

**EXPLORING BARRIERS AND  
OPPORTUNITIES FOR PARTNERSHIP  
FORMATION IN THE CONTEXT OF  
CAN WA'S STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP  
INITIATIVE**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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### BACKGROUND

The Strategic Partnership Initiative was Community Arts Network Western Australia's (CAN WA) Wheatbelt strategic initiative aimed at providing opportunities for Aboriginal<sup>1</sup> arts and cultural development and developing strong working partnerships between local governments of the Eastern Wheatbelt and the Noongar<sup>2</sup> community. Broadly, CANWA's Strategic Partnership Initiative aimed to facilitate a community wide awareness of Noongar culture, values and perspectives, that is Noongar ways of knowing, being and doing (Martin, 2003; Moreton-Robinson, 2003; Oxenham, 2000).

Importantly, CAN WA's Strategic Partnership Initiative needs to be positioned within the broader context of CAN WA's work in the Wheatbelt over the past six years and understood as a comprehensive approach to community change/empowerment that engages across multiple levels of the social ecology. CANWA has a commitment to the Wheatbelt and this initiative follows on from those evolving relationships and projects that have their foundation in Kellerberrin, and that have now spread to other towns in the region, for example, the establishment of the Kellerberrin Indigenous Arts and Cultural Development Unit (See e.g., Green & Sonn, 2008; Sonn, Drew & Kasat, 2002), and the Voices of the Wheatbelt project (Sonn, 2009).

The different levels of intervention, aims and practices associated with change at each of the levels in the context of CAN WA's Strategic Partnership Initiative are displayed in Table 1 below. The different levels outlined in the table should be seen as highly interconnected with change at the personal level (e.g., increased self- confidence, skills and affirmation of cultural identity) leading to an increased likelihood of participation at the group level and in community life more generally. This in turn increases the likelihood and capacity for individuals and groups to engage in 'taking

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<sup>1</sup> CAN WA has found that local people generally express a preference to be described as 'Aboriginal' over 'Indigenous'. Aboriginal or 'Noongar' as the overarching language and cultural grouping is therefore used throughout this paper.

action' to institute structural, systemic and symbolic change for collective empowerment. Moane (2003) refers to movement through the different levels as the cycle of liberation.

**Table 1: Processes and practices associated with empowerment in the context of CAN WA's Strategic Partnership Initiative**

Level	Aims	Practice
<b>Personal</b>	Building strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Recording and sharing stories about Noongar history, culture, values and perspectives.</li> <li>- Provide practical support, assistance and resources central to empowerment processes including governance skills training.</li> </ul>
<b>Interpersonal</b>	Making connections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Bringing people together to create an increased sense of community, belonging and connection.</li> <li>- Providing opportunities for Noongar people to participate in community life.</li> <li>- Worked with the community to try and create connections and link Aboriginal people with non-Aboriginal people and organisations.</li> </ul>
<b>Political</b> I.e., structural, systemic & symbolic	Taking Action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Collaborating with local government to facilitate partnership formation between local government and the Noongar community.</li> <li>- Engaging the shire in dialogue about the barriers to partnership formation.</li> <li>- Developing analysis of power relations and exploring barriers to partnership formation between the local government and the Noongar community.</li> <li>- Providing opportunities for Noongar people to voice concerns and sharing Noongar perspectives on issues affecting the Noongar community.</li> <li>- Sharing and recording stories about Noongar history and life in the communities for Noongar people.</li> </ul>

(Adapted from Moane, 2003, p. 98).

In other research projects CAN WA has initiated in the Wheatbelt and elsewhere there has been a focus on conceptualizing and exploring the benefits of arts practice in communities (See e.g., Conceptualizing Community Development, 2002; Drawing out community empowerment, 2008; Naked Practice, 2009). The Strategic Partnership Initiative continued this engagement on the grounds of promoting inclusion through arts practice. In this particular program of work, participation in arts and cultural activities, celebrating and acknowledging Noongar culture and the values and perspectives of Noongar people, and increasing community wide cultural understanding and awareness were addressed through oral history projects including “Bush Babies”, “Noongar Voices of the Central Eastern Wheatbelt” and associated activities such as the Djuran excursion (CAN WA, 2010b). These different projects have been highly successful as indicated by the media coverage and feedback from people who participated (See e.g., Moornjukun – ‘Black Sisters’: Recording the stories of the Badjaling Bush Babies and their Noongar Midwives, 2011; Noongar Voices paints a unique picture of Wheatbelt life, 2010). In addition to this CAN WA continued to provide practical support to the Noongar communities across the shires, for example in planning for the Keela dreaming festival and in providing governance training and skills development opportunities.

