Coming to terms with the past?

Identifying barriers and enablers to truth-telling and strategies to promote historical acceptance

Anne Maree Payne and Heidi Norman
Indigenous Land and Justice Research Group
School of Humanities & Languages

UNSW SYDNEY

RECONCILIATION AUSTRALIA

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Terminology

This report follows the Reconciliation Australia language and style guide in using the terms Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and First Nations Peoples. We have retained the original language used in direct quotations from interview participants and other sources. Therefore, other terms, such as Indigenous, also appear. Any references in this report to First Nations Peoples in the Canadian context should be understood in the broader Australian sense of the term, and not in the specialised sense in which that term is used in Canada.

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Executive Summary

Research aims

In this pilot research project undertaken on behalf of Reconciliation Australia, we sought to improve the knowledge base about truth-telling and engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and shared histories[1] by identifying:

- how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous Australians understand the concept of truth-telling;
- what the key barriers to and enablers of engagement with truth-telling and First Nations histories are; and
- what the implications of these are for progressing truth-telling in community settings.

Methods

We undertook a literature review to identify issues and concerns as well as examples of good practice in community-based truth-telling; and a media analysis, survey and interviews to gather information about attitudes towards truth-telling in Australia. Selected data from the 2022 Australian Reconciliation Barometer were analysed to identify relevant demographic trends in attitudes towards truth-telling and historical acceptance.

Findings

This report provides an overview of the key findings from our research. We identified three dominant narratives about truth-telling in the academic literature, to which we added a fourth category capturing our research findings about the 'how to' of truth-telling practice:

1. truth-telling as justice
2. truth-telling as healing and reconciliation
3. truth-telling as history
4. truth-telling practice.

This framework can be used to categorise the wide range of initiatives and events currently taking place in Australia under the heading of 'truth-telling'. It also helps to distinguish what cannot meaningfully be described as truth-telling. We are not suggesting a hierarchy between the various categories we propose and acknowledge the potential overlap and interconnection between them. Nevertheless, we feel that our categories provide a useful conceptual framework to discuss our findings and to think about truth-telling processes in general. Each of the categories is described in more detail in the Overview of key findings section.

The strong consensus emerging from our research was that truth-telling in Australia must:

- be led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities
- engage with First Nations perspectives
- recognise the ongoing impacts of the past on First Nations people's lives today
- be ongoing, not a 'one-off' event
- aim to achieve change, whether at an attitudinal, institutional or structural level.

Our exploration of attitudes towards, barriers to and enablers of truth-telling in Australia highlighted that while truth-telling is an everyday activity for many First Nations people, non-Indigenous Australians are unsure about how to participate and unclear about what their role in truth-telling might be.

Benefits of truth-telling

Both First Nations and non-Indigenous people agreed that the main benefits that would emerge from truth-telling would be the development of a shared understanding of Australian history; the hope that truth-telling would deliver healing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples; and the potential of truth-telling to help improve relations between First Nations and non-Indigenous peoples.
All respondents agreed that truth-telling should involve First Nations people's perspectives on the past being presented, and a large majority agreed that truth-telling should recognise the diversity of First Nations peoples.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were highly committed to truth-telling, although less likely than non-Indigenous people to agree that truth-telling might lead to justice for First Nations peoples. First Nations respondents identified a range of motivations for participating in truth-telling, not exclusively centred on dialogue with and the education of non-Indigenous people. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were more interested in truth-telling about their local community (87%) than non-Indigenous people (67%) and were also much more likely to be motivated to participate in truth-telling to share their own personal or family history or perspective (89% of First Nations respondents, compared to only 25% of non-Indigenous respondents).

Barriers to truth-telling

Different barriers to truth-telling were identified by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous respondents in our research. For First Nations people, the impact of trauma and the need for cultural safety in truth-telling were significant concerns. First Nations people were also significantly more likely to identify concerns that truth-telling might emphasise divisions and differences between First Nations and non-Indigenous Australians, and that participants in truth-telling might question or challenge the accuracy of the perspectives being shared.

Previous research has identified a lack of awareness amongst non-Indigenous people about what they could do to act on their interest in deeper engagement with First Nations peoples.[2] Although seeing themselves as highly aware of and engaged with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history and truth-telling, non-Indigenous people in our study still indicated significant uncertainty about how to participate in truth-telling, with over half of non-Indigenous respondents indicating that this would either be a barrier to their participation (38%) or that they were neutral or unsure (26%) about whether it might be. In contrast, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents were less likely to describe lack of knowledge about how to get involved as preventing their participation in truth-telling, with only 12% indicating this would be a barrier. The need for non-Indigenous Australians to reflect on the appropriate ways in which they could and should be involved in truth-telling was also identified as an issue by both First Nations and non-Indigenous respondents.

There was a degree of uncertainty among non-Indigenous people about what truth-telling involves and recognition of the need for basic literacy in the wider population about truth-telling. Others identified a lack of opportunity to participate in truth-telling.

These findings highlight that community-based truth-telling initiatives will need to include public education about what truth-telling encompasses, as well as practical information about where, when and how truth-telling will be taking place.

Effective truth-telling practice

The success of truth-telling processes has been linked to their ability to be inclusive and to encompass a range of perspectives.[3] Other key aspects of effective truth-telling practice identified in our research include:

- being realistic about the benefits of truth-telling
- addressing cultural safety concerns and knowledge protocols
- recognising diversity among and between First Nations and non-Indigenous participants in truth-telling
- recognising systemic disadvantages experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians
- centring First Nations self-determination and sovereignty as key principles
- building truth-telling and truth-listening capacity
- dealing with difficult emotions and the potential for conflict
- maintaining hope for a better future.

Our research contributes a framework summarising approaches to truth-telling and characteristics of successful truth-telling. We hope the findings of this pilot study contribute strategies to advance recognition of First Peoples.

Introduction

There has been incredible growth in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history field[4] over the past 50 years and dedicated efforts by community groups to build a better understanding of our shared history. Despite this, First Nations people in Australia continue to point to truth-telling as a much-needed step in the path to recognition and reconciliation. Truth-telling was a key demand of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people expressed in the Uluru Statement from the Heart. During the Regional Dialogues that led to the Uluru Statement from the Heart, the demand for truth-telling was 'unanimous at every dialogue.' A key guiding principle that emerged was that constitutional reform should only proceed if it 'Tells the truth of history'.[5]

There is no lack of information or resources to understand the past. However, there is a gap in existing research about the most effective ways to communicate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history to the Australian community. The most recent Australian Reconciliation Barometer report indicates that while 84% of respondents from the general community believe that knowing about the histories of First Nations people in Australia is fairly to very important, only 45% possessed a fairly high to very high knowledge of First Nations histories.[6] Only 6% of non-Indigenous respondents had participated in a truth-telling activity in the previous 12 months.[7] This highlights the gap between First Nations peoples' calls for truth-telling as an essential aspect of re-setting the future relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous Australians, and the knowledge about and interest in participating in truth-telling amongst the non-Indigenous population. It might also indicate a lack of opportunity for members of the wider community to participate in local truth-telling activities.

Research components

We gathered information about truth-telling from a range of sources:

- A literature review drew on existing knowledge from Australian and other relevant international academic literature about 'coming to terms' with difficult pasts, particularly in settler-colonial contexts. This review also identified information about barriers to and enablers of participation in truth-telling, with a particular focus on community-based truth-telling initiatives. The aim was to identify concepts, principles and approaches that could inform truth-telling approaches in Australia, particularly at a community level. **Read the full literature review.**
- A media analysis identified Australian news media containing the term 'truth-telling' published during the six-week period during which the 2022 Australian Reconciliation Barometer survey data were being collected. Analysis of this material highlighted the diversity of meanings the term truth-telling has acquired, the variety of contexts in which truth-telling in all its forms occurs, and the range of different things people refer to when they talk about truth-telling. **Read the full media analysis.**
- A survey was open for responses from 22 May to 16 June 2023. Respondents represented a section of the Australian community who appear highly committed to truth-telling, and therefore provide us with valuable insights from those currently most likely to participate in truth-telling. The report on the survey findings is available here: **Read the full report on the survey findings.**
- In-depth interviews were conducted with ten survey respondents, providing a large amount of information about attitudes towards, enablers of and barriers to truth-telling. **Read the full report on the interview findings.**
- Selected data from the Australian Reconciliation Barometer (ARB) 2022 were analysed to determine if specific patterns or trends could be identified when correlated with respondents' demographic details.

This report provides an overview of the key findings from our research. The introduction to this report explores what truth-telling is and why it is important. The first three sections of the findings explore the three drivers we identified for engaging in truth-telling: to deliver justice; facilitate healing and reconciliation; and to correct the historical record. The fourth section of the findings – *Truth-telling as Practice* – explores the 'how-to' of truth-telling and presents our findings in relation to effective truth-telling practice.

What is truth-telling?

Truth-telling emerged in the 20th century primarily in post-conflict settings, as a mechanism to establish the truth about state violations or to counter the previous suppression of information about the treatment of oppressed groups. In this study, truth-telling is broadly understood as activities or processes that seek to recognise or engage with a fuller account of Australia's history and its ongoing legacy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

A striking feature emerging from our primary research into truth-telling in Australia was the sheer diversity of activities, actions and events that are currently conceived of as 'truth-telling,' and the wide range of understandings about what truth-telling encompasses. For example, in the media analysis we found significant evidence of the evolution of truth-telling as an idea, highlighting the way its meaning has expanded well beyond the original human-rights based notion of victim testimony in the context of restorative justice. While a wide range of activities might share the aim to reconfigure contemporary understandings about the past, we believe that any meaningful working definition of truth-telling must also include the desire to 'transition' or to achieve change – whether at a structural, institutional, or personal level. Truth-telling needs to avoid being positioned as a 'one-off' event or activity but instead should be seen as an ongoing process of dialogue and engagement, an intergenerational project of change.[8]

From the Heart: truth-telling in Australia

The Uluru Statement from the Heart called for a Makarrata Commission to be established to oversee 'agreement-making' and 'truth-telling' processes between governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Truth-telling was seen an essential step to redefine the political relationship between First Nations peoples and the Australian nation.[9] While the exact shape truth-telling processes will take is not yet determined, it is likely to be through local truth-telling initiatives at a community level,[10] and recent research has identified the wide array of truth-telling activities being undertaken by local communities across Australia.[11]

Several state government-level truth-telling processes are currently in train or under consideration in Australia. The work of the Yoorrook Justice Commission in Victoria commenced in mid-2022, with the final report due to be delivered in 2025. Other states and territories are currently considering or are in the process of establishing state-level truth-telling bodies. The Northern Territory Treaty Commission published its *Towards Truth-Telling* report in February 2021, recommending the establishment of a three-year independent truth commission. The *Pathway to Truth-Telling and Treaty* Report published in late 2021 explored the possible format, content and purpose of truth-telling in Tasmania, among a range of other issues. The Queensland government's Path to Treaty legislation was passed in May 2023 and included the establishment of a Truth-Telling and Healing Inquiry, although it is currently unclear if this process will proceed since the Liberal National Party indicated that they would be withdrawing their support in the aftermath of the Voice Referendum.[12]

Why does truth-telling remain a central demand for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people?

