

1-1-2010

Towards Social Sustainability: the case of the Family Wellbeing community empowerment education program

Janya McCalman

School of Indigenous Australian Studies, James Cook University

Alexandra McEwan

School of Indigenous Australian Studies, James Cook University

Komla Tsey

School of Education, James Cook University

Eunice Blackmore

Family Wellbeing facilitator, Alice Springs

Roxanne Bainbridge

School of Indigenous Australian Studies, James Cook University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://epubs.scu.edu.au/jesp>

Recommended Citation

McCalman, Janya; McEwan, Alexandra; Tsey, Komla; Blackmore, Eunice; and Bainbridge, Roxanne (2010) "Towards Social Sustainability: the case of the Family Wellbeing community empowerment education program," *Journal of Economic and Social Policy*: Vol. 13 : Iss. 2 , Article 8.

Available at: <http://epubs.scu.edu.au/jesp/vol13/iss2/8>

Towards Social Sustainability: the case of the Family Wellbeing community empowerment education program

Abstract

Despite interest in the concept of social sustainability over the last twenty years, researchers have struggled to clearly define what it really means and to find ways to implement it in practice. This paper describes a practical example of how Alice Springs Aboriginal residents have taken steps to work towards social sustainability through a community empowerment education program. The paper is based on the findings from a synthesis of a phased series of papers and reports from evaluations of the Family Wellbeing (FWB) Program in Alice Springs since 1996, supplemented by interviews with key program facilitators and evaluators. The study found that by engaging Aboriginal participants in conversations within the context of their own stories, the FWB program has helped participants to understand their situation and experiences and to move from self blame, victimhood and poor self esteem towards a position of greater strength and control. Participants have also gained capacity at a collective level to identify their strengths and needs and to tackle issues for family, organisational and community improvement. Participants' identified violence as a community priority and developed a vision for personal, family and community healing. At a personal level, FWB resulted in a range of empowerment outcomes including a reduced likelihood of reoffending, engagement in further study and finding employment. Organisational and community outcomes have included the founding of a healing centre and the further delivery of FWB to groups such as town camp residents, prisoners, alcohol rehabilitation clients and school students. The paper concludes that there is potential to embed such approaches within the core business of mainstream health, education and welfare services. Although our qualitative research to date suggests a range of benefits, these need to be demonstrated empirically through rigorous economic evaluation of FWB's costs and benefits.

Keywords

social sustainability, empowerment, social and emotional wellbeing, Aboriginal, meta-synthesis

Cover Page Footnote

ACKNOWLEDGMENT: The work reported here was supported by funding from the Australian Government Cooperative Research Centre's Program through the Desert Knowledge CRC (DK-CRC), Core project 4: Sustainable Desert Settlements. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the views of DK-CRC or its participants. We would like to acknowledge the involvement of Alice Springs Family Wellbeing facilitators and participants. We would also like to thank Vicki Saunders for designing model 1.

Introduction

Globally, there has been increased interest over the last 20 years in the concept of 'sustainable development'. In Australia, this has led to national prioritisation of the 'triple bottom line' of sustainable economic growth, environment, and quality of life for current and future generations (Australian Government Infrastructure Australia, 2009). While the economic and environmental aspects of sustainability have received a lot of attention in the literature (Common, 1995), the social dimensions have "tended to fall off the sustainability agenda" (Barron and Gauntlet, 2002, p.4). The challenge of integrating economic and social development has not been well met (Meagher, 2000), and researchers have struggled to find ways to facilitate social sustainability (McKenzie, 2004).

Part of the problem has been that the concept of social sustainability can be defined in a variety of ways with different meanings. In this paper, we follow McKenzie (2004, p. 12) who defines social sustainability as "a life enhancing condition within communities, and a process within communities that can achieve this condition". From this perspective, social sustainability is a condition which encompasses equity of access to key services; mechanisms for ensuring that future generations will not be disadvantaged by the activities of the current generation; the valuing and protection of disparate cultures; the participation of citizens in political activity, particularly at a local level; and mechanisms for communities to collectively identify their strengths and needs, and to fulfil these needs through community action or political advocacy. In fact, as McKenzie (2004) points out, the process of taking steps towards achieving these conditions is also a part of social sustainability.

This paper presents a case study of a practical social and emotional wellbeing program that provides an example of how residents have taken steps towards social sustainability. It was developed and has been implemented primarily by members of the most disadvantaged group in Australian society, Aboriginal Australians. The *Family Wellbeing* (FWB) program is an empowerment education program which aims to build communication, problem solving, conflict resolution and other necessary skills to enable individuals to take greater control and responsibility for family, work and community life (Tsey and Every, 2000). Through FWB, groups of Aboriginal people (sometimes these groups have also included Torres Strait Islanders and non-Indigenous participants) are supported to define their visions, priorities and steps towards sustained personal and community confidence.

Evaluations of FWB delivery to diverse groups of Aboriginal people in Alice Springs have demonstrated that given effective courses of development,

individuals experiencing difficulty in this area are able to turn their lives around (Tsey and Every, 2000; Rees et al., 2003; Tsey, 2008). Experience from the FWB program also suggests that in remote Aboriginal Australia, working towards social sustainability relies upon, and may need to start by, building social capital (or in the words of a facilitator “getting people to work together”) through personal empowerment processes.

To set an appropriate context for this discussion, we begin with a poem *From Murky Waters* composed by Hanz Katarinja, an Aboriginal man. The poem provides Hanz’s reflections of his process of personal empowerment, prompted by participation in the FWB program while an inmate of the Alice Springs Correctional Centre. It is reproduced with his permission.

From Murky Waters

From the murky water

I stood up

I said that’s enough

I want to be clear

There was a corroboree

I found the Elders

On my long journey

Step by step

Stage by stage

I went through the business of

Understanding self esteem

Expressing my inner-self

Being responsible as an adult

In the process of healing

Understanding my needs

Balancing the body and mind

In tradition and culture

I can feel the healing

I can see the clearing

It shines and reflects an image

From what I was

To what I am now

From murky water

To clear running water

To my new destination.

The poet's description of his experiences of overcoming disadvantage "from what I was to what I am now" points to his capacity for personal growth and change even in the most challenging of circumstances. The poet describes finding a catalyst for change "I stood up, I said that's enough, I want to be clear". Implicit in these verses is a capacity to reflect and establish commitment to a better future: "my new destination". Moreover, with its express reference to healing, renewed connection to land and the voice of the Elders, the poem strongly conveys engagement with the spiritual, social and emotional factors now recognised as fundamental to Aboriginal wellbeing.