The oral history projects that CAN WA initiated as part of the initiative are clearly connected with change at the personal and interpersonal levels, that is, building strengths and making connections both within the Noongar community and at a broader community level. As well as this, these oral history projects provide opportunities for the broader community to learn about Noongar culture, history and perspectives, which can help to break down barriers between the Noongar and Wadjella community. Moreover, the very act of sharing stories about Noongar history, culture and identity, particularly those stories that have not been heard before, is itself political, and can be seen as the Noongar community ‘taking action’ and contributing to a social change agenda.

In reflecting on previous projects and in the planning process of the Strategic Partnership Initiative, CAN WA was interested in exploring how contexts of inequitable power relations limit the potential of their work. Therefore the Strategic Partnership Initiative incorporated an explicit focus on the barriers to partnership formation, and the creation of receptive social environments for supporting

Aboriginal empowerment more generally, in a context marked by a history and continuing legacy of colonisation. While this has always been an implicit part of CAN WA's work, the Strategic Partnership Initiative is the first time the organisation has explicitly sought to effect change at levels of representation and government, that is, at the political (structural, systemic and symbolic) level. This required an examination of the broader sociocultural and historical context in which their community cultural development work is situated. For the objectives of the overall Strategic Partnership Initiative to be addressed in a meaningful way, CAN WA recognized the need to critically examine barriers to inter racial partnerships (Reyes-Cruz & Sonn, 2010), thus providing the rationale for and focus of the current study.

### **THE CURRENT RESEARCH**

The current investigation explored the relationships between the Noongar community and the local government from the perspectives of different stakeholders in the community, and the perceived barriers to partnership formation from a Noongar and a Wadjella<sup>3</sup> perspective. The study was specifically concerned with:

- Identifying and exploring the barriers to partnership formation and participation from both a local government and Noongar perspective.
- Identifying opportunities for strong partnership formation between local government and the Noongar community.

This examination of barriers was contextualised in the current research, within the longer history of race relations in Australia and informed by an understanding of oppression as “structural, institutional, interpersonal and intrapsychic, outrageous and civilised, cultivated in the media, the market and the academy” (Fine, 2006, p. 90). From this view, systems, identities and ideologies, while tied to existing and historic power relationships are considered to be fluid so that social change is always possible. As noted by Christens, Hanlin and Speer (2007) however, the “ability to facilitate systems change is constrained by social power, particularly the capacity to shape ideology” (p. 229). The current investigation sought to make explicit “the symbolic power and privileges afforded by our different social group memberships and how these may impact upon relationships and everyday interactions” (Sonn & Green, 2006, p. 3). Symbolic power then, has

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<sup>3</sup> Wadjella is the Noongar term for White person.

implications for the potential of CAN WA's community empowerment endeavors as well as for partnership possibilities between local government and the Noongar community, and thus for social change.

## **DATA SOURCES AND DATA GATHERING: PEOPLE AND PROCESSES**

Interviews were conducted with both Noongar community members and shire representatives in the Central Eastern Wheatbelt towns of Quairading, Kellerberrin, Merredin and Tammin. Four separate interviews were conducted with local government representatives (Wadjella's), with both the CEO and the Community Development Officer (CDO) usually participating in these interviews. However, in the case of one shire, the CDO was not available to be interviewed. In total, seven Wadjellas were involved in the research, four male CEO's and three female CDO's, all of whom were forty years and over.

