Ethics, Indigenous Cultural Safety and the Archives

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Introduction

The concept of cultural competency is an emerging theme and area of interest in Australian libraries and archives. As more Indigenous people enter the profession, the more we have seen a push for recognition of Indigenous ways of knowing. A culturally competent profession would enable librarians, archivists and information professionals to be more consciously aware of their own backgrounds, and the different experiences and perspectives of people who are engaging with their collections and services. An area that is still under discussed is that of Indigenous cultural safety, including consideration of the ways in which Indigenous people are either made to feel safe or unsafe in libraries and archives. This paper discusses the importance of Indigenous voice and representation in the profession, as well as the need for Indigenous people to be taking a leading role in determining priorities around access, management and use of cultural heritage materials.

This paper was originally presented at *Nga Taonga Tuku Iho 2018: A conference on Māori Archives and Records* in Rotorua, Aotearoa/New Zealand in August 2018. As part of the presentation I shared some of my experiences of working as an Indigenous Archivist in Australian archives and libraries. This included discussing what I consider to be some persistent issues in professional practice, as well as sharing some examples of good practice and pathways for future transformation. The paper has been developed as part of wider reflexive work that I am undertaking as part of my doctoral studies at Monash University. The PhD studies have given me an opportunity to step away from practice and begin a process of deep reflection on my journey of working with Indigenous peoples in libraries and archives. My doctoral research is being designed with a strong focus on Indigenous standpoint and critical theory to consider questions relating to Indigenous cultural safety and self-determination in Australian libraries and archives.

Within my doctoral studies I have also been exploring the use of autoethnography as a method to practice reflexivity in relation to

my experiences in libraries and archives. Bainbridge conceptualises an autoethnographic approach in an Indigenous research context as being:

> As a research method, autoethnography allows the particularities of research production to be embedded in our inner ways of knowing and being and our own subjectivities to saturate the research. In this view, autoethnography not only as the potential to accommodate inner group diversity amongst Indigenous researchers, but also to establish an Indigenous standpoint in the research project.[1]

This paper begins by introducing key concepts including ethics, cultural competency and cultural safety as related to libraries, archives and Indigenous peoples. These concepts are then further explored through some specific scenarios and projects related to my own experiences of professional practice. Finally, the paper will discuss these scenarios and suggest gaps and priorities in relation to Indigenous priorities and self-determination in libraries and archives.

Key Concepts

Ethics and Indigenous people

In the broadest terms, ethical beliefs "shape the way we live – what we do, what we make and the world we create through our choices"[2] – and so, ethics provide a 'moral compass' to guide decision making. The concept of ethical practice and decision making can cross a number of realms including personal, professional and research contexts. Much focus has been developed on research ethics, particularly in the health sector, in order to lay foundations and approaches that remove people from harm and work towards research having a positive impact on people's lives. Specific attention has been given to Indigenous Australian people and research ethics, some of which has been developed as a means of redress as well as to acknowledge the harm that has been caused by Indigenous Australian people being the subjects of unethical research in the past.[3] This work is guided by statements, such as those formulated by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS), in *Guidelines for Ethical Research in Australian Indigenous Studies*,[4] and the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), in *Ethical conduct in research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and communities: Guidelines for researchers and stakeholders 2018*.[5] The NHMRC guidelines aim to encourage people to think and act ethically in Indigenous Australian research contexts and are underpinned by six core values; spirit and integrity, cultural continuity, equity, reciprocity, respect

and responsibility.[6]

Within the library and archive professions ethical statements have been articulated and endorsed by our international and national peak bodies and associations, these include for example the International Council on Archives[7] and the International Federation of Library Associations.[8] These international statements, which trickle down to the ethical frameworks of our national peak bodies, codify and guide expected standards of conduct and behaviors within the sector in order to foster dialogue and discussion on approaches to common issues. For example, this could relate to censorship, free and open access to resources, respecting privacy or working with standards. Put simply, these professional ethics guide action and encourage professionals to morally consider approaches to complex issues through reflexive practice. The end goal of these approaches is to foster professional practice that values and promotes transparency within decision making. In considering the different facets of 'ethics' a number of questions arise about their use in professional practice. Including, how much do personal ethics effect professional ethics? Are research ethics relating to vulnerable populations being incorporated into professional ethics? Are ethical decisions culturally framed? Are Indigenous people's ethical frameworks (such as those developed in the research sector) being incorporated into library and archive professional statements?