The Uluru Statement from the Heart called for recognition of First Nations Law, resistance, the work of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rights campaigners, and 'the tenacity, courage and perseverance' of First Nations peoples, alongside recognition of experiences of invasion, dispossession, and frontier violence.[13] The outcomes sought from truth-telling are diverse: truth-telling can be a form of restorative justice; a foundational requirement for healing and reconciliation; a process for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to share their culture and history with the broader community; an opportunity to build wider understanding of the intergenerational trauma experienced by First Nations Australians; and to create awareness of the relationship between past injustices and contemporary issues.[14]

Gomeroi scholar Heidi Norman has emphasised the cultural and political aspects of truth-telling for First Nations Australians, arguing that 'the impulse to tell "our story" and develop "a shared sense of history" functions as something of "a plea" from Aboriginal people to have their historical experiences acknowledged and understood by the broader community with the hope that this will then result in political change.'[15]

For Aboriginal respondents in our study, truth-telling was seen as an everyday practice rather than as an event; as one interviewee commented, 'I think it's every day. It's every day. If I really want to think about that, it is every day and in every conversation we have.'[16] This interviewee later commented, 'I can't take my culture, my lived experience, out of my words... my personal integrity as an Aboriginal woman is fundamental and guides how I say and what I say and how I engage.' She highlighted that her truth-telling was based on 'my lived experience of being ostracised and being oppressed as well, and I need to validate those because they guide me on why I feel and view the world the way I am.'[17] A male Aboriginal interviewee commented 'I try to get people to understand that it's coming from the heart, what I'm telling, and I charge non-Aboriginal people with a responsibility of listening and learning… We don't make this stuff up.'[18] One non-Indigenous interviewee also spoke of truth-telling being incorporated into everyday practices and needing to be something that people always held in their minds, to 'start living it.'[19]

Truth-telling was also described by Aboriginal interviewees as a responsibility to community, reflected in the following comment: 'I can't be seen in any forum not telling the truth because I have the responsibility of others that I'm speaking for.'[20] For this interviewee, truth-telling included the responsibility to speak truth to power, and to accurately represent the interests and needs of the Aboriginal community to non-Indigenous authorities or decision-makers.[21] Another Aboriginal interviewee highlighted the importance of these perspectives, because 'our voice has not been heard and other people speaking on our behalf all the time is huge.'[22]

What are the potential benefits of truth-telling?

In our truth-telling survey, both First Nations and non-Indigenous respondents agreed that the main benefits that would emerge from truth-telling were the development of a shared understanding of Australian history; the hope that truth-telling would deliver healing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples; and the potential of truth-telling to help improve relations between First Nations and non-Indigenous peoples. All respondents agreed that truth-telling should involve First Nations perspectives on the past being presented, and a large majority agreed that truth-telling should recognise the diversity of First Nations peoples.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents were highly committed to truth-telling, although as we will discuss in further detail below, less likely than non-Indigenous respondents to agree that truth-telling might lead to justice for First Nations peoples. First Nations respondents identified a range of motivations for participating in truth-telling, not exclusively centred on dialogue with and the education of non-Indigenous people. Some commented on the importance of truth-telling in communicating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history to Aboriginal children and young people. For one Aboriginal respondent, recognising the commonalities in First Nations experiences despite diversity of geographic location was a key learning that had arisen from their participation in truth-telling. Another suggested that it should not be up to First Nations people to educate the non-Indigenous community; 'racism and denial is a non-Aboriginal issue and needs to be internally addressed by the non-Aboriginal community to bring people to the point where they are willing to listen.'

First Nations respondents indicated that their participation in truth-telling had enabled others to have an improved understanding of the ongoing impact of the past on contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lives. Others spoke to their role in educating non-Indigenous participants about the struggles endured by First Nations peoples, and the importance of recognising the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experiences. One person commented that the lack of non-Indigenous knowledge about the impacts of colonisation had been 'eye-opening'; several others identified how their confidence in their own knowledge had been bolstered by the opportunity to share it with others. Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents made a connection between truth-telling and healing (as did a few non-Indigenous respondents). Specific comments about the benefits of participating in truth-telling included:

> *Catharsis and a shared sense of community built through the truth being shared, understood and commemorated.*
>
> *It's important to be heard as part of the healing process.*
>
> *Providing others with an opportunity to see things from a different perspective and encouraging them to question the validity of colonisation within a sovereign Nation.*

For non-Indigenous respondents, key learnings from their participation in truth-telling included recognising the importance of truth-telling to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples; recognising the diversity among First Nations peoples; improved understanding of the history, cultures, perspectives and experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples; the opportunity to connect with Elders; understanding the impact of racism, white privilege, intergenerational trauma, and violence on First Nations communities; and improved understanding of connection to Country. Others spoke of identifying ways to take appropriate action in support of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples; 'being a witness'; building solidarity; the importance of accountability; and taking responsibility to achieve change. Non-Indigenous respondents also identified the need for humility; active listening skills, 'truth-hearing' and 'learning how to hear the uncomfortable truth'; cultural sensitivity; and respect. There was recognition from some non-Indigenous respondents that their knowledge was inadequate; one respondent appreciated learning more about the specific First Nations peoples whose lands they lived on, and another spoke about the transformative power of interpersonal connections made with First Nations people. Others highlighted recognising the inaccuracies and bias of the history they had previously been taught, the need to 'make space for this [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander] past to be acknowledged', and the need to 'not assume that truth-telling is a simple process of letting a few stories be told and then move on to business as usual.'

One non-Indigenous interviewee highlighted the important role that truth-telling could play in improving relationships and resolving problems at a local community level: 'Take that time to listen to the local Aboriginal people and take that time to develop a long-term relationship. Stop thinking about these things in short term agendas. That way you can work a way out of some of the problems that confront you.'[23]

Overview of key findings

1. Truth-telling as justice

A dominant meaning of truth-telling in the twenty-first century emerges from the transitional justice field and sees truth-telling as intrinsically connected to justice. In the human rights context, truth-telling emerges from restorative justice processes designed to bring victims and perpetrators together and is widely used in various forms in post-conflict contexts around the world as a reconciliation and peace-building mechanism. In contrast to traditional retributive justice which is strongly focused on perpetrators, truth-telling is both perpetrator and victim-centred. Like all political processes, truth-telling initiatives reflect the realities of power and vested interest – in how the issues get defined, whose voices are heard, which facts are acknowledged, and so on. Truth is always multidirectional and often contested; there are key questions to consider about 'who is able to tell the truth, about what, with what consequences, and with what relation to power?'[24]

There are significant debates in the transitional justice field about the relationship between truth and justice. In his comprehensive exploration of personal and political avoidance of uncomfortable truths, *States of Denial*, Stan Cohen emphasised that 'doing something' about the past means more than getting the accounts right. The dominant meaning of accountability is justice.'[25] Cohen noted that while the driving rationale to investigate and generate knowledge is to hold perpetrators accountable, investigations into past wrongs often begin and end with recording knowledge, effectively decoupling truth from justice.[26] He asks, 'What is the point of knowledge without justice? Should justice or truth be the guiding aim of accountability?'[27] These are important questions of justice for truth-telling processes to engage with; truth should not be an end in itself but should contribute to creating a better future.

The UN Framework and 'the right to truth'

There is growing recognition within the international human rights framework of 'the right to truth.' The UN Human Rights Committee passed a Resolution on the Right to the Truth in 2009; an International Day for the Right to the Truth Concerning Gross Human Rights Violations was established by the UN General Assembly in 2010; a Special Rapporteur on the promotion of truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence was appointed in 2012; and a UN Resolution on the Right to Truth was passed by the General Assembly in 2013. There is also a rapidly growing body of national and international legal theory and case law establishing this emerging human right.[28]

Importantly, within the UN framework the right to truth encompasses not only the victims' (and their families') right to know, but also the right of a people 'to know the history of oppression that is part of its heritage'.[29] Truth is seen as an important mechanism to restore dignity to victims of human rights violations and their families and is also seen as playing a vital role in preventing denial and safeguarding against the reoccurrence of violations.[30] Effective truth-telling can also restore trust and repair relationships between victims of human rights violations and their communities.[31]

American philosopher Margaret Urban Walker argues that truth-telling for and by victims of gross violation and injustice and their descendants may legitimately be seen as a form of reparations; however, to count as reparations, truth-telling must be interactive, useful, fitting, and effective.[32] She also emphasises that truth-telling in and of itself is unlikely to be sufficient reparation for serious wrongs. This means that in the Australian context, truth-telling must be accompanied by other measures that address the ongoing impacts of colonisation and dispossession on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Historical injustice in settler colonial contexts

Transitional justice refers to the range of ways societies respond to the legacy of large-scale, serious violations of human rights.[33] Colonial injustices have largely been seen as beyond the reach of transitional justice due to its lack of focus on structural issues.[34] Transitional justice processes have also been critiqued for failing to address the ongoing impacts of injustices such as land dispossession or to recognise the sovereignty and self-determination of First Nations peoples.[35] Theorists have emphasised a link between contemporary concern for addressing historic injustices and the need for new forms of political legitimacy to underpin liberal democratic states. For example, historian Bain Attwood describes the 'acute ethical problem' facing settler societies such as Australia, where the 'troubling presence' of the past is increasingly seen to cast a shadow over Australia's future.[36] Modern efforts to address historical injustices in colonial contexts are appealing as they seem to offer the possibility of national redemption for past wrongs,[37] but they typically fall short in acknowledging the ongoing impacts of historic injustices, accepting legal responsibility, or providing material redress.[38] Matt James describes this as 'the historical justice dilemma', arguing that 'historical justice seems trapped in the regimes of injustice that it claims to want to transcend.'[39] However, despite these criticisms, others argue that transitional justice provides a unifying framework that brings together disparate discourses on colonial-era injustices[40] and remains relevant in Australia because of its focus on 'the transition of state power and the mechanisms of justice that are required to achieve political transformation.'[41]

Can truth-telling deliver justice for First Nations peoples?