Nine Noongar people participated in the current research, which involved one focus group and three individual interviews with Noongar community members. While one 'young adult' participated, the other Noongar interviewee's ages ranged between 40 and 75. The Noongar people involved in individual interviews were each considered respected Elders in their communities<sup>4</sup>. This research was also informed by ongoing conversations with CAN WA, including the development of the workshop with government and other agency stakeholders referred to as a Creative Think Tank, informal conversations with both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community members and general observations made during the fieldwork phase.

## **DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS**

The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed in the first instance following standard procedures for doing thematic analysis. The second stage involved analysing the interviews to explore 'discourses', defined as:

the common-sense assumptions and taken-for-granted ideas, belief systems and myths that groups of people share and through which they understand each other. Social, cultural

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<sup>4</sup> Participants were each paid an Elders fee by CAN WA in appreciation of their time and knowledge.

and historical processes are produced through discourses, which limit our experiences, understandings of self, and our relations with others. (Mama, 1995, p. 98)

Analysis focused on the common sense understandings of the barriers to partnership formation and participation from both the Noongar and Wadjella perspective, thus elucidating understandings of the 'other', which have implications for effective engagement and relationship building between communities.

### **HOW DID NOONGAR PARTICIPANTS CONSTRUCT BARRIERS TO PARTNERSHIP?**

Following the analysis of transcripts four interrelated themes were developed for how Noongar participants constructed the barriers to participation. The themes identified were disregard, dispossession, cultural mistrust and being misunderstood and are informed by how Walter (2010) spoke about the Domain of Aboriginality, a domain largely indicative of a marginalized social position. The different themes represent different social and symbolic resources participants used to account for the barriers to partnership and the subsequent implications for themselves and their communities within the broader context. These themes are displayed in Table 2 below.

**Table 2: Key themes and descriptions for Noongar constructions of barriers**

Theme	Description
<b>Disregard</b>	<p>Drawing from Walter (2010), this theme refers to the treatment of Aboriginal people as inferior, as less than. It describes the feeling of being treated as inferior.</p> <p>e.g., Lack of consultation and not being considered as part of the community, being dominated, myths and stereotypes, experiences of overt racism.</p>
<b>Dispossession</b>	<p>Drawing from Walter (2010) this relates to the dispossession of Aboriginal people from culture, family, community, land and hope. The narrative of dispossession emphasised the importance of culture continuity and the fragmentation of culture, family and community brought about by processes of colonisation, which continue today.</p> <p>It can also relate to the lack of awareness and recognition of Aboriginal culture and identity.</p>

<b>Cultural mistrust</b>	This narrative reflects a deep mistrust of White people and society, based on the history of colonisation and racism, and continued social exclusion, marginalisation, exploitation and disregard.
<b>Being misunderstood</b>	This narrative relates to the silencing or erasure of history, and disconnection of this history from the issues currently facing Aboriginal communities, that have their roots in colonisation, racism and failed government policies.

The theme of disregard refers to the treatment of Aboriginal people as inferior, as less than white people, and being treated with disrespect. It describes the feeling of being treated as inferior as reported by some of the participants. Disregard points to the over-visibility of Aboriginal Australians as social problems and the normalization of disrespect for Aboriginal people and culture, with the “constant denigration of Aboriginal people...twisted into the daily fabric of the nation’s conversations” (Walter, 2010, p. 30).

The theme of dispossession speaks to the ongoing effects of the dispossession of culture, family, community, land and of hope. Participants variously spoke of forms of dispossession and also the non-recognition of Aboriginal people’s experiences and worldviews and how these may influence everyday life. This non-recognition is often discussed as cultural insensitivity, but the dispossession has deeper and longer roots and is not only a matter of insensitivity.

Closely related to the notion of dispossession was the idea that white society does not understand and choose not to understand the deeper roots of Aboriginal exclusion and how this plays out as a barrier to partnership. In particular, participants spoke of the silencing of violent history and blaming Aboriginal people for their situation. The dominating power relations are still reflected in the ways in which Noongar people feel they and their cultural values are not respected, undermined, and portrayed in negative ways. These are powerful narratives that others hold of Aboriginal people and that Aboriginal people are fully aware of and report as barriers to their participation in broader community and in local government.