One of the challenges of codifying the standards at an international and national level is the potential for cultural differences and diversity to be overlooked. Often high-level statements such as those expressed in codes of ethics seldom leave room for discussions about privilege, discrimination or structural power imbalances that guide ethical decision making in practice. They can be fueled by assumptions that are developed through unconscious or implicit bias, developed with a lack of awareness and understanding, or the inability to see the world through another cultural frame or lens. Cox describes suggestions that "obviously, it is far easier to consider conceptually the role, content, and use of professional ethics codes than it is to explore specifically the murkier matters of ethical practice, failings, and successes".[9] In discussing ethics in libraries, Byrne suggests that key professional values are a means to ensure that "… all individuals and all communities are able to maintain and develop their cultures and languages, express their opinions, and further their development".[10] A key point here is the focus 'all communities' and an ethical commitment to understanding a diversity of ways of knowing and being within information spaces and across libraries and archives.

Gilliland further explores the issues of ethics, neutrality and social justice in the profession, noting that:

> Codes of ethics around the globe exhort archivists to neutrality so that they and their repositories will be trusted by records creators, the general public, and posterity to be impartial in their actions. However, archival neutrality is increasingly viewed as a controversial stance for a profession that is in the midst of the politics of memory.[11]

What kinds of ethical considerations or questions come into play in relation to Indigenous Australian people's relationships with libraries and archives? In terms of access and management of resources and records, Indigenous people are often dealing with ethical decisions that were made by colonisers on *how* our family's lives were recorded, kept and accessed. This runs counter to Indigenous Australian ethical considerations around the ways in which our family's records, histories or cultural materials should be handled. What might be deemed as a 'good decision' around management of these materials by some, might actually be a 'very bad decision' to others.

Indigenous Cultural Safety

The concept of Indigenous 'cultural safety' provides a useful framework for people to be able to reflect on their own ethics, beliefs and values in professional settings, and to recognise the potential for these to impact on others. Developed in the 1980s in the health sector in Aotearoa New Zealand, the concept of 'cultural safety' can be broadly defined as:

> Cultural safety is an environment, which is safe for people; where there is no assault, challenge or denial of their identity, of who they are and what they need. It is about shared respect, shared meaning, shared knowledge and experience, of learning together with dignity, and truly listening. [12]

The concept builds a pathway for people to consider their own unconscious bias, as well as to build support and awareness of Indigenous cultural values and ways of knowing. It takes away a focus on neutrality, and instead encourages people to think deeply about their own subjectivity. The Australian Human Rights Commission[13] draws out the concept further to define the space as:

- Environments of cultural resilience within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities
- Cultural competency by those who engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Cultural security is a concept closely aligned with cultural safety. Cultural security promotes a stronger commitment for people to be effective in Indigenous contexts, as well as having cultural needs expressed in policies and practices so that Indigenous priorities are not reliant on changes in personality or leadership. The model also suggests that you cannot move to a place of cultural security without first moving through building cultural awareness and cultural safety.[14]

Australian libraries and archives have developed strong awareness of Indigenous Australian priorities and needs. However, concepts such as Indigenous cultural safety and cultural security are yet to be fully explored or translated into Australian library and archive practice. As part of my doctoral research, I plan to investigate the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in this area. I would argue that, at present, many of the conversations about cultural safety – that is, the conversations that Indigenous people have about feeling *culturally unsafe* – are taking place on the periphery.