A socially sustainable Alice Springs?

The history of Alice Springs has left a legacy of structural inequalities between the town's non-Indigenous and Aboriginal populations, and also between different groups of Aboriginal residents. In Central Australia, from the mid-19th century, expansion of the pastoral and mineral industries entailed a process by which the traditional custodians of Alice Springs, the Central Arrente people, were effectively excluded from use of land around permanent water supplies (Hartwig, 1965). The expansion of the pastoral industry also resulted in neighbouring Aboriginal peoples being dispossessed of their lands and relocated to reserves, or obliged to reside in fringe camps around the growing town. The 1966 *Cattle Station Industry (NT) Award* (1966) CAR 651 decision secured equal pay between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal workers. Ironically, this decision resulted in the loss of jobs for Aboriginal workers in the cattle industry and their subsequent migration to the fringes of Alice Springs and other towns. A reliance on welfare and increasing use of alcohol since the 1970s has served to compound Aboriginal social exclusion (Tsey et al., 2000; Pearson, 2006).

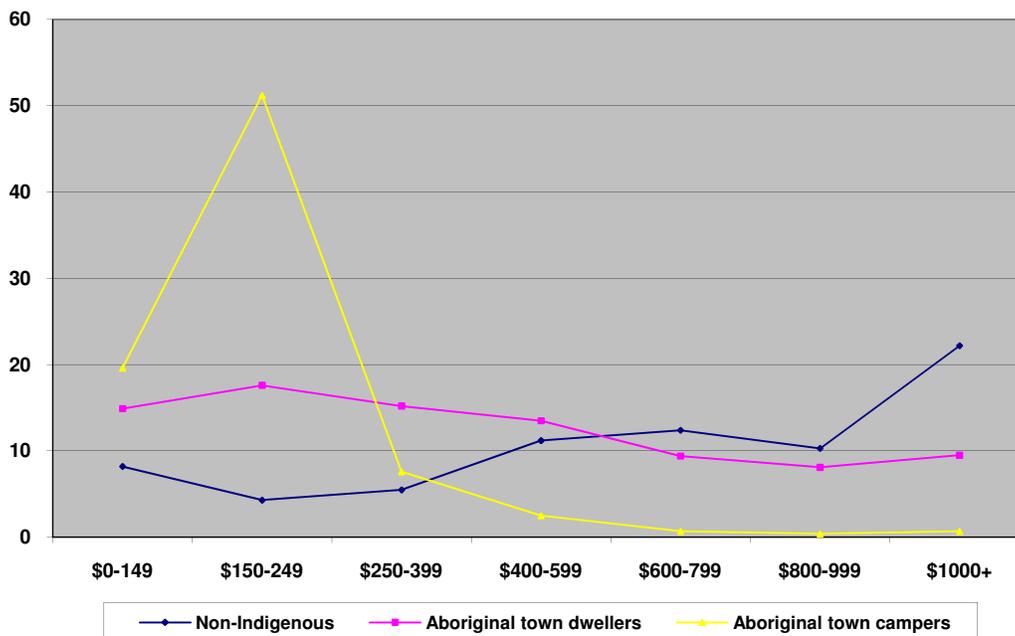
Today Alice Springs is a central desert service town with a predominantly non-Aboriginal population. According to the most recent Census, Alice Springs had 24,000 residents. Of these, 19,600 were non-Indigenous and 4400 (19 percent) were Aboriginal people¹ (ABS Census 2006). In addition to its stable population, Alice Springs is a service hub for approximately 11,000 – 12,000 transient

¹ There were also a further 1885 people whose Aboriginal status was not recorded and 93 people with Torres Strait Islander heritage.

residents from 260 desert settlements. The town's structural inequities are reflected spatially. At the time of the 2006 Census, 1,200 of Alice Springs' Aboriginal residents lived in 19 legally established town camps (with special purpose leases) and two camps without leases. Town camps are made up of family members or members of the same language groups or geographical origins. They are places for Aboriginal people who either want to live permanently near Alice Springs or who need a place to stay when they visit the town from remote communities to attend specialist health, dental and other services, or for shopping. Those living in camps have to cope with a lack of infrastructure and service provision. There are also high levels of alcohol misuse, family violence and other social pressures (Long and Memmott, 2007; Foster et al., 2005).

To illustrate the structural disparities mentioned above, we present graphs based on the 2006 Census data, of the income and educational attainment of Alice Springs' non-Aboriginal population, Aboriginal town dwelling (those living in the Alice Springs suburbs) residents and Aboriginal town camp residents. Census data for town camps may be unreliable due to the difficulty of enumerating itinerant dwellers and problems in defining the geographical and social distribution of households and their individual members, although it has greatly improved over time (Taylor, 2002; Sanders, 2007).

Graph 1: Percentage of Alice Springs non-Aboriginal, Aboriginal town dwellers and Aboriginal town camp residents aged 15 years and over by weekly gross individual income bracket.

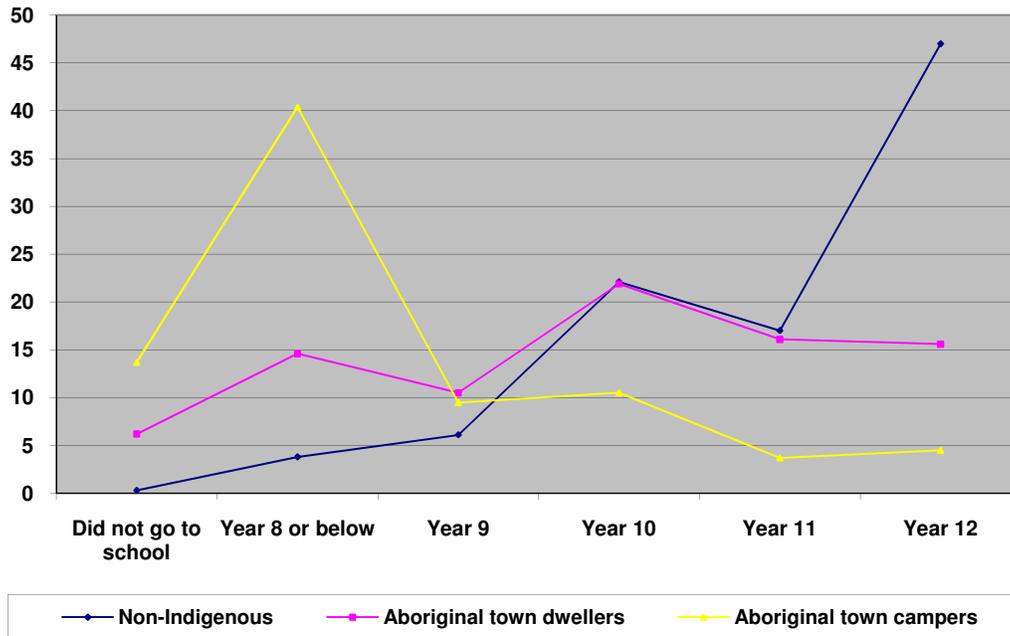


Source: ABS 2006 Census

Graph 1 shows that 68 percent of town camp residents had an income of less than \$249 per week, corresponding to the levels of both social security payments and CDEP² wages. This supports the assertion that the economy of town camps is dependent on passive welfare (Sanders, 2004). In contrast, 33 percent of town dwellers and 13 percent of non-Aboriginal people earned less than \$249 per week. At the higher end of the income scale, one percent of town camp residents earned more than \$800 per week, contrasting with 18 percent of Aboriginal town dwellers and 33 percent of non-Aboriginal residents.