The notion of cultural mistrust reflects the way in which Aboriginal people have constructed ways to deal with broader white society as a result of the history of oppressive race relations. The theme is connected with the other notions and it speaks to ongoing disregard, dispossession and the continuing failure to work in respectful and inclusive ways with Aboriginal people. Cultural mistrust is rooted in the history of colonisation and racism, and it speaks to the responses to those practices and how these are perpetuated today.

These four themes capture some of the social and symbolic resources Noongar participants used to discuss the barriers to partnerships and relationship with the broader communities. These stories illustrate the role of symbolic power and representation in establishing and maintaining Aboriginal inequality and disadvantage in the Australian context, and specifically, in these smaller communities, which can be seen as a microcosm of broader society.

### **HOW DID LOCAL GOVERNMENT CONSTRUCT BARRIERS TO PARTNERSHIP?**

Three interrelated themes were identified in ‘shire talk’, representing the different social and symbolic resources participants used to account for the barriers to partnership. These were: culture blame, abstract liberalism and equality of opportunity and silencing and forgetting the past. The shire told a very different story of the barriers to partnership formation and where they arise, reflecting the different resources available for understanding/ constructing 1) Aboriginal people and culture, 2) the role/responsibility of local government/White Australia in relation to the continuing disadvantage of Aboriginal people and 3) race and racism. The three identified themes were discussed in relation to Whiteness, which offers a conceptual lens for understanding “the way in which dominance and privilege is constructed and maintained and how it perpetuates the unfair distribution of power” (Sonn & Green, 2006, p. 9). The themes identified are displayed in Table 3 below.

**Table 3: Key themes and descriptions for local government constructions of barriers**

Theme	Description
<b>Abstract Liberalism (Bonilla Silva, 2006)</b>	This involves using ideas associated with political liberalism (e.g., equal opportunity) and economic liberalism (e.g., choice, individualism) in an

	<p>abstract manner to explain racial matters (e.g. Aboriginal disadvantage). This discourse has the effect of constructing Australia as a society not divided along racial lines, and in that sense as post-racial. This discourse involves assertions that everyone should be treated equally and not given 'special privileges' or 'tokenism in employment', in fact affirmative action of any kind is presented as divisive of the broader community. This discourse assumes we are all the same and therefore there is no need for special measures for engaging with one group over another.</p> <p>Equality of opportunity, one of the assumptions of abstract liberalism, sits under this broader theme. This theme, which constructs Australian society as egalitarian, fair, with equal opportunities available for all is accompanied by the construction of White Australia as 'understandably fed up', having done all they (we) can to support Aboriginal people, and the assertion that it is up to 'them' to make the most of the opportunities that are available.</p>
<p><b>Culture blame</b></p>	<p>This narrative constructs Aboriginal people and culture as the root cause of Aboriginal disadvantage, marginalisation and disempowerment, rather than locating these circumstances in the sociocultural, historical and political contexts.</p> <p>E.g., Family feuding, apathy &amp; welfare dependency, the construction of the 'good Aboriginal'.</p>
<p><b>Silencing and forgetting the past</b></p>	<p>Silencing and forgetting the past is about the erasure, denial, mitigation of the history of colonisation and racism in this country and the failure/refusal to recognise/acknowledge the continuing impacts for Aboriginal people and culture of this history and contemporary circumstance. This theme is about what we choose to remember and choose to forget, which has implications for where blame is attributed.</p>

Drawing from the work of Bonilla Silva (2006) who discussed abstract liberalism as one of the central frames of a colour blind racism in the American context, we use abstract liberalism to describe a narrative common across interviews with shire representatives that constructs the nation, and more specifically the shires, as not divided along racial lines and in that sense as 'post-racial'. This involved assertions that everyone should be treated equally and not given 'special privileges' or 'tokenism in employment'. In fact, affirmative action or differential treatment of any kind is presented as unfair and divisive of the broader community. This narrative assumes we are all the same and therefore asserts that there is no need for special measures for engaging with one

group over another, or for engaging differently with different groups. Regarding each person as an 'individual' with 'choices' this narrative is underpinned by the assumptions of an egalitarian society and the idea of meritocracy. Another key assumption of abstract liberalism, is the idea of equality of opportunity, which was particularly pertinent throughout local government constructions of barriers. This narrative constructs the shire and the broader Australian community in a positive light, as 'understandably fed up', having done their best to support Aboriginal people, who are constructed as unable to help themselves.

