by participants in our research project, we have chosen to use a process of Collaborative Dialogical Inquiry (CDI) (Bridges & McGee, 2010). CDI is a type of participatory research which stems from feminist



theory, detailed in Bridges' and McGee's (2010) chapter. CDI explicitly involves research participants as co-inquirers in order to challenge power relationships which are implicit in Western research (Bridges & McGee, 2010). Through this process participants are empowered to shape the research processes and outcomes through the "*notion of being an expert about one's own life and experience*" (Bridges & McGee, 2010, p. 258). This means the researcher is no longer the deciding force which governs all aspects of the research process, instead, CDI involves co-inquirers to collectively design, dialogue, reflect and make meaning toward a mutual decision (Torbet, 1983). The outcomes of the research and the collective knowledge gained are then returned to the community and co-inquirers rather than held in the ivory tower of academia (Barker, 2008; Bridges & McGee, 2011). CDI as a method also fits with Nicholls (2009) "*collective-reflexivity*" which demands a shift in researcher positionality through participatory methods "...by ceding researcher control beyond the initial phase of negotiation, and extending participation into data collection, analysis and distribution" (Nicholls, 2009, p. 124). In the quote below LU considers how CDI may begin to "shift" researcher control toward strengthening the lifeworld.

It was clear to me through our conversations that a collective communication needed ongoing representation of the collective knowledge throughout the project, which we plan to do through collaborative dialogical inquiry. With representation of the collective voice throughout the methods, the group can check the "normative rightness" of the research actions through perceived reliability and insightfulness. Our process will likely foster a creativity beyond discourse toward representations which are rich and meaningful to the community, such as a visual artwork. (Excerpt from LU's reflexive journal)

Through CDI, the research pathway and products remain pertinent to those who are most influenced by its outcomes. This builds on the self and interpersonal to provide a final layer of relational and communicative accountability of the researcher(s) to the community. It is with the addition of this final layer that researcher actions can be perceived as sincere, trustworthy, and "normatively right," and motivated toward understanding. It is from here on that a mutual decision can be made about what to do (or not do).

## Concluding thoughts

When applying a critical theory research framework within Indigenous health research context, a researcher's reflexivity process needs to acknowledge, grapple, unsettle and interrogate the tensions that are implicit when undertaking research with Aboriginal people (Crotty, 1998; Krusz et al., 2019; Scotland, 2012). We acknowledge that there are inherent tensions within this article. There is also an ongoing unsettling between the expectation of community and the demands of "academic rigor" and publication. If left ignored and without exposure, these tensions have the ability to recolonize the lifeworld through

strategic undercurrents (Getty, 2010; Nicholls, 2009; Smith, 2012). We continue to grapple with tensions around authentic representations of inclusivity and equal voice in our research, as well as the expectations of how we fulfill our role in the research relationship. We have ongoing trepidations regarding the unconscious and normalized oppression of Aboriginal people due to colonialism, for which any attempt to disrupt must be made through conscious awareness (Krusz et al., 2019). We persevere in our interrogation of colonizing discourses toward understanding each other's reality through collective dialogues of our research methodologies. We think that through dialogue and trust, these tensions can be brought to the surface toward a communicative practice in order to re-balance the lifeworld.

Through this article, we have explored aspects of theory and research practice in relation to Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action. We have highlighted three researcher actions: Dadirri—inner listening, relational actions beyond discourse, and collective knowledge. Collectively, these can bridge the disconnect between Indigenous decolonizing methods and Western knowledges toward the attribute of relationality in cross-cultural research with Indigenous people. These actions are underpinned by Habermas' forms of expression: expressive, evaluative and moral-practical, and his validity claims; sincerity, values and normative rightness to inform a communicative process. With the final embodiment of three layers of reflexivity; self, interpersonal and collective, we provide an approach toward the possibility of communicative relationality in cross-cultural research.

These three researcher actions are key to the yarning and CDI approaches we are using. These collaborative research approaches aim to bridge the notions of language and decolonizing research toward a communicative relationality with participants and staff of an Aboriginal wellbeing program. Through this process we have moved toward developing an understanding of (each other's) reality toward developing, maintaining and strengthening research relationships.

This article adds to the growing literature about research with Aboriginal people and provides another way forward for researchers in health and other disciplines to connect with a critically framed approach which has a focus on cross-cultural realities, communication and collaborative research.

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