² Initiated in 1977, the CDEP (Community Development and Employment Program) provided work for its participants in lieu of unemployment benefits. Participants worked at award wages for the number of hours that equaled their entitlements from unemployment benefits. In effect it was/is a “work-for-the-dole” scheme. For further information see <http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/indigenous/progserv/families/cdep/Pages/default.aspx>

Graph 2: Percentage of Alice Springs non-Aboriginal, Aboriginal town dwellers and Aboriginal town camp residents aged 15 years and over by highest year of school completed.



Source: ABS 2006 census

Graph 2 depicts a similar situation with regard to educational outcomes. Although education is critical to strengthening Aboriginal self-determination and improving social and health outcomes (Tsey, 1997), 54 percent of Aboriginal town camp adults had never attended school or left before completing grade 8. In contrast 21 percent of Aboriginal town dwellers and only four percent of non-Aboriginal residents had never attended or left school before completing grade 8. At the higher end of the educational attainment scale, only five percent of town campers had completed grade 12, compared to 16 per cent of Aboriginal town dwellers and 47 percent of non-Aboriginal residents.

Clearly, the Census data does not reflect a town exhibiting McKenzie’s criteria for social sustainability. The Census data depict fundamental structural inequities suggesting that there is neither equity of access to key services in Alice Springs, nor that the town’s disparate cultures have been valued or supported. The Aboriginal concept of social and emotional wellbeing has been described by the South Australian Aboriginal Health Partnership (2005) report (p. 8) as:

Living in a community where everyone feels good about the way they live and the way they feel. Key factors in achieving this include connectedness to family and community, control over one's environment and exercising power of choice.

Attaining a satisfactory state of social and emotional wellbeing involves a process of empowerment. As a consequence of the history of dispossession and contemporary social disadvantage, Aboriginal FWB participants from Alice Springs and North Queensland have described their poor social and emotional wellbeing and a need to heal, come to terms with past trauma, and understand their present life circumstances and life's opportunities (Tsey et. al., 2000; 2008). They identified empowerment as encompassing the steps of:

- 1) Dealing with pain,
 - 2) Gaining control,
 - 3) Becoming strong,
 - 4) Finding one's voice,
 - 5) Participating in change, and
 - 6) Working together for a stronger community
- (Haswell-Elkins et al., 2010).

Taking steps towards improving social and emotional wellbeing also contributes to social sustainability.

Within this context, in 1996, a group of organisations led by Tangentyere Council³ collaborated to introduce and deliver the FWB Program. The catalyst for the introduction of the program was a series of youth suicides. The intention was to empower service providers as well as people affected in the context of suicide and self harm. The collaborators recognised that suicide was just the tip of an iceberg of wellbeing problems. These included trans-generational trauma, widespread psychosocial distress, substance abuse, domestic violence and lack of parenting skills (Tsey et al., 2000).

2. Tangentyere Council is an Aboriginal owned and controlled organisation governed by an executive of elected representatives from Alice Springs town camps. Its mission is to provide sustainable services and programs which are culturally sensitive, innovative, effective and efficient to town camp residents. (Tangentyere Council, 2010).

Family wellbeing

The FWB empowerment program was developed in 1993 by the Aboriginal Education Development Branch of the South Australian Education Department under the leadership of Les Nader (an Aboriginal man with family ties in Alice Springs). The program evolved from a community development planning approach that involved community discussions about social and emotional wellbeing, held during (provided) lunches in a number of South Australian Aboriginal communities. The program developed organically. The first stage came about in response to a community member's request for training to deal with the loss and grief, and other trauma that community members were grappling with on a day-to-day basis. The second and subsequent stages three, four and five were developed in response to requests for further training related to loss and grief, family violence, and training for facilitators.

By the late 1990s, FWB had become an accredited Certificate 2 level course comprising four stages, each consisting of 30 hours of group learning. Stage five comprises a Certificate 3 course which provides supervised practice to enable people who have completed stages one to four to become program facilitators (Tsey and Every, 2000). FWB provides a framework within which participants are able to raise their concerns, identify their strengths, build relationships and gain new skills through reflection on experience. It prompts participants to reflect on fundamental existential questions such as 'who am I, what is my identity, what are my beliefs and attitudes, what is my spirituality, what helps my family, where am I going in my life?' By finding answers to these questions, participants are more likely to take greater control over the circumstances influencing their lives, look after their own needs, build a vision for the future and fulfil their potential as human beings (Tsey, 2008).

As it has evolved, FWB has been designed to support group and community advocacy efforts on issues such as land rights, housing, health improvement and other structural determinants such as the income and educational disparities indicated in graphs 1 and 2 above. As part of this, participant groups are supported to collectively identify and to address priority community issues identified after participation in the personal development training. The program therefore contributes towards social sustainability in Alice Springs by providing a mechanism for Aboriginal people to collectively identify their personal and community strengths and needs, and by encouraging Aboriginal participants to fulfil these needs through becoming involved in community action or political advocacy (McKenzie, 2004).

The first training program in Alice Springs in 1996 comprised FWB stage one. It was as a pilot program with nine participants. As mentioned, it was delivered as part of a targeted response to a cluster of youth suicides in Alice Springs. Participants' enthusiasm for the program led Tangentyere Council, and a coalition of Alice Springs organisations, to invite the Adelaide creators of FWB to deliver the five stages to a further 31 participants. This training was conducted in 1998 by Adelaide trainers on a 'fly in, fly out' basis. As well as family members and young people affected by the suicide crises, the training targeted service providers on the assumption that they could, in turn, deliver the program to others. One of the authors of this paper evaluated the project, during the course of which he participated in FWB.