The narrative culture blame constructs Aboriginal people and culture as the root cause of Aboriginal disadvantage, marginalization and disempowerment, as opposed to locating these circumstances in their sociocultural, historical and political contexts. Rather than understanding issues in all their complexity, there seemed to be a tendency to jump to a culture blame explanation within local government talk about barriers and other issues facing the Noongar community. Finally silencing and forgetting the past is used to describe the tendency within Wadjella talk to mitigate, deny, or fail to acknowledge historical realities. The silencing and forgetting of the past is about the erasure, denial, mitigation of the history of colonisation and racism in this country and the failure/refusal to recognize/acknowledge the continuing impacts for Aboriginal people and culture of this history and contemporary circumstance. What we choose to remember and choose to forget, as a nation and as individuals, has implications for where blame is attributed and how Aboriginal empowerment and partnership is approached.

In 'shire-talk' about barriers to partnership between the shire and the Noongar community local government representatives are actively constructing their scope of justice, or moral community. These assertions may seem reasonable, just and fair in the absence of an understanding or acknowledgment of the operation of symbolic power in the sociocultural, historical and political contexts in which they are embedded and of the history of dispossessions and exclusions experienced by Aboriginal people. This exemplifies the important need to examine the different ways in which common sense understandings can function to further marginalize and exclude Noongar people from community life, and also of sharing stories about Noongar history, culture and identity.

The consequence of the way the local government constructs their moral community is reflected in the narratives identified in Noongar talk: dispossession, disregard, being misunderstood and cultural mistrust. It is these narratives that need to be transformed, and this can only be achieved by changing the way government (at all levels) 'does business' with Aboriginal people and communities, and the way broader Australia thinks about Aboriginal people and culture and the issues affecting Aboriginal communities, that is, by creating new narratives for partnership. The creation of new narratives for partnership is essentially about thinking differently about 1) Aboriginal people and culture, 2) the role/responsibility of all levels of government in Aboriginal empowerment and 3) necessarily viewing issues affecting Noongar people and communities in all their complexity, thus avoiding the tendency to engage in culture blame, silencing and forgetting the past and the application of abstract notions of liberalism. Creating new narratives for partnership is about widening non-Aboriginal Australia's scope of justice to include Aboriginal people, where injustice is taken to refer to the outrageous and the civilized, the violent and the mundane, and to both complicit and intentional acts. Furthermore, 'justice' here must be understood in the context of a history of dispossession and exclusions and the lived reality of Aboriginality. In this way, ignoring, silencing or choosing to forget the history of colonisation and the complexity of the issues affecting Aboriginal communities, is a social injustice, which stands as a major barrier to partnership formation between communities.

### **POINTS FOR DISRUPTION: WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS OF THIS WORK?**

The complexity involved in the working of racialised oppression highlights the importance of multiple levels of interventions required to effect social change. Researchers have highlighted different strategies for social intervention guided by a commitment to participation, working from the ground up, an ethics of relatedness and developing solutions to problems drawing on the different knowledge and experiences of all stakeholders

The strategies can include:

- a) Working together with a view to raise critical awareness about sources and processes of exclusion and identifying and reclaiming strengths that can form the basis for resilience and action.

- b) Fostering the creation of social settings in which people can come together to create partnerships across social and cultural divides and gain access to networks and resources.
- c) Generating counter stories and representations and engaging in the deconstruction of dominant ideologies as part of the process of promoting broader level social inclusion.

Working on the ground through arts practice on the one hand and seeking systemic and structural change on the other, CAN WA's Strategic Partnership Initiative provides lessons about collaboration for change.

Community arts such as the oral history project, "Bush Babies" and "Noongar Voices of the Central Wheatbelt" have illustrated the importance of storytelling for reclaiming silenced stories. These projects are powerful and should be encouraged because they are vital to providing spaces for joint participation and they are examples of communities to telling their own stories that are important for cultural continuity and for change. It is recommended that community arts projects continue to be developed in partnership with communities as an important means to tell about Aboriginal lives in communities, humanize social relations, and to contribute to the broader projects of reclaiming and rewriting devalued and silenced identities, and moving towards complex shared understandings of issues.