In our truth-telling survey, non-Indigenous respondents were more confident about the potential benefits of truth-telling in delivering justice for First Nations peoples (87%) than Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents (79%). The greater level of uncertainty about truth-telling's relationship to justice identified among First Nations respondents (17% of First Nations respondents were unsure of this compared to 12% of non-Indigenous respondents) may reflect a less optimistic assessment by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of the potential for change within non-Indigenous people and society due to the limited benefits realised by previous reconciliation initiatives. Despite this concern, more than half of First Nations respondents (53%) rejected the proposition that truth-telling would not make a practical difference to the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples; once again however, non-Indigenous respondents were much more confident about the practical impact of truth-telling, with 70% disagreeing with the statement that truth-telling would not make a practical difference to the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

2. Truth-telling as healing and reconciliation

Truth-telling is based in the official acknowledgement of the truth of victim accounts which had previously been ignored or denied and is therefore frequently associated with 'healing'. For example, Appleby & Davis comment that 'Healing can only begin when this true history is taught';[42] the Northern Territory Treaty Commission report on truth-telling to inform a potential process in the Northern Territory comments that truth-telling 'works to restore dignity and begin a process of healing from the past.'[43] Some have problematised the assumed relationship between truth-telling and healing, emphasising that the context within which truth-telling takes place is critical, particularly for more vulnerable members of a community;[44] while others have questioned the appropriateness of individualised, therapeutic responses to collective and systemic harms. However, it is important to note key differences in settler and First Nations approaches to and understanding of healing; healing for First Nations peoples has been described as 'a process of connectedness' between land, tradition and community, one that moves 'beyond individual or therapeutic approaches to encompass the need for structural change.'[45]

The need for healing does not mean that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are sick, but rather that 'Colonialism is sick.'[46] Juanita Sherwood highlights the profound impact of 'situational, cumulative and intergenerational trauma felt through encounters of systemic and overt violence which are the lived experiences of Indigenous Australians', which is further compounded by lack of recognition of this trauma by mainstream Australia.[47]

Commemoration and memorialisation

Acts of acknowledgement and recognition, such as memorialisation, plaques, and renaming places, have been recognised as important truth-telling activities.[48] Memorials to the impacts of colonisation are particularly important because the structural impacts of colonisation are ongoing; memorials can create the possibility of consensus and shared understandings of the past.[49] One example is the Myall Creek Massacre Memorial. Despite the extensive history of frontier massacre in Australia documented by recent initiatives such as the University of Newcastle's *Colonial Frontier Massacres in Australia, 1788-1930* project, the Myall Creek Massacre Memorial remains one of very few established memorials at a massacre site in Australia. The brutal murder of around 30 Aboriginal people, primarily women, children and elderly men, at Myall Creek in June 1838, and the subsequent trials and eventual hanging of seven of the perpetrators, represented a pivotal moment in relations between Aboriginal people and settlers in NSW. The memorial was established in 2000 and an annual commemorative event involving descendants of both the victims and perpetrators of the massacre attracts a large audience.

In addition to memorials acknowledging the victims of colonial-era violence, our media content analysis highlighted numerous other examples of place-based truth-telling taking place around Australia, including re-naming or dual naming protocols for places and objects; the establishment of sites for truth-telling or reconciliation; and the recontextualisation or removal of colonial-era statues. For example, debate about the removal of a statue of William Crowther in Hobart was seen simultaneously as an act of truth-telling and as an enabler of truth-telling, by encouraging debate and further reflection about dark aspects of Australia's past.[50]

The need for cultural safety in truth-telling

Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith highlights that truth-telling can be a painful process for First Nations participants. Noting that 'Sharing knowledge is a long-term commitment,'[51] Smith argues that 'This form of remembering is painful because it involves remembering not just what colonization was about but what being dehumanized means for our own cultural practices. Both healing and transformation, after what is referred to as historical trauma, become crucial strategies in any approach that asks a community to remember what they have decided consciously or unconsciously to forget.'[52]

The existence of widespread trauma in First Nations communities makes issues of cultural safety in truth-telling critical. Drawing on the Department of Health & Human Services 2020 document *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural safety*, Bennett & Gates highlight the importance of trauma-informed approaches to truth-telling, and define a culturally safe space for learning and sharing as 'one in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples feel safe and that there is no assault, challenge or denial of their experience.'[53] However, others have noted that historical ignorance makes many white Australians an 'unsafe audience' for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to engage with, particularly when 'historical facts are met with disbelief, denial and refusal to engage', leading to 'profoundly uncomfortable' interactions.[54]

Trauma as a barrier to participation in truth-telling

Trauma was identified in our research as an issue that might impact on both First Nations and non-Indigenous participation in truth-telling. A non-Indigenous interviewee commented that 'truth-telling should not be a retraumatising experience as much as possible. Now it can be a healing thing for people to be telling their story, but for some people, if they're not in that space or time for that, it may not be a healing experience – it may be a retraumatising experience, and if you had a situation where it was other people – non-Indigenous people invited into the space, there is a danger of re-traumatisation in that respect.'[55] This interviewee highlighted that 'The most basic thing that you can do for somebody who has experienced trauma is to listen to them and validate their experience.'[56]

In our survey, 53% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents indicated that the fear of experiencing distress or trauma might be a barrier to their participation in truth-telling, with a further 16% being neutral or unsure whether this issue would prevent their participation. In contrast, only 11% of non-Indigenous respondents indicated that distress or trauma might be a barrier to their participation. The concern that participants might question or challenge the accuracy of the perspectives being shared was also a more significant barrier to participation for First Nations respondents (41%) than for non-Indigenous respondents (21%), with a further 26% of First Nations respondents being neutral or unsure about whether this issue would prevent their participation. Cultural safety concerns were another significant barrier to participation for First Nations respondents: 35% of First Nations respondents indicated that concerns about cultural safety might be a barrier to their participation in truth-telling, with a further 37% being neutral or unsure. In contrast, 19% of non-Indigenous participants saw lack of cultural safety as a barrier to participating in truth-telling, with 40% neutral or unsure whether this issue would prevent their participation.

One Aboriginal interviewee highlighted the potentially traumatic impact of truth on participants in truth-telling, asking, 'How does the person receiving the truth deal with that?'[57] A non-Indigenous interviewee commented that truth-telling was hard; when asked what made it hard, she identified people not knowing how to talk about the history of dispossession and the challenge of talking about traumatic events and noted that people tended to avoid difficult and traumatic things in their own lives, as many people 'struggle with dealing and talking with hard things of a traumatic nature.'[58]

Truth-telling and healing

In our survey, similar proportions of First Nations (87%) and non-Indigenous respondents (86%) agreed with the statement that truth-telling will help deliver healing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. When asked about the relationship between truth-telling and healing, one Aboriginal interviewee responded that while truth-telling could contribute to healing, 'I think your healing is your own journey and I think your healing can only be done when you're in a position to heal yourself… it has to be a process of wanting to be healed and actually wanting to talk about the trauma.'[59] This interviewee went on to comment that trauma 'just doesn't go away the next day because you talked about it. It's a lifelong burden that you carry, and it's just how you deal with it on day-to-day basis which is the issue.'[60] These comments highlight that truth-telling doesn't automatically lead to healing for all participants; organisers of truth-telling events need to be realistic about this and ensure appropriate support is provided for participants who may be impacted by trauma.

The importance of relationality / interpersonal connections

Relationality was highlighted as a key feature of truth-telling by one Aboriginal interviewee: 'Truth-telling is about understanding everybody has their own view on a circumstance and to acknowledge that it could be different from somebody else. So it's based on a lived experience, it's based on their personal, professional experience but also depending on what context. If we're talking about Aboriginal community context, it's about how you understand and navigate at that local level and your connections, your relationships and just you being an Aboriginal person.'[61] In our survey, truth-telling was seen as a process that might contribute to improving relationships between First Nations and non-Indigenous people. Only 1% of non-Indigenous survey respondents agreed with the statement that improving relations between First Nations and non-Indigenous Australians was not important; this compared to 6% of First Nations respondents. As we have highlighted previously, the desire to educate or have dialogue with non-Indigenous participants was not necessarily the primary motivator for participation in truth-telling for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents.

Burgess et al argue that 'Aboriginal-led truth telling is possible when values and ethics emanate from an Indigenous worldview, respect is embedded through deep listening, and connections develop into relationships.'[62] Internationally renowned peacebuilding expert John Paul Lederach also identifies relationships at the centre of reconciliation processes, arguing that relational engagement enables people to see 'spaces of intersection, both those that exist and those that can be created,' and to imagine new post-conflict relationships.[63] Research undertaken with non-Indigenous people in Canada has identified that interpersonal engagement between First Nations and non-Indigenous peoples was aligned with non-Indigenous respondents accepting personal responsibility to engage with First Nations issues rather than seeing it as the responsibility of some 'other' (whether the government or another body) to act.[64] These findings from the academic literature demonstrate the power of interpersonal connections in changing hearts, minds, and actions, but also recognise that it takes time for authentic relationships to develop.