Using a 'train the trainer' approach, these Alice Springs FWB pioneers facilitated the program with a further group of 12 people during 2001 – 2002, and another 21 people during 2002-2003. Since 2004, facilitators have delivered FWB in Alice Springs in a range of settings, to approximately 300 people . Over the years, accredited and non-accredited FWB training has been delivered to groups of men (including prison inmates), women, town camp residents, alcohol rehabilitation clients, workplace employees, and teenage girls. Hence, approximately eight percent of Alice Spring Aboriginal adult suburban dwellers and five percent of adult town camp dwellers have been exposed to FWB. The value placed on FWB by Alice Springs participants is exemplified by the fact that they have advocated for its continuation through a series of short-term grants for more than a decade. The program is now supported and delivered by all four of the key Aboriginal health and education providers in Alice Springs: Tangentyere Council, the Institute for Aboriginal Development, Central Australian Aboriginal Congress and Batchelor Institute of Tertiary Education.

The high level of population mobility of some Alice Springs Aboriginal residents has also led to requests for FWB beyond Alice Springs. Alice Springs FWB participants who originated from remote Aboriginal communities, including prison inmates, have called for program delivery in their home communities. This is yet to occur, but the 1998 Alice Springs FWB delivery provided a springboard for dissemination of the program to north Queensland from whence it has continued to spread across Australia (Tsey, Travers, Gibson, Whiteside, Cadet-James, Haswell- Elkins, McCalman, and Wilson, 2005). As one FWB participant commented:

Alice is a meeting place for all people, black, white and brindle, traditional owners... it's a place that can have this rippling effect.

Method

This paper draws on a meta-synthesis of four papers based on the delivery of the FWB program in Alice Springs from 1996-2008. It describes the factors identified by Aboriginal FWB participants relating to social sustainability in the Alice Springs context. The synthesis findings are supplemented by interviews with key FWB facilitators, a literature review, analysis of Census data, personal observations, discussions and the experience of the authors of this paper of facilitating, supporting and evaluating FWB over twelve years.

Between 2000 and 2008, a series of three peer reviewed papers and one evaluation report describing the delivery of FWB in Alice Springs have been developed for community audiences, academics and funding bodies. As detailed in Table 1, these were based on interviews conducted in 1999 and 2004 with 28 participants interviewed of the core group of 73 people trained to 2004. Of those interviewed, 15 (54 percent) had completed four FWB stages; they had a median age of early 40s and 25 of the 28 were women. In addition, eight significant others (partners, family members or friends) were interviewed. The interview data were supplemented by diary entries⁴ from 10 participants, a systematic analysis of standard FWB course evaluation sheets and participant narratives regarding the use of FWB as a suicide prevention strategy, presentation of key evaluation findings and draft reports to participants for comment and feedback, as well as the evaluator's participant observation (Rees et al., 2004; Tsey, 2008).

⁴ Graduates were asked by evaluators to keep diaries of the specific contexts in which they used FWB skills, knowledge and principles for a period of six to twelve months following training (Tsey and Every, 2000).

Table 1: Synthesised Studies

| Authors, type of publication, and date | Method | Focus |
|------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Tsey, K. and Every, A. Peer reviewed paper 2000 | Analysis of literature, participant observation made by the principal evaluator, analysis of standard FWB evaluation forms, analysis of personal narratives, focus group discussions with 31 participants including professionals, family members, young people; 80 percent Aboriginal. | FWB as a youth suicide prevention program. Self-reported changes in attitudes, belief and behaviour. |
| Every, A., Williams, A. and Tsey, K. Community report 2003 | Interviews with nine FWB participants and four family members, friends or work colleagues. Distribution of interviews and draft reports to participants for comment and feedback. | Reflective personal empowerment narratives. |
| Rees, S., et al.. Peer reviewed paper 2004 | In-depth interviews with 28 of 52 Aboriginal participants aged 30-50 who had taken part in one of the 1996, 1998 or 2001-2002 programs (only four men). Seventy-five percent were employed. Interviews with eight significant others, participant observations; diary entries from 10 participants. | Self-reported changes in attitudes, beliefs and behaviour in relation to addressing violence. |
| Tsey, K. Peer reviewed paper 2008 | Secondary analysis of 24 of 73 previous interviews and other data. | Tackling endemic substance abuse |

The method for developing the meta-synthesis of the four studies was to summarise and then compare the interpretations, themes and explanations found in the original studies. We followed a modified version of the systematic seven step process of meta-ethnography developed by Noblit and Hare (1988). Step 1 - deciding the research question; Step 2 - deciding on the scope of the synthesis; Step 3- reading the studies; Step 4 - determining how the studies are related; Step 5 - translating the themes into one another; Step 6 - synthesising the translation; and Step 7 - expressing the synthesis. Meta-ethnography generally involves the synthesis and interpretation of studies across a variety of ethnographic settings, but we limited the scope to evaluations of the FWB program in Alice Springs and did not attempt to identify comparable empowerment initiatives beyond the FWB framework. It is also important to note that the community feedback document (Every et al., 2003) did not fall within the already-interpreted data set of meta-synthesis. We decided to include this data on the basis of its immediacy and relevance to the Alice Springs context. Nonetheless, we assumed that the application of a synthetic approach would result in a broader interpretation of the results – one of the identified strengths of meta-synthesis (Campbell, Pound, Pope, Britten, Pill, Morgan and Donovan, 2002).

The research team grappled with the question of whether we were sufficiently objective to undertake a meta-synthesis of our own work. We resolved that the meta-ethnographic methods, together with regular group critical reflection on the themes identified provided sufficient rigour. One researcher took the lead and read the chosen studies repeatedly in order to identify the main concepts associated with social sustainability. These were then reviewed with co-authors until we were confident of the trustworthiness of the identified themes. Common and recurring concepts relating to social sustainability were then clustered by three co-authors of this paper.