Collaborating with the Noongar community has meant that external agencies such as CAN WA provide pragmatic support and assistance to Aboriginal people. These types of support are important aspects of community empowerment. At a different level, there is bridging and networking activities with local government and other relevant agencies that are concerned with the promotion of community wellbeing. Based on this it is recommended that CAN WA continue to disseminate the knowledge about building partnerships for change within the broader context of histories of oppression.

These programs were limited in terms of time and resources but significantly, provided opportunities for Noongar people to be included in projects aimed at reclaiming and telling stories about their lives in the broader community context. Importantly as prefigurative action, this work lays the foundation for future actions aimed at community inclusion and the telling of stories serves to break down barriers and to inform/shape relationships. In this regard CAN WA recognizes that

approaches to Aboriginal empowerment can't be piecemeal as reflected in their long term commitment to the Wheatbelt. However CAN WA recognizes the importance of understanding the social, ecological and historical context of change work. In their view LGA's are best positioned to promote change and social inclusion of Aboriginal people into everyday community life. Moreover, as asserted by Social Justice Commissioner Gooda, a new approach to development that embraces Aboriginal culture and identity is needed, emphasising that all levels of government, "have a responsibility to ensure that society's structures, laws and processes facilitate full and open engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander citizens" (AHRC, 2011, p. 23). Because of this there is a need to recognize the importance of changing narratives that work in exclusionary ways, because it is through reworking these that we begin to create new stories for partnerships. Only by developing an awareness of how different narratives function in everyday common sense ways to exclude the Aboriginal community from participation in broader Australian society, are we able to move forward together. Thus there is an important need to not only create new positive narratives and representations about Aboriginal people and culture but also expose exclusionary narratives that pervade the everyday. These narratives, as we have shown, while seemingly benign, work to further marginalize and exclude Aboriginal people, but do not necessarily involve malice or 'intent to be racist'. Indeed the construction of the 'intent to be racist' as a necessary to label something as 'racist' or exclusionary, is itself a further barrier to effective dialogue about racialised exclusion/oppression.

Importantly, there were some examples of local government disrupting exclusionary narratives and attempting to create new ones. Providing the opportunity for local government to speak about the challenges involved in engaging the Noongar community and building interracial partnerships, was seen as important by local government representatives, who acknowledge the importance of dialogue about the issues/challenges with outsiders as well as others experiencing similar challenges. There were examples in shire talk about barriers where there was recognition of the need for flexibility, awareness and a proactive approach by local government to engaging and building relationships with the Noongar community that rebuilds trust.

## **ENGAGING WITH COMPLEX UNDERSTANDINGS OF ISSUES**

Another important aspect of CAN WA's engagement with the Noongar community is the commitment to a complex view of understanding the challenges confronting communities, and that a long term commitment is required to create inclusive communities. The Strategic Partnership Initiative builds on previous projects and embodies this commitment. It draws from the knowledge of working on the ground with Noongar and local government to understand barriers and the possibilities for change, based on institutional knowledge generated through cycles of reflection on action. It is through these practices that CANWA has created an understanding of the importance of anchoring projects and programs in the cultural realities of communities that they seek to partner in empowerment work.

Based on this work it is recommended that there be a follow up Creative Think Tank to provide feedback and opportunities for dialogue about how barriers can be understood and the powerful ways in which they shape community relations. This research shows the complex problematic understandings that people have about the issues in communities, but it also suggests that by coming together people can begin to name the issues and the different ways they are understood. It is in this context that community arts projects have a powerful role as a vehicle for making explicit the issues and aspirations in communities and important providing tools for producing shared agendas and breaking down the cycles of blaming people for problems, which they have little or no control over, but which stem from a history of dispossession and exclusions.