One of the challenges of progressing agendas around Indigenous cultural safety in libraries and archives is providing clear terminology, definitions and contexts. There is no doubt that everyone wants to feel culturally safe and cultural secure in libraries and archives. A consideration of culturally safety in an Indigenous context will require deeper reflection on the ongoing legacies of Australia's colonial histories, including the continued marginalization of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in today's society. As McKemmish, Faulkhead and Russell note:

> There is a pressing need for Australia's collective knowledge spaces to be reconfigured to be representative of all cultural voices, but as a whole Australia is not yet at a place to recognise all that reconciliation can achieve, let alone share the spaces and decolonise them for the benefit of all.[15]

In a health context Canadian authors Browne et al have argued that cultural safety needs to be considered through a critical paradigm in order to alleviate ambiguities around what 'culture', 'safety' and 'cultural safety' mean.[16] They also encourage deep thinking around the issue and

reflection on what will be 'uncomfortable dialogue' about what are larger socio-political and social justice issues.[17]

Cultural Competency

As discussed, Coffin's Cultural Security Model includes distinctions between areas of cultural awareness, cultural safety and cultural security. All are envisaged as being on a pathway of maturity, that is, you begin with cultural awareness, progress through to cultural safety and then cultural security. There is extensive literature and resources that have been developed relating to progressing a move from 'cultural awareness' into a set of skills that are more actionable. Professor Juanita Sherwood describes Indigenous cultural competency in the context of valuing diversity, she notes:

> Cultural competence is the ability to participate ethically and effectively in personal and professional intercultural settings. It requires being aware of one's own cultural values and world view and their implications for making respectful, reflective and reasoned choices, including the capacity to imagine and collaborate across cultural boundaries.[18]

The question of Indigenous cultural competency has been gaining attention in the library and archive sector in recent years. For example, the National and State Libraries of Australia (NSLA) are currently scoping the roll out of an Indigenous cultural competency program for staff in NSLA libraries over the period 2019 to 2021.[19] Similarly, the AIATSIS have also developed a foundational 'Core Cultural Learning' course relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples which aims to build cultural competency around the history and diversity of Indigenous Australia.[20] Other collecting institutions such as the State Library of New South Wales (NSW) are providing opportunities for people to gain foundational knowledge through cultural competency programs which support the NSW public library network. The training forms part of the wider strategy, I*ndigenous Spaces in Library Places: Building a vibrant public library network inclusive of Indigenous peoples and communities*.[21] Cultural competency is a pathway to build knowledge of Indigenous priorities. A different view is that cultural competency masks issues of power, dominance and white privilege within libraries and archives. To minimise such outcomes any development and implementation of cultural competency in the library and archive sector should include ongoing evaluation and reflection to ensure that issues of power and representation are being addressed. For

example, this is a critical area in relation to the development of collections in libraries and archives. Indigenous people should be shaping the ways that are built, rather than relying on past practices that are informed by colonial collecting paradigms, and which still *other* Indigenous peoples in collections.

Reflections on Practice – Cultural safety & working with Indigenous archives

In the previous section the key themes of ethics, cultural safety, cultural security and cultural competency were introduced in relation to Indigenous people, libraries and archives. In the section that follows, I will now briefly discuss some scenarios related to my experiences of working in libraries and archives with Indigenous cultural materials. I do this to draw out the themes related to ethics, cultural safety, and cultural competency. The scenarios that are introduced provide some insight into some prevailing issues and challenges that I believe archives and libraries must contemplate in order to manage legacy collections through appropriate care; as well as to develop appropriate services and allocation (or radical reallocation) of resources.

Collection of Aboriginal Hair Samples

During the process of stepping back and reflecting on my engagement with archives and Indigenous peoples, I have identified a number of key moments that demonstrated the power of archives and recordkeeping. One that was challenging for me to navigate early in my career was navigating a set of experiences related to a collection of Aboriginal hair samples that were held at the State Archives of NSW. During my first weeks of entering the archives I became aware of the existence of a collection of hair samples that were attached to correspondence from the NSW Surveyor General's Department. The samples were later removed and rehoused for safekeeping by the archives and placed in the safe store (the area part of the repository which stored the most significant of items held by the archives). The safe housing of the material brought up many questions for me about cultural safety, they included:

- How do archives manage ethical concerns for collections such as samples of hair?
- Whose cultural values guide decisions around the management of collections?
- What are the obligations to inform communities about the existence

of materials?
- What considerations were given to the cultural safety of staff engaging with this material?
- How do you navigate issues around retrospective consent relating to archival collections?