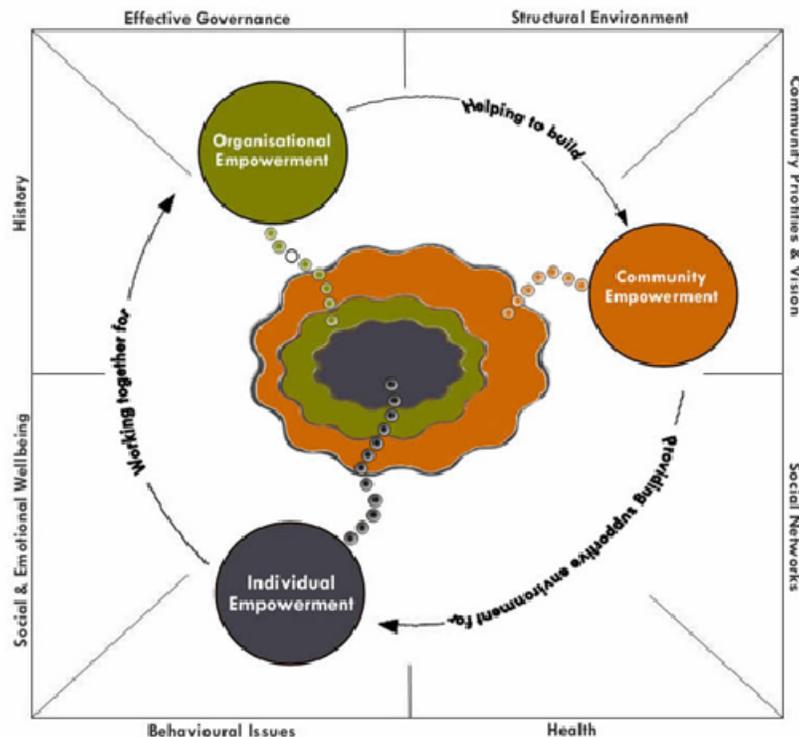
To translate the themes into one another we completed a grid, entering each theme into a row and each paper into a separate column. These are not presented here for reasons of space. The themes emerging from FWB delivery in Alice Springs were largely consistent with those documented from FWB delivery in two other sites (Whyalla, South Australia, and HopeVale, North Queensland) (Office for the Status of Women, 2002; Tsey et al. 2005). The exception related to the impact of the Northern Territory “Emergency Intervention” from June 2007, which has specific relevance to the Northern Territory and will be discussed later.

Findings

The identified themes described key influences on the social sustainability of Alice Springs, from the perspective of FWB participants. They were:

1. Personal empowerment;
2. Identifying priority community issues, visions and goals;
3. Community development outcomes including FWB delivery;
4. Effective governance, ideally through community control; and
5. Working together for national policy development and implementation.

The findings from this meta-synthesis can be represented as a model of empowerment towards social sustainability (see Model 1). From a pool of 'murky waters', the model shows a ripple effect of empowerment from personal to organisational to community levels. It is the interplay between individual agency and the contextual environment or structure that keeps the 'drip' of change happening.



Model 1: Empowerment towards sustainable settlements

Personal empowerment

The poem *From Murky Waters* provides one example of a reflection of an individual experience of empowerment. At a group level, a local FWB facilitator described her observations of participants' personal changes through FWB:

*And then when you've completed the whole course, you know,
they're just like, when you walk in there, they're like little rose
buds and then at the end they're fully opened and bloomed eh, you
know.*

A range of personal empowerment outcomes for FWB participants have been documented in the synthesised papers and reports. These have included developing greater self awareness, confidence and self esteem; reflecting and understanding the cause of problems; confidence in negotiating gender and other relationships; dealing with loss and grief; healing; a sense of belonging in the world; and feeling supported and connected to others. Some participants spoke of an improved capability or an enhanced ability to cope with difficult situations. They reported developing skills to deal with emotional issues; problem solving; resilience and coping abilities; an ability to reframe personal and community problems in a political and historical context; and strategies to manage conflict. Some FWB participants have gone on to further study or to obtain employment. For example, a local FWB facilitator described one participant's trajectory post-FWB:

*Well I know this young fella who was in and out of jail and he
works at (workplace name) ... and I've asked, you know so and so,
and he said yeah – gee he's a good worker, gee you know and he's
always there on time and he's always clean. So at least that's, I
know that's one of the blokes I looked after in jail.*

FWB publications and reports have also documented specific health-related outcomes including an increased understanding of the precursors for violence, understanding of the effects that drug and alcohol problems have on others, and reduced stress levels. International literature suggests that the health benefits of empowerment may extend well beyond those identified by the Alice Springs participants. Developing skills to cope with the day to day challenges of life can prevent or reduce excessive and accumulated stress, and hence circumvent compromised immune system functioning and multiple other chronic health deficits. Processes such as empowerment therefore have the potential to influence population level rates of health morbidity and mortality (Wallerstein, 2006).

As one FWB participant observed, personal changes also have a 'ripple effect on others'. Those documented in the Australia FWB literature include more constructive relationships, gaining skills to use within the family, better listening skills, gaining an ability to protect themselves and offspring from violence, greater awareness of young people and children's needs and the skills to support them, and being better able to assist others at risk or in crisis. For example, participants reported an enhanced capacity to identify the triggers for family violence, and capacity to defuse potentially violent situations, resulting in decreased conflict within families and thus the larger community.

Identifying priority community issues, visions and goals

As people gained personal strength they took on new roles and responsibilities. As a first step, FWB groups discussed priority community social and emotional wellbeing issues. In all four papers/reports, Alice Springs FWB participants identified overcoming violence as a community priority and identified their overarching vision as a physically and emotionally safe environment. They saw this as a prerequisite for healing and fundamental to the sustainability of Aboriginal communities. Young people and children were seen as especially vulnerable to violence and participants stressed that healing should (and could potentially) occur through schools (by adapting FWB to the needs of children). If schools were to adopt an empowerment approach, any gains made in a child's self esteem and confidence would need to be sustained through the engagement of parents and family within the school and at home.

Participants were also clear that anti-violence strategies must also address the needs of men. FWB participants also said that the role of men was important and that men need adequate counselling and other forms of support in order to take their rightful place in healing the home and family. As one FWB participant reflected:

FWB has given me a strength to identify real needs in the community. In our culture the men are superior. With the introduction of alcohol and other substances, women have got strong. That's quite intimidating for men. In Alice Springs there are a huge range of choices for women caught in domestic violence or sex abuse about where they can go to be safe. Our men are disempowered, we have to start empowering them.

Other recurring issues for Alice Springs participants were the need to deal with loss and grief, youth suicide prevention, and a lack of adequate shelter and resources for young people.

Community development outcomes including further FWB delivery

Empowerment programs such as FWB provide one, albeit important, opportunity for local people to build their own personal capacity to then take on advocacy for broader change. FWB is underpinned by the community development principle that any learning or change process should start where the energy is (McCashen, 2005). Participants articulate their experiences and concerns in a supportive group environment, thereby enhancing their capacity to more readily identify broader issues and take group action to make positive changes. One example of this process in Alice Springs has been the successful advocacy for funding for a healing centre. The Akeyulere Apmere Healing Centre was founded in 2001, in partnership with Tangentyere Council, and became a focus for delivering the FWB program to domestic violence offenders in Alice Springs jail, as well as facilitating access to traditional healers and healing practices, such as smoking ceremonies (Tangentyere Council, 2006).