The power of personal experience

For several non-Indigenous interviewees, the impact of truth-telling was drawn from the power of hearing about the personal experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. One interviewee commented 'testimony is huge, and having stories heard and the nature of people's experiences, and really having an understanding of how that impacted people.'[65] Another interviewee highlighted the impact of First Nations people speaking from their personal experience and sharing personal anecdotes, which enabled the listener to personally connect; 'I think that makes it real for people. It's not – I mean you can even put a quote in a textbook but … you can't empathise with that as much as if there's a person sitting in front of you. I think without that empathy then it's difficult to put the story in the history in with your own.'[66] One interviewee highlighted that 'It's seeing firsthand the impact that certain situations have had on people and the sort of flow on effects … also personalising these stories so they're not just statistics … it's also the emotion that comes up, those sorts of things that are so powerful … even if it's not necessarily a matter of changing your mind completely about the issue, even if you are sort of already on board, so to speak. Hearing that personal testimony, it has the power to then change how engaged you can be … just feeling better equipped to discuss it with people and being able to relay it in human terms rather than just dry historical fact.'[67] However, for one non-Indigenous interviewee, to engage a wide audience truth-telling needed to be more than sharing personal stories: 'If it's just people story telling then they just become stories … We always have stories of hardship or injustice in some shape or form so I don't think it can be only that… I think it has to be quite a mix of – and a lot of – different things. It can't just be a "poor me" story.'[68]

The role of education in truth-telling and reconciliation

Arguing that truth-telling projects are a form of public pedagogy, Margaret Urban Walker describes truth-telling as a form of human rights education, commenting that 'the more frequently and widely truth-telling processes are implemented, the more effectively human rights standards are circulated.'[69] Reflecting on the successes and failures of the work of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (CAR) in Australia in the 1990s, Andrew Gunstone identifies local community involvement and the development of reconciliation publications and resources as two key successes.[70] However, he argues that CAR's educational goals ultimately failed because they did not genuinely address First Nations peoples' rights, including sovereignty, self-determination, native title, land rights and a treaty. Gunstone and Walker's research findings highlight the importance of a rights-centred approach to truth-telling.

Research identifies that non-Indigenous people learn about Australian history, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and cultures, and reconciliation from four main sources: school; media (including television, films, radio, books, and newspapers); work; and family and friends.[71] However, this learning does not necessarily lead to greater understanding of First Nations peoples and cultures, with some researchers concluding that there is a lack of evidence to support that 'education is a deeply transformative site with regard to non-Indigenous attitudes to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and/or reconciliation'.[72] Others remain hopeful about the impact of education on changing attitudes. Sophie Rudolph reminds us that we need to be cognisant of First Nations peoples' aspirations for education, arguing that 'education has a range of roles in contributing to justice projects for First Nations'.[73] This theme is echoed by Taylor & Habibis, whose research centres Aboriginal perspectives and highlights First Nations peoples' enduring belief in the importance of addressing white ignorance. Taylor & Habibis argue that we are yet to see a systemic, well-funded, community-wide effort in Australia to address white ignorance,[74] suggesting that we currently lack the data to accurately assess the potential impact of education in shifting non-Indigenous attitudes.

3. Truth-telling as history

The call for 'truth-telling about our history' raises different challenges again for those involved in doing and teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history. The call brings into question what the field has achieved, what it hasn't, what the work has unsettled and the barriers to deepening our students' and the broader public's understanding of the stories of First Nations peoples. Here we turn to examine the history of the emergence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history, how this history was received and why, and some of the priorities First Nations peoples have pursued to advance their interests through the work of history.

Recovery: the history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history

For more than 50 years, historians have contributed an enormous body of work that has brought overlooked Aboriginal perspectives and experiences into the accounts once dominated by colonial and settler perspectives, establishing the academic field widely referred to as 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history.' Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander worlds have been written back into the history books and today, are rarely out of view in those texts.

On the other side of the sandstone gates, an incredible flourishing of First Nations activists and intellectuals, writers and artists were also producing historically inflected creative works, including biographies, memoirs, literature, paintings, and performance. If the leading prizes in the creative arts are any indication, these works are a dominant presence in the nation's cultural ecosystem. It should be the case that we can declare First Nations histories recovered and the silences filled, yet the call for 'truth-telling about our history' speaks to a persistent problem.

Accounts of the emergence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history generally identify two key points. One is the influential series of lectures by eminent anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner that introduced a striking metaphor to describe the omission of Aboriginal people from the Australian history canon: 'the great Australian silence' powerfully captured acts of repression and the experience of repressed peoples.[75] The second is that at the time Stanner was presenting his lectures, there was already a significant body of research underway, but also movements for social and cultural change with First Nations activists, 'organic intellectuals', advocates at the forefront of transforming Australian institutions and society. Decolonialisation, anti-racism and Aboriginal land rights involved Aboriginal citizens in careful consideration of identity and politics, and dialogue across activist networks, including those looking outside Australia to anti-racism in places like apartheid South Africa. Students, feminists and environmentalists were challenged to consider intersections of class, race and gender, and for Aboriginal activists, ideas for achieving change were being translated into action.[76]

Henry Reynolds's influential work *The other side of the frontier: Aboriginal resistance to the European invasion of Australia* introduced the previously omitted account of Aboriginal resistance to invasion. By drawing on fragmentary sources – archival information, diaries, journals, newspapers, official documents and oral narratives – which described the many and varied acts of resistance at the frontier from the opening months at Sydney Cove until the start of the 20th century, Reynolds compiled a radical retelling of Australia's history.[77] He showed that all over the continent, Aboriginal people 'bled as profusely and died as bravely' as soldiers in Australia's 20th century overseas wars.[78] Reynolds's methodological innovation showed the way for other scholars and heralded a revision of Australia's history from the dominant narrative of 'peaceful settlement' of the colonial frontier to one of violent conflict between colonial settlers and First Nations people.[79] Two contradictory narratives emerged: the Australian story of peaceful settlement and battlers making good and the First Nations story that challenged this account. The work of historians came to be reduced to two competing characterisations – negative and positive; black armband and white blindfold.

Refusal and denial of history as truth-telling

The new history soon came into dramatic contest as detractors argued its emphasis on First Nations people's lives was sustained by a revised and unduly sorrowing account of Australia's history; that Australia had a fairer society in the past than the new history conceded; and that the loss of Aboriginal populations was due more to disease than to genocidal violence. Other critics went further arguing that historians had 'fabricated' evidence of massacres of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and therefore of violence on the frontier. These criticisms found some support by then Prime Minister John Howard, eager to defend the nation's historical report card; he said, 'I sympathise fundamentally with Australians who are insulted when they are told that we have a racist, bigoted past.'[80] The new history and the refusal and denial response to it touched on something deeper that historians and others have sought to explain.

The ongoing difficulty of 'coming to terms' with confronting colonial histories in settler-colonial contexts has been variously diagnosed as a product of forgetting or historical amnesia; epistemologies of ignorance; historical denial; racism; indifference; disbelief; cultural difference about what counts as historical knowledge; and the impact of shame and guilt. There are pedagogical explanations; psychological explanations – including the strategic use of forgetting to protect a social group's self-image; and the belief that engaging is somebody else's responsibility rather than our own.

Historian Ann Curthoys explains this phenomenon as less the struggle between negative and positive histories, but 'between those which place white Australians as victims, struggling heroically against adversity and, those which place them as aggressors, bringing adversity upon others.'[81] Andrew Lattas also concludes Australian nationalist discourse emphasises a struggle where the pioneer, explorer and artist suffer, and white settler suffering 'becomes a means of conferring right of ownership to the land.'[82] Writing about the nature of historical memory in settler colonial contexts, Attwood draws on Freud's concept of denial or disavowal, arguing that it is 'always partial in that a human being both knows and does not know, or rather knows, but is unwilling or unable to acknowledge what they know.'[83]

Settler denial has been described as 'a distinct form of an epistemology of ignorance.'[84] That is, in settler contexts, non-Indigenous people have a vested interest in 'not knowing', and despite decades of curriculum reform they still lament 'why didn't we know?' when confronted with accounts of past violence and injustice against First Nations Australians.[85] Research suggests that the barriers to learning historical truths are attitudinal as well as structural and researchers have lamented the piecemeal nature of current educational approaches.[86]

While people may believe that their ignorance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history is innocent, it seems likely that ignorance about this history is a form of structural ignorance, or as Mitchell Rolls described it, 'a deliberate turning away from the evidence, a will to ignorance.'[87] If structural ignorance is the cause of 'not knowing' in the Australia context, the academic literature suggests that merely providing more information is unlikely to change attitudes or produce greater engagement. Instead, interpersonal connections with First Nations people are identified as the factor most likely to lead non-Indigenous people to feel a sense of personal responsibility to engage,[88] with awareness of white privilege also being identified as 'an important driver of a positive attitudes to Indigenous Australians and reconciliation.'[89]

There is also an argument about the owners, or keepers, of the history that was, is, or could be taught. Tony Birch says the way in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history (or the history of First Nations and non-Indigenous contact and conflict) is taught puts the burden of the history on Aboriginal people. Birch cautions that 'the absence of recognition of this history from either the Australian government or those 'in denial' is a cruel situation whereby Aboriginal people … are expected to carry the burden of the memory of white Australia's sins.'[90]

'History of' or 'History for'?

Outside of the academy, there are different motivations and interests in the doing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history. Darug and Dharawal historian Julia Hurst and non-Indigenous historian Peter Read suggest that in 'Countering the "entangled" politics of Settler Colonialism and history making, Australian Aboriginal histories aim to "move on" without settler Australians.'[91]

The 'very different version of history' that exists between settler colonial nation-states and First Nations communities is addressed by scholars.[92] Damien Riggs argues that First Nations' histories could be described as '"histories of" (of place, relationships, stories and belonging)', whereas non-Indigenous histories are '"histories for" – histories used to legitimate, to justify or to claim.'[93]

In his account of the work of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history, Worimi historian John Maynard explains research in this field as generative, a process that can reinforce and sustain Aboriginal worlds.[94] The search for truth by Aboriginal people is like a 'beacon of desirability' as these truths were previously denied. The impact of colonisation not only targeted the fracturing of Aboriginal people, but historical erasure. Maynard says, 'we were driven and encouraged into a state of forgetting and detachment from our past.'[95] Wiradjuri historian Lawrence Bamblett provides an account of Aboriginal approaches to history that highlights 'our stories are our survival.'[96]

Heidi Norman describes the history work being undertaken by Aboriginal communities to tell their stories about the places and people that are significant to them – a local, bottom-up 'living social and cultural history' that is not constrained by the debates and counter-debates of historians or the moral weight of the national story, and one which looks forward to future generations and not just back to the past.[97] Her research with NSW Local Aboriginal Land Councils observes dedicated labour to restore Aboriginal graves on old missions, town cemetery and document sites, such as at the Tulladunna cotton chipping Aboriginal camp on the plains country of northwest New South Wales. Aboriginal communities are documenting their history, they explain, to communicate across generations – to create belonging, sustain community futures and know themselves. This history is generative and highly valued, prioritised work.