The letter itself was also a potent reminder of our colonial history and an example of the ways in which Aboriginal people were treated as subjects of colonial enquiry. Human remains, objects, artefacts and documents traded as curios around the world. The letter explicitly stated the objection of the people of the area in having the collection of hair taken, so its context was clear. Konishi discusses the colonial fascination with Aboriginal hair as part of the formation of racial taxonomies.[22] This was no neutral process of collecting, it was a part of the colonisation process of classifying, naming and subjugating Indigenous Australian people and cultures for the purposes of dispossessing people from their lands. From my perspective, the collection of hair needed to be considered in this context.

Aboriginal Trust Fund Repayment Scheme

Another significant project that evolved in the early period of my career was the NSW Aboriginal Trust Fund Repayment Scheme (ATFRS). The ATFRS was established by the NSW Government in late 2004 to investigate the repayment of monies that were held in trust by the NSW Aborigines Protection and Welfare Boards and never repaid. The Aborigines Protection Board (APB) and Aborigines Welfare Board (AWB) were the major government agencies that had an impact on the lives and experiences of Aboriginal people in NSW. Operating from 1883 to 1969, the Boards had broad ranging powers over the lives, movements and finances of Aboriginal people under their control in the state. The Boards were responsible for the removal of Aboriginal children from their families, the Stolen Generations, and were instrumental in setting up Aboriginal reserves around the state for the 'protection' and 'care' of Aboriginal people.

A vital component of this project related to the use of the records of the APB and AWB as evidence. Yet, these records were known to be incomplete and the use of them for evidential purposes presented many challenges. Firstly, financial records were basically non-existent and the wider APB and AWB archive was poorly kept and incomplete in terms documenting the Boards' functions and responsibilities. Secondly, the APB

and AWB records are 'records of surveillance'[23] and as such were innately biased in their creation. The files recorded only segments or snapshots of people's personal experiences. Indigenous voices are rarely heard through the records, instead the records document the experiences of public servants working with Aboriginal communities in fulfilling their roles as managers and matrons, and ultimately as instruments of government control. McGrath, in writing about the operations of the ATFRS, noted that one of the challenges of working with the records was that, "If the scheme is hinged entirely upon the chance existence of 'proof' amongst poorly kept, patchy records, this historical lottery will introduce a new layer of inequity.[24]

The question of how we could reconcile the tensions of poor-recordkeeping and bias of records brought up many questions within the wider ATFRS team about ethics and cultural safety for Indigenous people accessing records. These included:

- How can projects like the ATFRS redress issues around the failure of recordkeeping and records bias?
- What role should archivists help play in addressing the gaps in recordkeeping to provide Aboriginal people the space for counter narratives?
- How do you take care of your own health when working with collections that are biased and discriminatory?

Staff who worked on the AFTRS had to think about their own care on a daily basis, as being around records of the APB and AWB had the ability to cause trauma. Not only was it difficult being around the records but facilitating access for communities could be both powerful and challenging. Responses from claimants accessing their records through the ATFRS was also powerful – people's responses could move from anger, frustration, sadness and sometimes total dismay on the information that was held within the official files. As ATFRS Director Marilyn Hoey has written "… handling and reading these records could also bring forth a range of emotions for claimants and ATFRS workers alike. To read and hold these records, some of which were more than a century old, was often daunting, and many contained stories that were painful and distressing".[25] Notions \of cultural competency and cultural security were paramount for the effective operation of the ATFRS.

Exhibition: In Living Memory

During this time, the State archives also embarked on a project to return photographs of the APB and AWB to communities. The historic images were returned as part of the consultation process leading up to the exhibition titled *In Living Memory: based on photographs from NSW Aborigines Welfare Board (1919-1966)*. Launched at the State Archives in September 2006, the project challenged traditional archival practice in that it sought to provide an outlet for Aboriginal communities in NSW to respond to the records held by government. The exhibition brought up many questions that concerned reframing and reimagining the archives. The images were transformed from being that of the 'historic archive' and 'government record' into the realm of 'living archives' connected with family and community. Within this, cultural safety and community ethics were at the fore and the consultation process sought retrospective consent from people for family photographs to be used publicly. In the case of displaying images of children's homes, members of representative groups within the Stolen Generations provided group permissions for stories to be told and images to be disseminated. Some of the questions that arose as part of the project were, how do archives:

- Allow user groups to add information to the State archives, and for this to be captured into new archival systems documenting the records?
- Allow Aboriginal people to contribute important stories to sit alongside the records?
- Enable a process where Aboriginal people can donate images that might enhance the existing collection, particularly where government failed to adequately document their functions by keeping full and accurate records?
- Enable Aboriginal communities to have input on access decisions about the images? For example, restrictions based on personal reasons or where images document Aboriginal cultural heritage that under Aboriginal cultural frameworks would have different access provisions.