FWB groups have also addressed the specific social and emotional wellbeing issues of groups of people in need through further delivery of FWB. Examples include the facilitation of FWB to town camp residents, and victims of domestic violence (through Tangentyere Council), to prison inmates at the Alice Springs Correctional Centre, to alcohol rehabilitation clients through the Central Australian Aboriginal Alcohol Programs Unit, and to grade-nine high school students at Alice Springs High School, as a tertiary education program through Batchelor Institute of Tertiary Education, and as a community program through the Institute of Aboriginal Development. For each delivery, the concerns and priority issues of these groups of participants have been able to be encompassed within the generic content of FWB. For high school girls, for example, a local facilitator reflected that:

Um, well they all wanted to talk about babies and sex stuff, you know... We talked about everyday things I suppose for young girls. You've gotta change your program around to suit who your clients are. Yeah. You know like when I went to the jail, talking to the men there was different, it was very different, you know, from running an all women's group.

The success of these subsequent FWB programs, delivered by local facilitators trained in earlier courses, points to an interesting resolution of an age-old community development dilemma. Within the context of structural inequalities, such as between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians, there is often a trade-off between providing programs on the basis of equity or greatest need and the

practicalities of engaging relatively well-functioning people who have an interest and capacity. In Alice Springs, Aboriginal people responded to this dilemma by first engaging those who were already employed in social service provision and/or community leadership roles. The priority for the first training programs from 1996 to 2004 was to target community leaders involved in human service delivery on the basis that they could in-turn deliver the program to others in the community.

Whether educated and employed or not, for Aboriginal participants, the delivery of the program by other local Aboriginal people has been crucial to the program's credibility. One participant, for example, reflected:

Great, finally we've got something, you know, that you can relate to without using big words and having people from out of town, strangers coming and talking to you.

Despite local knowledge and networks, facilitators still experienced challenges in delivering the program in some contexts. One facilitator's reflection on the delivery of FWB to town camp residents, for example, demonstrates the pros and cons of being an 'insider':

I went to school with those women and I seen their lifestyle and everything, and it was hard for me. And I thought, crikey, how am I going to get these women to talk. They know me, they know I know about these stories and stuff. But I didn't, you know, not why they were hurting, you know.

The delivery of FWB over twelve years and by four Alice Springs Aboriginal organisations reflects the program's legitimacy for Aboriginal participants. Organisations delivering such programs require supportive structures and systems, including training and support for coordinators/facilitators, and immediate, short and long term access to relevant counselling services. In part, the capacity of social and emotional wellbeing programs to facilitate positive change and achieve community acceptability rests on the training and sustained support of local facilitators. Successful facilitation requires the provision of a safe environment, the facilitators sharing their own stories, use of tools for personal reflection and critique and flexibility in program delivery. Participants also recognised a need for improved skills, training and support, particularly to enable them to have better relationships with young people and children. They felt that strengthened community relationships with children would enhance social and emotional wellbeing, including feelings of connectedness and safety, and would result in a more secure sense of personal identity.

Effective governance, ideally through community control

Statements made by FWB participants reflected concerns about the quality of governance of Aboriginal services that have been the subject of debate for twenty years (Sullivan, 2006). For example, one participant referred to Alice Springs as a:

Small town: small talk, small mind, small vision, dreams'. She said 'the organisations are doing the same thing for over 20 years when they have come into existence. They haven't moved with the time. We have escalating social problems. It's not the time for politics but time to put programs to deal with people.

Further, another participant asked:

Are organisations doing 'band aids' – just looking at the surface and not looking at the core? ...(P)rograms should come forward from the 'grass roots' not from those in the workplace.

FWB participants spoke of the importance of working together and said that they had developed friendships and support networks based on common values, social connectedness, and hopes for their community. However, FWB participants also spoke of the challenges of maintaining change when the social environment is resistant. They identified peer pressure and gender inequalities and “welfare mentality” as constraining factors of the immediate cultural environment, suggesting a need for further engagement with issues of cultural change. One FWB participant, for example, suggested that ‘welfare mentality’ resulted in a lack of initiative to address problems, hence exacerbating them:

Problems exist and become bad because no-one wants to deal with it. They remain silent. When talking and recognising there are problems, (we) can start to look at resolving (them) – (we) can work with different groups in Alice Springs.

As well, the structural factors implicit in negotiating both mainstream and Aboriginal ontologies present unique challenges for Indigenous organisations (Martin, 2003). Reflecting on her experience of racial segregation through her work in an Alice Springs community-controlled organisation, for example, one FWB participant observed:

Never the Aboriginal and the non-Aboriginals meet in this town. Two separate worlds. Where is the power and who holds it?

The Harvard studies (Cornell and Kalt, 1992; Cornell, 2002; Hunt, Smith, Garling and Sanders, 2008) are generally accepted as offering a way forward for Indigenous governance, claiming that it can be both respectful of cultural norms and responsive to local wisdom while also delivering practical outcomes that reassure institutional investors (Sullivan, 2006). When people have control of decision making over the activities that affect them and some control over the benefits of that activity, then they are likely to make much better decisions and have a resultant improvement in their social and emotional wellbeing (Cornell and Kalt, 1992; Cornell, 2002; Hunt et al., 2008). Consistent with the Harvard studies, from a FWB perspective, community-controlled organisations reflect the principles of empowerment and control embodied within FWB. The program can reflect these principles to community members when it is delivered through community-controlled organisations.

As the Harvard studies stress, good governance structures need to match with the culture of a community that is the development target. The concept of ‘cultural match’ does not suggest importing traditional forms of activity into modern organisations. Rather, it implies that principles for acceptable standards are established according to the level of relations in question and the intensity of the inequalities experienced, thus guaranteeing autonomy while at the same time ensuring good management (Sullivan, 2006). FWB participants suggested that the leaders of Aboriginal community-controlled organisations must draw on contemporary and traditional Aboriginal social values, that is, equity, inclusion, reconciliation and the guidance of the Ancestors in order to influence positive change. The actions and decisions of leaders must reflect these core values. Community ownership and integrated community services should be encouraged to operate in the spirit of reconciliation.