History as inheritance

There is a new discourse emerging that the process of settlement between First Nations and non-Indigenous Australians offers: the sharing of the inherent wealth of a much deeper history. Here, the worlds of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders call for a very different approach to doing history and for stories to be told over much longer timeframes through an entirely different archive and knowledge system. While much of the work to restore Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander worlds omitted from the national story has been undertaken, First Nations perspectives or histories extend beyond the 200-plus years of colonisation to many thousands of generations and draw on a wide array of evidence to tell a richer story. This decentres colonial settler-Indigenous relations in processes of truth telling, and instead offers the possibility of a much longer history and connection to place.

4. Truth-telling practice

This section provides an overview of our key findings about effective truth-telling practice.

Our findings align with the work of Anishinaabekwe scholar Kathleen Absolon. She proposes the following key questions need to be addressed in any attempt to build relationships between First Nations and non-Indigenous people based on truth and honesty:

- How will we create an inclusive and relationship building process?
- Who will coordinate a planning session to begin?
- Are Indigenous people who are relevant to the topic invited?
- Who will you invite? Inviting people who have interests indicates an investment in a meaningful and purposeful process.
- Is there a space that generates respect in the sharing of ideas? Creating spaces that allow people space to share, engage & be on land is helpful.
- What mechanisms are in place to ensure Indigenous people are listened to?
- How will respect be enacted?
- What truths need to be shared?
- What Indigenous process can be integrated to foster respectful sharing and listening: relationship building?
- What activities and events can be planned that build respectful and inclusive relationships with Indigenous peoples?[98]

The following overview highlights some of the key issues, concerns and practices in implementing truth-telling at a community level that were identified from the academic literature and from our primary research.

Truth-telling should be led by First Nations people

The academic literature highlights the importance of truth-telling being led by First Nations peoples and centring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and worldviews.[99] A recent study exploring 22 community-based truth-telling initiatives in Australia emphasised as a key principle that truth-telling should be led by or developed in partnership with First Nations Australians.[100]

In our primary research, 88% of both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous survey respondents agreed that truth-telling should be led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. One non-Indigenous interviewee commented that truth-telling needs to be 'driven by the Indigenous community, first and foremost,'[101] with another stating 'Well, without a doubt it would have to have Aboriginal people being able to speak their experience and I think it should be led by Aboriginal people.'[102] Another non-Indigenous interviewee identified the need for 'an interchange between the correct Indigenous people – and when I say correct I would think that the people who are connected to that particular bit of Country – and probably non-Indigenous people who are sharing that Country.'[103]

Establishing aims and processes

Misconceptions around the aims of truth-telling (for example, is the intention to hear First Nations perspectives or develop 'shared' histories?) or misunderstandings about the processes by which truth-telling takes place can significantly impact on perceptions of the validity of truth-telling.[104]

As we highlighted earlier, truth-telling initiatives can be focused on celebrating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander resilience, survival and contributions, as well as acknowledging difficult and confronting truths about colonial violence. Acknowledgement of the broad dimensions of truth-telling was also present in our primary research. One of our interviewees recognised that truth-telling was a 'complex, nuanced thing, that there's positives to it as well as just the awful heartbreaking stories that you anticipate going in.'[105] This interviewee argued that while truth-telling should not be promoted as a 'feel good event', stories of First Nations people's resilience and survival might also be shared, so it wasn't necessarily going to be all 'awful heartbreaking stories.' This sentiment was echoed by another non-Indigenous interviewee, who identified having 'a bit of a party, a bit of a celebration of culture, maybe that can exist alongside truth-telling about the hard elements of the history,' describing this as something that might attract more people to participate in truth-telling.[106] Irrespective of the approach being taken, it is important to clearly communicate the aims and intentions of any truth-telling initiative to all key stakeholders and attendees.

When asked what would get people to participate in truth-telling, one non-Indigenous interviewee responded, 'I guess, understanding of the process, for a start. I mean ... if I went down the street now and I invited half a dozen people on the street to say will you come to a truth-telling with me most would go "What's that? ... what is it? What's in it for me?"'[107] Another non-Indigenous interviewee highlighted the need for clear information to be provided about the truth-telling event, in terms of who should attend, what would take place, clear expectations around behaviour, managing disrespectful conduct, protocols around the ownership of any cultural and historical knowledge shared, and 'feeling that that is going to be a safe space where you're going to enter.'[108] This interviewee commented that if you are expecting people to attend truth-telling, there also needs to be clarity around 'what's the end product, what's the outcome, what's the purpose?'[109]

Practical considerations such as 'holding events in locations and at times that suit a range of people'[110] and the importance of timeliness and cultural safety were also mentioned – 'Sometimes you just have to … be in the safe space or the right place, the time and place to take it on board.'[111] While several non-Indigenous interviewees spoke of their desire for truth-telling to happen organically, one acknowledged that 'there still has to be a level of organisation to achieve that. Like, who sits in the yarning circle? Who – and who organises the time, the place, the – all this sort of thing. It's not going to happen spontaneously.'[112]

Lack of awareness about how to participate in truth-telling

While there was a high degree of consensus amongst both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous respondents about the importance of truth-telling, non-Indigenous respondents (76%) were less likely than Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents (85%) to agree that it was important for them personally to participate in truth-telling. 47% of non-Indigenous survey respondents had participated in a truth-telling activity with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the previous 12 months, compared to 56% of First Nations respondents. A much higher proportion of both First Nations and non-Indigenous respondents in our survey had participated in truth-telling activities in the previous twelve months than was identified in responses to the 2022 Australian Reconciliation Barometer, which identified that 43% of Indigenous respondents and 6% of non-Indigenous respondents had participated in truth-telling in the past 12 months.[113] As such, we believe our survey data set represents a section of the Australian community who appear highly committed to truth-telling, providing us with valuable insights about those currently most likely to participate in truth-telling.

Previous research has identified a lack of awareness amongst non-Indigenous people about what they could do to act on their interest in deeper engagement with First Nations peoples.[114] Although highly aware of and engaged with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history and truth-telling compared to respondents drawn from a representative sample of the Australian community in the 2022 Australian Reconciliation Barometer, non-Indigenous research participants in our study still indicated significant uncertainty about how to participate in truth-telling, with over half of non-Indigenous respondents indicating that this would be a barrier to their participation (38%) or that they were neutral or unsure (26%) about whether it might. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents were less likely to flag that lack of knowledge about how to get involved would prevent their participation in truth-telling, with only 12% indicating this would be a barrier.

Responses to an open-ended question in the survey highlighted a degree of uncertainty about what truth-telling involves and recognition of the need for 'basic literacy' in the wider population about what truth-telling could amount to. Respondents spoke about being uncertain about how to participate in truth-telling, reflected in the comment 'most people don't know where to start. It's tricky to navigate.' One non-Indigenous interviewee who had not personally participated in truth-telling commented that a barrier for him had been 'lack of awareness of a specific truth-telling exercise. Most of my working life hasn't had heaps to do with the Indigenous community, so it's not something that has presented itself to me. I would happily, at the very least, engage heavily, let alone actively, but it's not something that I've come across. But then again, it's not something I've really sought out, either.'[115] Another non-Indigenous interviewee commented that she hadn't participated in any truth-telling and that she 'wouldn't really know where to start … one of the barriers would be like, just not knowing when and how.'[116] This interviewee lived in a regional area and had two small children, so felt that her capacity to participate was limited. For her, the specific barriers to participation were 'time, capacity, not really knowing.'[117]

For one non-Indigenous interviewee, fear of the unknown was seen as a barrier to non-Indigenous participation in truth-telling: 'What is this, what am I signing up for? … I think just knowing that it is for everyone – you maybe don't even have to offer anything when you're in that space, just being in that space is what we need you to do for now … There may not be anything in it for you, but there could be, but you won't know until you go.'[118]

Yin Paradies argues that there is a need for public education initiatives to strengthen 'knowledge and confidence of how best to further reconciliation in Australia among those most committed to doing so,'[119] and the findings from our research highlight that community-based truth-telling initiatives will need to include public education about what truth-telling encompasses, as well as practical information about where and when truth-telling will be taking place.

Motivating people to participate

Our research found that for 93% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander survey respondents and 98% of non-Indigenous respondents, participating in truth-telling represented an opportunity to show their personal support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. First Nations respondents were also highly motivated to participate in truth-telling to learn more about the resilience and survival of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (91%), to share their own personal of family history / perspective (89%), and to focus on truth-telling about their local community (87%). Non-Indigenous respondents were highly motivated to participate in truth-telling to learn more about the ongoing impacts of the past on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples today (94%), to learn more about the resilience and survival of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (93%), and to learn more about the past treatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (89%).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander survey respondents were more interested in truth-telling about their local community (87%) than non-Indigenous respondents (67%) and were also much more likely to be motivated to participate in truth-telling to share their own personal or family history or perspective (89% of First Nations respondents, compared to only 25% of non-Indigenous respondents). 42% of non-Indigenous respondents disagreed with the statement that sharing their own personal or family history or perspective would motivate them to participate in truth-telling, with a further 33% neutral or unsure about this aspect. This speaks to uncertainty about the appropriate role of non-Indigenous people in truth-telling, which we explore in further detail below. Non-Indigenous respondents were much more likely to be motivated to participate in truth-telling to learn more about how they could contribute to reconciliation (87%) than Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents (74%).

Providing clarity around the role of non-Indigenous people in truth-telling

Lack of clarity about the role of non-Indigenous people in truth-telling was a barrier to participation in truth-telling for 23% of non-Indigenous survey respondents, with a further 23% indicating that they were neutral or unsure about whether this issue would prevent their participation. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents seemed to have clearer expectations about the role of non-Indigenous people in truth-telling, with only 12% agreeing that they were uncertain about this aspect. For one Aboriginal interviewee, truth-telling involved a commitment from non-Indigenous participants: 'just take a moment to reflect that although they may not have been around when it happened, it did happen, and it happened on our doorstep and for whatever reasons it happened, it did happen. But in truth-telling, I say to them we are all charged with responsibility for this to never happen again.'[120] The idea of 'never again' has consistently been identified by the survivors of human rights violations as a key motivator of their participation in transitional justice mechanisms.