The process of giving names to people and places that had not been identified enabled the development of culturally safe spaces. Previously, the objectification of Aboriginal people would intensify the already isolating experience of connecting with the archive. Naming people in the images gave a sense of agency to people and the families that their stories would

now be visible and heard. Caswell discusses the concept of 'symbolic annihilation' in relation to the silencing or erasure of people not being represented in the archives and notes how this lack of representation in turn has an effect on how history is written for decades to come.[26] The process of developing In Living Memory enabled a 'slowing down' of procedures to ensure that consultation and engagement were key. It was not just about exhibiting materials from the collection, but rather was focussed on the story of what the photographs meant to people. Essentially, this was about making space for Indigenous voice.

Continuing the 'difficult dialogue'

The three examples of working with Indigenous people and archives raised questions regarding ethics, cultural safety and cultural competency. They also demonstrated the power and potency of archives relating to Indigenous Australian people. As part of my presentation in Aotearoa/ New Zealand I presented some options for reframing and considering Indigenous ethics and cultural safety in archives. I believe that these conceptual and theoretical models provide opportunities for the library and archive sector to build dialogue related to Indigenous priorities in libraries and archives. I plan to consider these concepts, models and theoretical frameworks more fully in my doctoral studies:

- The *Cultural Interface*: addressing the complexities around the management of Indigenous and Western knowledge systems and the place that these collide.[27]
- *Critical Archiving and 'Wicked Problems'*: addressing problems that are so complex in nature that we need to develop new transformative and transdisciplinary approaches for problem solving.[28]
- *Protocols to promote dialogue:* investigating the effectiveness and adoption of protocols for libraries and archives (for example, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Library Information Resource Network – ATSILIRN – *Protocols for Libraries Archives and Information Services).*[29]
- *Records Continuum Theory and Practice*: to explore the extension of rights in records, and the ability for co-creation, multiple provenance, participatory archives that enable self-determination.[30]
- *The Archival Multiverse*: to explore the concept of 'multiple ways of knowing and practicing' as well as 'multiple narratives co-existing in one space' in relation to Indigenous cultural safety and self-determination.[31]

- *Critical Indigenous Archives & Libraries/Decolonising methodologies*: examine the ways that power imbalances influence libraries and archives. Build a focus on recognising what colonisation 'looks like' in order to decolonise.[32]
- *Digital community archives*: examine ways in which projects such as Mukurtu (and in particular the 'Hubs' and 'Spokes' models) enable ethical development of digital community archives based on Indigenous community needs.[33]

Conclusion

This paper has drawn on literature relating to ethics, and cultural safety and Indigenous peoples in the broad context of libraries and archives in Australia. The scenarios that were shared demonstrated some of the challenges that existed in the sector as related to a lack of Indigenous perspectives in collections and services. The scenarios also identified some common themes that can either hinder or assist Indigenous self-determination in archives. The paper has also raised questions on what normative assumptions might underpin our professional ethical statements. Many of the questions raised in this paper will be the subject of further research within my doctoral studies. As part of this I am interested in revealing some of the tensions and clashes of worldviews that exist in Indigenous engagement with libraries and archives. I believe that we need to invest in dialogue – much of which may be difficult – in order to build culturally safe spaces. What are the requirements for cultural safety in the sector? My future research will focus on exploring what structures, requirements, competencies and skills might be needed to build cultural safety and cultural security in our profession. I see this need as being required on two levels. One relates to the soft skills, such as the ways in which people might navigate their own spaces and make decisions that are informed by Indigenous ethics; the other is structural and relates to power dynamics, policy and resources. I believe that both a required at the same time to build purposeful action and transformation. Finally, some conceptual models were shared, which I consider to be useful frameworks for engaging in transformation around Indigenous self-determination in libraries and archives.

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