Working together for national policy development and implementation

The Federal Government’s 2007 Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER), also referred to as the Intervention, which was purportedly introduced to tackle child sexual abuse, applied a range of coercive measures to Aboriginal residents (Maddison, 2009). These included widespread alcohol restrictions, the introduction of ‘normal’ tenancy agreements and market-based rents, community clean-up and repair projects, and the quarantining of welfare payments (Maddison, 2009). The Federal government adopted a top-down approach to the Intervention’s implementation. This approach was in complete disregard of the first recommendation outlined in the *Amppe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle: Little Children are Sacred* report into child sexual abuse in the Northern Territory; the

report that prompted the “Intervention”. The first recommendation notes that community involvement of Indigenous people with government should be a “bottom up” rather than a “top down” process:

It is critical that both governments commit to genuine consultation with Aboriginal people in designing initiatives for Aboriginal communities
(Wild and Anderson, 2007, p. 9).

It is possible to utilise the findings of the FWB synthesis to undertake a critical reflection on the NTER. What is clear from this exercise is that the stated rationale for the NTER was consistent with the community priorities identified by Alice Springs FWB participants: the need to address violence and create a sense of safety, especially for children and young people. Aboriginal people initially welcomed the Government’s acknowledgement of these longstanding issues and the announcement of funding to address them. However, the initial response soon turned to anger because of the realisation of the NTER’s impact on people’s daily lives and because of the top-down mode of implementation (Maddison, 2009). Similarly, FWB participants have expressed concern about the imposition of top-down policies.

The 2008 review of the NTER (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008) found that in many cases, Aboriginal people believed that in implementing the NTER, the incumbent Federal Government had ignored their prior local efforts to address social problems. Aboriginal people consulted during the review process suggested that communities and government should work together to achieve common aims (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008). Although the majority of the review recommendations have not been implemented, programs such as FWB could offer a vehicle for meaningful consultation about such important policy initiatives.

Discussion and conclusion

At the beginning of this paper, we asserted that FWB provides a practical example of how Alice Springs residents have taken steps to work towards social sustainability. It does this through providing Aboriginal participants with a supportive environment for conversations which are very different than those they have experienced in the past. Past history is acknowledged along with the impact of history on people's lives today. However, rather than remaining in the past or focussed on problems, FWB supports participants to focus on personal resilience, strength and competency within the context of their own stories. The focus is helping participants to understand their situation in a new and more helpful light.

Participants are also given theoretical knowledge and analytic frameworks to better understand their experiences. The conversations of FWB are particularly important for many Indigenous people as they help them to move from self blame, victimhood and poor self esteem towards a position of greater strength and control.

By engaging people like Hanz Katarinja, author of *From Murky Waters*, in a process of personal empowerment, FWB has resulted in a range of outcomes including a reduced likelihood of reoffending, engagement in further study and improved employment outcomes. In working through personal social and emotional wellbeing issues, participants also gain capacity at a collective level to identify their strengths and needs and to tackle issues for family, organisational and community improvement. Outcomes have included the establishment of a healing centre and the further delivery of FWB to groups such as town camp residents, prisoners, alcohol rehabilitation clients and school students. But despite being supported for more than a decade in Alice Springs by Aboriginal FWB participants and facilitators and by key educational institutions and community-controlled services the program remains reliant on short-term funding grants. This means that continued employment and support of local FWB program organisers and facilitators is uncertain.

There is great potential for systematically embedding the principles and educational strategies of empowerment programs like FWB within the core business of mainstream health, education and welfare services, including school education, alcohol rehabilitation services and maternal and child health programs. Support from Government which comes in a top-down direction is critical for supporting some innovative service models. Recent meta-evaluations from the conducted by the United Kingdom Department of Health (2009) suggest that social and emotional wellbeing programs can be cost effective, with savings achieved mainly through reduced welfare and criminal justice costs and higher earnings. The wider benefits of promoting improved wellbeing have included improved educational attainment and outcomes, reduced levels of mental illness, safer communities with less crime, increased quality of life, reduced sickness absence, improved productivity and employment retention, reduced health inequalities related to both physical and mental health and lower utilisation of healthcare (UK Department of Health, 2009). While our qualitative evidence to date suggests a range of benefits from FWB, there is a need for empirical demonstration of its cost-effectiveness through rigorous economic evaluation.

Acknowledgement: The work reported here was supported by funding from the Australian Government Cooperative Research Centre's Program through the Desert Knowledge CRC (DK-CRC), Core project 4: Sustainable Desert Settlements. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the views of DK-CRC or its participants.

We would like to acknowledge the involvement of Alice Springs Family Wellbeing facilitators and participants. We would also like to thank Vicki Saunders for designing model 1.

References

- ABS. Australian Bureau of Statistics (2006). 'Census Tables 2006' Census of Population and Housing. Cat no. 2068.0. Accessed 13 August 2010 from www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/d3310114.nsf/home/census.
- Australian Government Infrastructure Australia (2009). 'National Infrastructure Priorities. Infrastructure for an Economically, Socially, and Environmentally Sustainable Future'. Accessed 5 August 2010 from http://www.infrastructureaustralia.gov.au/files/National_Infrastructure_Priorities.pdf.
- Barron L. and Gauntlet, E. (2002). 'WACOSS Housing and Sustainable Communities Indicators Project'. Paper presented at *Sustaining our Communities* International Local Agenda 21 Conference, Adelaide 3-6 March 2002. http://www.adelaide.sa.gov.au/soc/barron_gauntlet.pdf.
- Campbell, R., Pound, P., Pope, C., Britten, N., Pill, R., Morgan and Donovan J. (2002). 'Evaluating Meta-ethnography: A Synthesis of Qualitative Research on Lay Experiences of Diabetes and Diabetes Care'. *Social Science and Medicine*, 56 (4), pp. 671-684.
- Common, M.S. (1995). *Sustainability and Policy: Limits to Economics*. Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, Australia.
- Commonwealth of Australia (2008). 'Northern Territory Emergency Response. Report of the NTER Review Board'. Canberra. Accessed 13 August 2010 from www.nterreview.gov.au/docs/report_nter_review.PDF.
- Cornell, S. (2002). 'The importance and power of Indigenous self-governance: evidence from the United States'. Presentation to *Reconciliation Australia Indigenous Governance Conference*, 3 to 5 April 2002, Canberra. Accessed 13 August 2010 from http://www.reconciliation.org.au/igawards/media/Indigenouspercent20Governancepercent20Conferencepercent202002/Stephen_Cornell_2.doc.