Non-Indigenous interviewees also identified important roles for non-Indigenous people in truth-telling processes. One non-Indigenous interviewee saw a role for non-Indigenous participants as witnesses and as contributors to developing new understandings: 'I think whilst truth-telling will have most benefit for our Aboriginal community, I think that there needs to be – not the balance but I think there needs to be the people of European descent there to see where the waters have been muddied and to try to clear that up together… I don't think in that space that it's an equal amount of voice time but I do think that that needs to be built in.'[121] For another non-Indigenous interviewee acknowledgement and recognition were key contributions that non-Indigenous people could make to truth-telling: 'it is this acknowledgment of the fact that we exist in a land that has been occupied for a very, very long time … and also we need to recognise that in the early part of colonisation people didn't recognise that. People didn't recognise that there was a civilisation here because probably it was a civilisation that was just so different from theirs … so, recognising what's happening, acknowledging what's happened but also acknowledging that in the present we are still living on lands that Aboriginal people still have a connection to.'[122]

A non-Indigenous interviewee highlighted that while non-Indigenous people could choose their role in truth-telling, it was important to be involved whatever this might be: 'you have to decide what your role can be in it. Even if it's only a small one, that's better than doing nothing at all.'[123]

Respondents identified the need for non-Indigenous Australians to reflect on the appropriate ways in which they could and should be involved in truth-telling, and highlighted that uncertainty about appropriate ways to be involved was a barrier for some non-Indigenous people: 'there are a lot of unknowns about truth-telling for non-Indigenous Australians and a fear as to whether it is traumatic and what the etiquette is around joining in. It is not very obvious on where and how to engage with truth-telling.'

Non-Indigenous respondents also recognised that the burden of truth-telling should not fall exclusively on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and emphasised the need for shared responsibility for truth-telling. Others called on non-Indigenous people and institutions to take accountability, to stand up against racism and to take action.

One non-Indigenous interviewee expressed their feeling that they were not necessarily the target audience for a truth-telling event. For this interviewee, her lack of positional power to implement any outcomes from the truth-telling made her question the value of her participation.[124] While this interviewee was clearly attempting to critically reflect on and work through what her appropriate role in truth-telling processes was, the perception that someone 'in authority' should be responsible for taking action parallels an issue flagged in the academic literature by De Costa & Clark, who describe a sense of 'delegated authority' being prevalent among non-Indigenous people – that is, the feeling that someone other than themselves has the responsibility to act on First Nations issues.[125] Another non-Indigenous interviewee raised the concern that truth-telling might be 'preaching to the choir', as the people who were likely to attend were those who were already onside in terms of supporting First Nations issues: 'People that are going to sign up to come to truth-telling are the ones that want to hear it anyway, the ones that have already heard it that are engaged in that already.'[126]

One non-Indigenous interviewee articulated her sense of powerlessness and uncertainty about how to contribute: 'I don't know enough about things … it can be hard to engage with and especially as a white person, like seeing the Voice, the stuff playing out with the Voice … I don't feel like there's anything I can do to legitimately help or be involved or support that in any way other than go and vote … I'm not political, I'm not going to get involved in political campaigning, but it's hard to watch people fight over this stuff… there is nuanced stuff but like I don't understand all the nuance.'[127] Another non-Indigenous interviewee addressed being an effective ally: 'you also hear some people say 'Oh, but I just want to help' and the Aboriginal people say 'we actually don't want your help. You've been helping us for 200 years and it hasn't worked' … I think that possibly is something that I grapple with actively but I think other people might just find it paralysing or go in so brazen that they are helping and then alienate the Aboriginal people or turn up where they're not wanted.'[128] This interviewee also identified concern about performative activism as a potential barrier: 'I'm very conscious of that idea of swanning in on my great white horse and the idea of a white wokeness and being woke … but I also think if we don't do anything, if we don't play any part, if we don't play any part in it, then it's just sweeping it under the carpet still and leaving it up to others.'[129]

For an Aboriginal interviewee, it was important that truth-telling involved a two-way exchange: 'With my truth-telling; how much agency am I giving, how much imposing my knowledge on to them am I doing? So that is very important to me because if I'm having a conversation I want the power to be equal and I don't want to impose my thoughts onto them. I want us to a have a considered approach to when we're talking.'[130] This interviewee also suggested that truth-telling might benefit 'if we come in with a human rights framework that can guide us.'[131] Highlighting the diversity of opinion about how truth-telling might work in practice, for a non-Indigenous survey respondent the role of non-Indigenous people in truth-telling was more about listening than two-way exchange: 'it is time for non-Aboriginal people to listen, reflect and learn.' We discuss truth-listening in further detail below. In organising community truth-telling, it will be important to be clear about the specific approach being taken, i.e. listening or a two-way dialogue or exchange.

Inclusivity

Truth-telling processes need to be inclusive and participatory and should seek to amplify the voices of marginalised groups. The success of truth processes has been linked to their ability to be inclusive and to encompass a range of perspectives: 'If viewed as biased or exclusionary, the symbols will bear less popular resonance'.[132]

The need for truth-telling to be inclusive of all perspectives was also highlighted by several survey respondents:

> *I believe truth-telling is important and all voices need to be heard in a respectful manner not only to understand the truth but also to understand why some groups resist the truth.*
>
> *It is crucial that truth telling is designed so that the broader community can be reached and educated with the findings of truth telling.*

Every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person's and community's experience matters and should be listened to with respect and genuine empathy. We should not compare 'pain', there should not be competition with who has experienced the most pain, there should not be a stingy and inhumane attitude towards compassion.

Acknowledging diversity

As one survey respondent noted, 'Truth-telling must be flexible and diverse in delivery to allow and respect the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.' Multiple aspects of diversity need to be acknowledged; the diversity within and between First Nations peoples[133] as well as diversity amongst non-Indigenous peoples.[134]

First Nations historian Shino Konishi argues that a simplified binary understanding of 'Indigenous / settler' has limited recognition of 'the complexity of subjectivities and interpersonal relationships in many settler colonial contexts.'[135] A 2019 article discussing the Aotearoa-New Zealand context was one of very few examined in our literature review that looked beyond the 'white settler / Indigenous' binary to consider the implications and possibilities for solidarity between First Nations peoples and settlers of colour.[136] Clark, de Costa & Maddison have also noted the impact of differences in cultural background on attitudes towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, observing that 'racialised people' – those from non-white non-Indigenous ethnicities – 'often seem to speak and think differently about the realities of Indigenous life and marginalisation'.[137]

Highlighting the importance of diversity of First Nations perspectives within truth-telling, one non-Indigenous interviewee commented that 'it comes back to that idea of it not being cookie cutter, and there are lots of different lived experiences.'[138]

A non-Indigenous interviewee who had migrated to Australia as a child believed that it was important for everyone to be involved in truth-telling, including recently arrived migrants: 'I think that everybody should be involved because even as migrants we come in and we're still sharing the benefit of what Australia is today... I admit I'm enjoying the benefits of Australian– *current* Australian society at the expense of Indigenous people's previous history, and maybe even current conditions… I think it should be universal thing. I think that if you're going to be part of Australia you need to be part of this process.'[139]

Being realistic about the benefits and limits of truth

Erin Daly's 2008 article 'Truth Skepticism' spells out some of the challenges of the truth-seeking project. Daly discusses the idea of a 'truth cascade', her term for the multiple benefits seen to accrue from truth processes – these include 'helping victims to heal, promote accountability, drawing a bright line between the past and the present, promoting reconciliation'.[140] However, Daly cautions about expecting too much of truth-telling: 'The problem is that the truth neither is nor does all that we expect of it. It is not as monolithic, objective or verifiable as we would like it to be, and it cannot necessarily accomplish the ambitious goals we assign it.'[141]

Daly provides some valuable advice to those embarking on truth-telling: 'first, establish the goal(s) of developing a program that emphasizes the truth; second, determine whether the putative benefits are worth the costs and third, design a program so as to enhance the likelihood of success.'[142] Truth-telling processes also need to align with the desired goals.[143] Daly highlights that 'the benefits associated with truth-telling are difficult to achieve and need support … be realistic in asserting what the truth can and cannot do'.[144]

Arguing 'In Defence of Reconciliation', Victoria Freeman emphasises some of the hard truths that need to be faced by both First Nations and non-Indigenous peoples:

> *Indigenous peoples have to become reconciled to the fact that non-Indigenous people are here to stay … no matter how much restitution is offered, nothing settlers can ever do will fully make up or restore what was lost or damaged through colonialism … But non-Indigenous people also have to become reconciled to something very unpleasant, which is our history on this continent. Non-Indigenous people have to acknowledge that colonialism happened and continues, and we must acknowledge our own relationship to it. We have to acknowledge that, like it or not, all non-Indigenous peoples, even recent newcomers, benefit from the colonialism of the past and from ongoing colonizing actions in the present.*[145]

Adrian Little reminds us that 'Truth is not necessarily cathartic, and it cannot simply be generalized from individuals to broader groups or to society as a whole'. While we cannot expect truth alone to repair damaged relationships and trauma, 'we probably should aspire to improving them.'[146]

Addressing cultural safety concerns

Several survey respondents identified the need for First Nations people and other truth-telling participants to be supported in truth-telling conversations. One First Nations respondent spoke to the hurt truth-telling would surface for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants, highlighting the need for Elders and healing specialists to be on hand as with other forms of sorry business. Another expressed concern about possible backlash from non-Indigenous people arising from shame about the past or rejection of the truths shared; this respondent felt that 'everyone needs to be on board' but that Australia 'as a country are not at that stage yet.' This concern was also reflected in a comment by a non-Indigenous respondent, who wondered about the appropriate timing of truth-telling processes; for another non-Indigenous respondent, truth-telling was described as 'very heavy and some care and consideration to the new knowledge must be conveyed as a warning as it can be very confronting hearing the truth for the first time and realising the country we live in was based on theft.'

18% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander survey respondents indicated that concern about feeling ashamed or guilty might prevent them from participating in truth-telling, compared to 7% of non-Indigenous respondents. This suggests the existence of some degree of internalised shame about the difficult and confronting aspects of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' history and present circumstances among some First Nations respondents, which would need to be sensitively managed in truth-telling processes.

It has been noted that people who have experienced trauma can tell their stories 'in a highly emotional, contradictory, and fragmented manner,' which is seen by some to undermine the credibility of their experiences.[147] This is an important consideration for truth-telling processes to recognise, particularly where the aim is for broader community acceptance of the truths being shared by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

When asked how she assessed how much truth she wanted to share in any given context, one Aboriginal interviewee commented 'it's about a feel: how do I feel being in this situation and does the feel give me safety to speak? … that's innate but I can also judge … body language is really important. I can see if you are being authentic or engaged, which means are you really wanting to hear what I have to say … I can feel the emotion or whatever in a room. So that guides me with my truth-telling as well … My aunties always told me that … I should listen to my gut more often … So I go with my gut as that third safety mechanism, for the want of a better word.'[148]

Responding to a question about how truth-telling could be made culturally safe, one non-Indigenous interviewee who had worked with Stolen Generations survivors identified a range of important considerations, highlighting the need for 'involving the local Aboriginal community and survivors and survivor groups into the planning of any event – so making sure it's a setting that people would feel comfortable with. Are you providing support from counsellors and things, separate spaces where people can go into if they're needing to take time out and to talk to somebody? Making sure that you are incorporating culture into it – so it may be appropriate for smoking ceremonies and things like that to begin and end the day and having enough of the informal time and that sort of space for yarning, easing into it – those kinds of things, and the meals are critical because the meals are spaces where people informally talk.'[149]

Non-Indigenous interviewees also highlighted concerns about the capacity of some non-Indigenous people to participate appropriately in truth-telling. One interviewee highlighted lack of emotional intelligence as a barrier to some non-Indigenous people's participation: 'not having the ability to, like, hold multiple perspectives… the capacity to do that.'[150] For another non-Indigenous interviewee, non-Indigenous listening skills would need to be developed, particularly 'learning how to listen rather than tell.'[151]

Another non-Indigenous interviewee addressed the challenge of balancing issues of cultural safety with the need to address resistance: 'people have to still feel quite safe I think to be receiving this information. Discomfort is fine, but if you're really, really hard hitting, no-one is going to come to visit and so no-one's going to hear anything. It's an interesting conundrum … because if you lose your audience … then there's nobody to tell and we're making zero impact.'[152]

Dealing with emotional responses

The literature notes that non-Indigenous responses to engaging with Aboriginal content can produce a variety of emotional responses, ranging from resistance to shock, guilt, confusion, hesitation, and racism,[153] highlighting that protocols about dealing with the range of emotions that may surface will be an important part of community truth-telling processes. 'Difficult' information produces feelings of discomfort and distress in listeners, which can 'result in a perceived loss of agency as they grapple with how best to respond.'[154] However, discomfort might be an important part of the process: Carlson & Frazer argue that 'It is through these unsettling encounters, difficult emotions, and disorientating dilemmas that we might "engage in a process of letting go of deeply held beliefs".'[155]

Other scholars express concern about the potential appropriation of First Nations peoples' pain and suffering. For example, Kennedy argues that compassion can lead to 'a false feeling of shared suffering' and that participants in truth-telling will need to be able to reflect on and understand their differences and be able to 'exercise empathy without appropriating the other's pain as one's own'.[156] It is also important to recognise the differential burdens borne by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous people in reconciliation processes. Palmer & Pocock highlight that 'the pain of colonization' has not been forgotten by First Nations peoples,[157] who live with its ongoing consequences daily. They suggest that acknowledgement and acceptance of settler discomfort in hearing stories about Aboriginal pain and grievances might be essential, as 'it is a reminder of their responsibility for continued suffering and the need for reparation.'[158]

Recognising structural disadvantage and the ongoing impacts of the past

As we highlighted earlier in the *Historical injustice in settler colonial contexts* section, reconciliation initiatives have been critiqued for individualising collective harms and failing to acknowledge or address structural issues[159] and for failing to address the ongoing impacts of injustices such as land dispossession or to recognise the self-determination of First Nations peoples.[160] Truth-telling in the Australian context therefore needs to recognise systemic disadvantages experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and to centre self-determination and sovereignty as key principles.

Establishing protocols around knowledge transmission

An Aboriginal interviewee highlighted a concern about the potential for truth-telling to be an extractive process. A key question for her was 'what are you going to do with the information I've given you?'[161] This comment raises the need for truth-telling to establish clear protocols around knowledge exchange and the subsequent use of any information shared. This interviewee highlighted historical examples of First Nations people's words being 'taken out of context and being weaponised back,' drawing on the example of the *Little Children are Sacred* report being used to justify the Northern Territory Intervention. This highlights a risk in truth-telling: if the information shared gets taken out of context, if participants don't understand the history of the trauma and disadvantage that First Nations people are living with, then non-Indigenous people might view First Nations people through a deficit lens.

Maintaining hope for a better future

We have previously argued that truth-telling needs to acknowledge the strength and survival of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures as well as addressing the harms of colonisation. Working in the Canadian context, Fast & Drouin-Gagné highlight the need for approaches to teaching colonial history that 'also incorporate hope by presenting Indigenous responses to colonial violence and oppression'.[162] As First Nations Canadian authors Corntassel, Chaw-win-is & T'lakwadzi emphasise, 'Indigenous stories of resilience are critical to the resurgence of our communities'.[163] Little argues that truth-telling should have a future orientation, as 'Truth is about the future as much as it is about the past'.[164]

Building truth-telling capacity

Not everyone is able to express their truth articulately. An Aboriginal interviewee commented that there is a need to focus on the intent rather than just the words: 'truth-telling is obviously the verbal part of it, but there's also the physical being and also the heart, and also there's the spiritual feeling about … I think overall it's also the spirit and the intent.'[165] For this interviewee, capacity building would be required to support the participation of some First Nations people in truth-telling: 'There certainly are barriers. Again, some of our people … probably will find it really intimidating to actually have that discussion.'[166]

Truth-listening

Truth-telling requires listening and an empathetic audience. This type of listening requires 'the development of reciprocal, honest and trusting relationships through ongoing reflexivity and commitment to the process.'[167]

Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann, who first wrote about the Aboriginal concept of dadirri, describes listening as a vital life-skill that Aboriginal people learn from an early age, but one that is not often reciprocated by white Australians:

> *In our Aboriginal way, we learnt to listen from our earliest days. We could not live good and useful lives unless we listened. This was the normal way for us to learn – not by asking questions. We learnt by watching and listening, waiting and then acting … We have learned to speak the white man's language. We have listened to what he had to say. This learning and listening should go both ways. We would like people in Australia to take time to listen to us.*[168]

Dadirri has been described as 'a deep contemplative process of "listening to one another" in reciprocal relationships.'[169] Morris et al define Dadirri as 'the search for understanding and meaning, a cyclical process of listening, observing the feelings and actions, and reflecting and learning as individuals, and with community.'[170] As Ungunmerr-Baumann's quote above indicates, our style of listening is culturally learned; this highlights the challenges that the 'many truths and many differing realities' between First Nations and non-Indigenous people pose to intercultural listening and truthful dialogue.[171]

Colleen McGloin outlines the practice of what she describes as 'listening to hear.' McGloin argues that for change in thought, perception and action to occur, listening must be a risk-taking venture; 'If we are only to hear what is safe or familiar, there will be no conflict, no "poles of contradiction", no impetus or motivation for transformation.'[172] Carlson & Frazer suggest that this type of listening 'necessitates understanding the settler project of Indigenous elimination, and its manifestation through policy, practice, desire and discourse. And it means understanding colonialism not as a historical event, but as a current, ongoing, lived reality.'[173]

One survey respondent spoke to the fear that non-Indigenous voices could exceed or silence Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices in truth-telling. However, another non-Indigenous respondent was very clear about the role of non-Indigenous people in truth-telling, commenting 'it is time for non-Aboriginal people to listen, reflect and learn.' Several non-Indigenous interviewees also identified listening as a key role for non-Indigenous people in truth-telling. One interviewee commented that the role of non-Indigenous people was 'just listening, and accepting difficult truths, which there'll be a lot of. Then, of course, telling their own truths. I mean, yeah, I think the main thing is accepting what's happened, and the accounts of the Indigenous community, especially when it comes to the cultural genocide and all of the really difficult things. But yeah, just taking it on board and accepting that … you need to recognise that's what happened in the past, and learn from mistakes or issues, and try to move in a better direction as a result.'[174] Another interviewee commented 'I think we need to listen. There is no truth telling without being heard.'[175] While for one interviewee the role of non-Indigenous people was 'as listeners but also as participants so that I guess the disagreements can be heard in a place where it's safe to do that.'[176] Another interviewee defined his understanding of deep listening, 'to listen to a comment and to have the ability and the courage to learn from it and to reflect on it.'[177] Listening was also linked with being open to learn: 'It's critical because I think that personal being in the room and hearing somebody tell their story is profoundly impactful … in a way that history lessons and seeing things on the news and that sort of thing aren't necessarily. So, I think that it is going to be a huge part if we are to move forward, I think this is one of the ways in which we can make it happen.'[178]

Truth-telling in the workplace

One key finding from our primary research is that Australian workplaces are clearly an important site of learning and engagement with truth-telling and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history. For example, one non-Indigenous interviewee spoke of significant changes in his workplace around engagement with Aboriginal community representatives, and growing recognition that Aboriginal people should play the lead role in advising how to care for Country because of their deep connection: 'I basically say "I don't have the knowledge you have so you share with me what it is that needs to be done and as a manager I will try and get this achieved according to your sensitivities and your culture."'[179] Another non-Indigenous interviewee highlighted truth-telling activities as a regular feature of her workplace: 'the institution I work with has a First Nations speaker series so I go to as many as them as I can – and look, not all of them are necessarily about truth-telling but it's very rare that that doesn't come up. The institution I work for as well is also, you know, has an active First Nations strategy which includes being committed to truth-telling. I guess I'm exposed to it professionally as well as personally.'[180] One non-Indigenous interviewee experienced active resistance to his attempts to promote truth-telling within his professional body.[181] However, as highlighted by another interviewee, workplaces can provide a venue where people who would otherwise not go to a community-based event can be exposed to and participate in truth-telling.[182]

Recognising the potential for conflict

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander survey respondents were much more likely to agree that truth-telling might emphasise divisions and differences between First Nations people and other Australians (60% of First Nations respondents, compared to only 31% of non-Indigenous respondents). This could potentially be due to a greater recognition by First Nations respondents of the range of hard and challenging truths that need to be shared.

Acknowledging the potential for conflict or disagreement in truth-telling, one non-Indigenous interviewee flagged the need for some facilitation: 'I don't want to say there needs to be a mediator because you're sort of pre-empting that there'll be a disagreement and I think sometimes when you pre-empt that you've set it up to fail. I think there needs to be – say if there's truth – there needs to be some sort of connector, not a mediator as such but someone that knows both groups well. But then that's making it sound like there has to be two groups and it's not – that's not really the only part of truth-telling.'[183] This interviewee also suggested that a similar approach to that taken by the program *You Can't Ask That* might be valuable in truth-telling, or the use of an anonymous but moderated question box, to allow people to ask questions without feeling exposed: '[my students] love that idea that I can get this answer that I've been longing for but I cannot ask it. There might be … a bit of that within the truth-telling … [so that] people don't have to feel identified in their ignorance.'[184]

Conflict might also happen within and between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants in truth-telling. An Aboriginal interviewee raised the issue of lateral violence and the potential for conflict between First Nations people, commenting that the focus should be on 'an opportunity for every Aboriginal person over a certain age to have an opinion. That's what they should be talking about, not their opinion or why they have that opinion.'[185] A similar concern was also raised by another Aboriginal interviewee, who commented 'how can we enable our mob to - I call it - chew the fat, chew the fat respectfully.'[186] Two non-Indigenous interviewees also highlighted the potential for truth-telling processes to create conflict between First Nations groups, particularly where land or other vested interests might be at stake.[187] It is important to be aware of the potential for conflict in truth-telling and to have strategies in place to address this should it arise.

Conclusion

To return to the research questions that informed this pilot project, our research highlights that there is enormous diversity in understanding of truth-telling. We have offered a conceptual framework for understanding truth-telling, drawn from the dominant narratives in the literature and the broader socio-political context within which truth-telling takes place. We have responded to what we identified about the barriers to and enablers of truth-telling and their implications for progressing truth-telling in community settings by providing a detailed account of truth-telling practice, which we hope can usefully inform community-based truth-telling in Australia.

While there was wide agreement among participants in our study that truth-telling is an essential step in redefining the relationship between First Nations peoples and the Australian nation, our research findings highlight that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non-Indigenous people do not always have a shared understanding of what truth-telling involves, what it might achieve or how to go about it. These different understandings and assumptions will need to be carefully navigated by those organising community-based truth-telling.

We would like to conclude with the words of an Aboriginal interviewee, who highlighted the fear of 'hitting icebergs' as a barrier to truth-telling, but also spoke of the need to recognise that mistakes are part of the learning process. Her comment speaks to the need for resilience in truth-telling:

> *In Australia we are wanting to change the consciousness of a nation. So I put that in the context of the Titanic and it's a big ship and we don't want to hit icebergs … so how can we manoeuvre something so big and be respectful at all stages but knowing we might hit the side of an iceberg? But that's okay because that's our learning for the next iceberg – but acknowledge that.*[188]

Appendix 1: Truth-telling methods

This appendix outlines a range of truth-telling methods identified in our review of the academic literature that might usefully be applied to community-based truth-telling.

Rosemary Nagy highlights the need to use Indigenous methodologies, to ensure that truth-telling is undertaken in a culturally appropriate way.[189] Other scholars also emphasise the value of using Indigenous approaches to education, including storytelling, storying and counter-stories; Indigenous community-based pedagogy; place-based and land-based pedagogy; acknowledging the role of Elders; respecting local protocols; and the importance of relationality.[190]

Some specific Indigenous methods that might be used in truth-telling include:

Yarning

One Indigenous research method is yarning, described as 'a conversational, deep listening approach located in a culturally safe place and based on respectful relationships to understand self and others.'[191] Brigden et al argue that 'Yarning circles support building respectful relationships through respectful, harmonious, creative, and collaborative ways of communicating. They foster accountability and provide a safe place to be heard and to respond, and promote learner interactions, as well as supporting community engagement'.[192]

Storytelling

Burgess et al emphasise the importance of narrative approaches – the unfolding of stories, lived experiences, events and meanings that do not necessarily follow a linear chronology.[193] Indigenous storytelling has been described as 'a form of testimony';[194] in contrast to Western ideas about story-telling, for Indigenous peoples stories can be 'acts of creative rebellion'.[195]

Commenting that 'A storyteller believes in the power of story to heal the world', Baldasaro, Maldonado & Baltes remind us that 'We remember best if the story touches our emotions, because emotional memory runs deep.'[196] This has clear parallels with the findings of our primary research, where several non-Indigenous survey respondents and interviewees commented on the powerful impact of hearing First Nations peoples' stories. Baldasaro, Maldonado & Baltes also caution against the trivialisation of Indigenous stories and knowledge and are critical of demands for documentary corroboration of Indigenous oral knowledge.[197]

Storytelling involves responsibilities: the responsibilities of the listener 'to seek and find meaning in the story', and of the storyteller, 'to tell an appropriate story for the circumstances and the listeners.'[198] Sium & Ritskes highlight accountability as a key feature of Indigenous storytelling, identifying that 'the storyteller must feel a sense of intellectual and often spiritual responsibility to the audience they speak to'; they also consider the responsibilities of the listeners, who are 'witnesses to these stories of pain, healing, and transformation.'[199] Writing in the Canadian context, Aparna Mishra Tarc calls for non-Indigenous people to hear, engage with and understand Indigenous stories, to enable us to tell a new national story of sustainability and reconciliation.[200]

The importance of Country in truth-telling

Place-based learning has the potential to play an important role in community-based truth-telling processes. Learning from Country cultural immersion experiences led by Aboriginal community-based educators have been demonstrated to be an effective tool in deepening learning for preservice teachers.[201]

Customary or traditional justice approaches

Local or community-based approaches to transitional justice have been used in a range of settings around the world, employing customary or 'traditional' forms of justice and dispute resolution.[202] The use of local, culturally specific truth-telling and transitional justice mechanisms has been endorsed by the UN in the 2004 Special Representative Report on Rule of Law and Transitional Justice.[203] The term 'Makarrata' is itself drawn from the traditional Yolgnu practice of spearing a wrongdoer to temporarily disable them, 'to settle them down, to calm them'; Little suggests that the meaning of the term 'Makarrata' is more radical than the benign idea of reconciliation, requiring the removal or restriction of the ability of the settler state to perpetrate injustices against First Nations peoples.[204] Further examples of the use of traditional or customary practices in truth-telling and conflict resolution are discussed in the case studies which form part of the Literature Review.

Endnotes

[1] Although Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories are clearly Australian history, we use this term as 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history' is a recognised field of research within the broader field of Australian history. The term 'shared histories' emerged from the reconciliation movement in the 1990s, which has been critiqued as placing an undue emphasis on 'a single, shared national history', marginalising First Nations perspectives and experiences. See Gunstone, A. (2012). Reconciliation and 'the Great Australian Silence.' In R. Eccleston, N. Sageman, & F. Gray (Eds.), *The Refereed Proceedings of the 2012 Australian Political Studies Association Conference*. Australian Political Studies Association. p. 66.

[2] see, for example, Clark, T., de Costa, R., & Maddison, S. (2017). Non-Indigenous Australians and the Responsibility to Engage? *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 38(4), p. 382.

[3] Stanley, E. (2002). What next? The aftermath of organised truth telling. *Race & Class*, 44(1), p. 10.

[4] As outlined earlier, we use this term as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history is a recognised field of research within the broader field of Australian history.

[5] Commonwealth of Australia. (2017). *Final Report of the Referendum Council*. 30 June 2017. https://www.referendumcouncil.org.au/sites/default/files/report_attachments/Referendum_Council_Final_Report.pdf, p. 22.

[6] Reconciliation Australia. (2022). *Australian Reconciliation Barometer 2022 Full Research Repor*t. https://www.reconciliation.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/2022-Australian-Reconciliation-Barometer-FULL-Report.pdf, pp. 117, 17.

[7] Ibid, p. 110.

[8] Wilkins, D. (2019). Distant historical wrongs, truth telling and restorative justice: Exploring schools and museums as potential vehicles for repairing historical wrongs. In M. Evans (Ed.), *Transitional and Transformative Justice*. Routledge, p. 148.

[9] Fullagar, K. (2021). Why does Truth come third? *Inside Story*, 8 June 2021, https://insidestory.org.au/why-does-truth-come-third/.

[10] Appleby, G., & Davis, M. (2018). The Uluru Statement and the Promises of Truth. *Australian Historical Studies* 49(4), p. 504.

[11] Barolsky, V., & Berger, K. (2023). Recognising the power of community truth-telling. ADI Policy Briefing Papers, Volume 3(1), p. 4.

[12] Pengilley, V. (2023). Queensland's Path to Treaty process can proceed without bipartisan support, experts say. *ABC News.* 21 October 2023. https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-10-21/queensland-voice-treaty-first-nations-indigenous-voice-truth/102988372.

[13] Commonwealth of Australia. (2017). *Final Report of the Referendum Council*, pp. 16-21.

[14] Joint Select Committee on Constitutional Recognition relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. (2018). *Final Report*, Commonwealth of Australia, 2018. https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Former_Committees/Constitutional_Recognition_2018/ConstRecognition/Final_Report.

[15] Quoted in Lindsey, K., Smith, M., Clark, A., Batty, C., Brien, D., & Landers, R. (2022). 'Creative histories' and the Australian context. *History Australia*, 19(2), p. 334.

[16] ST, interviewed by Anne Maree Payne, 21 June 2023.

[17] ST, interviewed by Anne Maree Payne, 21 June 2023.

[18] GM, interviewed by Anne Maree Payne, 27 June 2023.

[19] AG, interviewed by Anne Maree Payne, 28 June 2023.

[20] GM, interviewed by Anne Maree Payne, 27 June 2023.

[21] GM, interviewed by Anne Maree Payne, 27 June 2023.

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