- Cornell, S. and J.P. Kalt. (1992). *Reloading the Dice: Improving the chances for economic development on American Indian reservations*. John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. Accessed 13 August 2010 from <http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/hpaied/key.htm>
- Every, A., Williams, A. and Tsey, K. (2003). *Caring and Sharing: Arnte-Arnte Aremele Antheme Family Wellbeing Community Report*, Tangentyere Council, Alice Springs.
- Foster, D., Tangentyere Council Research Unit and Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre (Australia) (2005). *Population and mobility in the town camps of Alice Springs: a report / prepared by Tangentyere Council Research Unit, Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre, Canberra*, <http://www.desertknowledge.com.au/crc>.
- Hartwig, M.C. (1965). *The Process of White Settlement in the Alice Springs District and its Effects upon the Aboriginal Inhabitants 1860-1894*. Thesis submitted for Doctor of Philosophy in History, University of Adelaide. Accessed July 2009 from <http://digital.library.adelaide.edu.au/dspace/bitstream/2440/20340/1/09phh337.pdf>.
- Haswell-Elkins, M., Kavanagh, D., Tsey, K., Reilly, L., Cadet-James, Y., Laliberté, A., Wilson, A. J., Doran, C. (2010). 'Psychometric validation of the Growth and Empowerment Measure (GEM) applied with Indigenous Australians', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* 44, pp. 791-799.
- Hunt, J., Smith, D., Garling, S., and Sanders, W. (Eds) (2008). *Contested Governance. Culture, Power and Institutions in Indigenous Australia*, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research Monograph No 29.
- Long, S., Memmott, P. (2007). 'Aboriginal Mobility and the Sustainability of Communities: Case Studies from North-West Queensland and Eastern Northern Territory'. *Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre, Working Paper Series* 5. Accessed 13 August 2010 from <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.156.6529>.
- McCashen, W. (2005). *The Strengths Approach: a Strengths Based Resource for Sharing Power and Creating Change*. St. Luke's Innovative Resources, Bendigo, Victoria.
- Maddison, S. (2009). *Black politics: Inside the complexity of Aboriginal political culture*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney.
- McKenzie, S. (2004). 'Social Sustainability: Towards Some Definitions', *Hawke Research Institute Working paper series No 27*. Accessed 5 August 2010 from <http://www.unisa.edu.au/hawkeinstitute/publications/workingpaper.asp#27>.

- Martin D.F. (2003). *Rethinking the Design of Indigenous Organisations: the Need for Strategic Engagement*. Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research Discussion paper 248/2003.
- Meagher, G. (2000). 'Social Sustainability in Australia', *Canberra Bulletin of Public Administration*, 0811-6318 No. 96, pp. 63-78.
- Noblit, G.W. and Hare, R.D. (1988). 'Meta-ethnography: Synthesising Qualitative Studies', *Qualitative Research Methods*, Newbury Park, Sage Publications.
- Office for the Status of Women (2002). '*The Safe Living in Aboriginal Communities Project*'. Commonwealth of Australia.
- Pearson, N. (2006). Arthur Mills Oration, Royal College of Physicians, 7 May. Accessed 13 August 2010 from http://www.cyi.org.au/WEBSITEpercent20uploads/Speeches_Articlespercent20Folder/Speeches.
- Rees, S., Tsey, K., Every, A., Williams, E., Cadet-James, Y and Whiteside, M. (2004). 'Empowerment and Human Rights in Addressing Violence and Improving Health in Australian Indigenous Communities', *Health and Human Rights*, 8 (1) pp. 95 – 113.
- Sanders, W. (2004). *Indigenous People in the Alice Springs Town Camps: The 2001 Census Data.*, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research Discussion Paper no 260/2004. www.caepr.anu.edu.au/system/files/Publications/DP/2004_DP260.pdf.
- Sanders, W. (2007). A vast improvement: the 2006 enumeration in the Alice Springs town camps, In Morphy F. (Ed) *Agency, contingency and census process. Observations of the 2006 Indigenous Enumeration Strategy in remote Aboriginal Australia* http://epress.anu.edu.au/caepr_series/no_28/pdf_instructions.html.
- South Australian Aboriginal Health Partnership (2005). 'Aboriginal Health — Everybody's Business. Social and Emotional Wellbeing'. *A South Australian Strategy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People 2005-2010*. Adelaide: Department of Health.
- Sullivan, P. (2006). *Indigenous Governance. The Harvard Project on Native American Economic Development and Appropriate Principles of Governance for Aboriginal Australia*. AIATSIS Research Discussion Paper no 17.
- Tangentyere Council (2006). Annual report 2004-2005 and 2005-2006. Accessed August 2010 from http://www.tangentyere.org.au/publications/annual_reports.
- Tangentyere Council (2010). Tangentyere Council. Accessed August 2010 from <http://www.tangentyere.org.au/about/governance>.
- Taylor, J. (2002). 'The context for observation', in D. Martin, F. Morphy, W. Sanders and J. Taylor, *Making Sense of the Census: Observations of the 2001 Enumeration in*

Remote Aboriginal Australia, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research Monograph No. 22 (reprinted 2004), ANU E Press, Canberra.

- Tsey, K. (1997). Aboriginal Self-Determination, Education and Health: Towards a More Radical Attitude Towards Aboriginal Education, *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, 21 (1) pp. 77-83.
- Tsey, K. (2008). 'Tackling Endemic Substance Abuse Among Indigenous Australians: The Contribution of Values-Based Family Empowerment Education', *Forum on Public Policy*, Journal of the Oxford Round Table. 2008, (1). Accessed 12 July 2010 from <http://www.forumonpublicpolicy.com/archivespring08/tsey.australia.pdf>.
- Tsey, K. and Every, A. (2000). 'Evaluating Aboriginal Empowerment Programs: The Case of Family WellBeing', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, 24 (5), pp. 509-14.
- Tsey, K., Travers, H., Gibson, T., Whiteside, M., Cadet-James, Y., Haswell-Elkins, M., McCalman, J., and Wilson, A. (2005). 'The Role of Empowerment Through Life Skills Development in Building Comprehensive Primary Health Care Systems in Indigenous Australia', *Australian Journal of Primary Care*, 11 (2) pp. 16-25.
- United Kingdom Department of Health (2009). 'Flourishing People, Connected Communities. A Framework for Developing Well-being'. Accessed September 2009 from <http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Healthcare/Mentalhealth/NewHorizons/index.htm>
- Wallerstein, N. (2006). *What Is The Evidence on Effectiveness of Empowerment to Improve Health?*, WHO Regional Office for Europe. Health Evidence Network Report. Accessed March 2009 from <http://www.euro.who.int/Document/E88086.pdf> .
- Wild, R and Anderson, P (2007). *Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle: Little Children are Sacred*. Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse. http://www.nt.gov.au/dcm/inquirysaac/pdf/bipacsa_final_report.pdf.