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I want for my children – as I do for your children – that they grow really, really old together having led fantastic lives that have allowed them to make a lifetime contribution to the health and wellbeing of the broader community and their families – that when they were tested by life’s challenges they pulled together to face them as a people – that they drew upon the best of what they had to find positive solutions to the things that have tested even our own generation. That they purposively took on those things that they felt did not reflect what they wanted in a fair, honest, respectful and harmonious society that they learnt to hold and celebrate Aboriginal culture and history as an essential part of the Australian story because they saw themselves as part of it – connected to it, proud of it and centred by it. A truly reconciled community. (Pearson, 2010)

The Strategic Partnership Initiative was Community Arts Network Western Australia’s (CAN WA) Wheatbelt strategic initiative aimed at providing opportunities for Aboriginal<sup>5</sup> arts and cultural development and developing strong working partnerships between local government of the Eastern Wheatbelt and the Noongar community. CAN WA’s role in the Wheatbelt is to build community capacity through “affirming culture and expressing this through the arts, mentoring and developing individuals, modeling Aboriginal community leadership and creating opportunities for Aboriginal participation in community life” (CAN WA, 2010a). CAN WA’s vision is a future where culture, creativity and the arts are known to be essential for community wellbeing and are at the core of a just, diverse and resilient society (CAN WA, 2010a). Underpinning their Community Cultural Development practice are the values of (1) respect for all people, cultures and the environment, (2) social justice, engagement and participation for all, (3) creativity and the freedom to express identity and culture, and (4) resilience and building community strengths and resources (CAN WA, 2010a). CAN WA’s is a thoroughly strengths based approach to community development that

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<sup>5</sup> CAN WA has found that local people generally express a preference to be described as ‘Aboriginal’ over ‘Indigenous’. Aboriginal or ‘Noongar’ as the overarching language and cultural grouping is therefore used throughout this paper.

supports cultures and identities, recognising the multiple and transgenerational layers of disadvantage and trauma confronting Aboriginal communities whilst also acknowledging the strengths and resources of Aboriginal communities for their own empowerment.

CAN WA “understand the need to involve the community in processes that help them track the past, understand and explore the present, and use their imagination to help manifest the future” (CAN WA, 2010a). Broadly, CANWA’s Strategic Partnership Initiative aimed to facilitate a community wide awareness of Noongar culture, values and perspectives, that is Noongar ways of knowing, being and doing (Martin, 2003; Moreton-Robinson, 2003; Oxenham, 2000). By facilitating opportunities for Noongar people to share their stories, opportunities and settings are created for the whole community to come together in celebration and acknowledgment of the rich history of the Wheatbelt and the stories of those who live there. Moreover, these stories, which may not have been shared or heard before, facilitate an awareness and understanding of the history, culture and lived reality of Aboriginal people. In challenging myths, stereotypes and misunderstandings through that circulate about Aboriginal people and culture through the creation of alternative settings (Sarason, 1972) and counter stories, these opportunities promote the inclusion of Aboriginal people in the scope of justice of the wider Australian society (Morgan & Drew, 2010). Scope of justice refers to “the psychological boundary within which considerations of fairness and moral rules govern and conduct” (Opatow, 1993, p. 72). Our scope of justice determines who is included and who is excluded from our moral community, that is, to whom considerations of fairness apply (Opatow, 1990, 1993, 2001). These tasks have been described as essential in moving toward true reconciliation, based on partnership, trust and mutual respect (Australian Human Rights Commission (Australian Human Rights Commission, (AHHRC), 2011) as emphasised in the following quotation.

Reconciliation involves building mutually respectful relationships between Indigenous and other Australians that allow us to work together to solve problems and generate success that’s in everyone’s best interests. Achieving reconciliation involves raising awareness and knowledge of Indigenous history and culture, changing attitudes which are often based on myths and misunderstandings, and encouraging action where everyone plays their part in

building a better relationship between us as fellow Australians. (Reconciliation Australia, 2011)

The inclusion of Aboriginal people in wider Australia's scope of justice is essentially about creating more receptive social environments<sup>6</sup> (Campbell, Cornish, Gibbs & Scott, 2010) for recognising and working to transform the social injustices and disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal Australia on a daily basis. Social Justice Commissioner Gooda has talked about the need to build 'stronger and deeper relationships' between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the broader Australian community, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and government at all levels, and within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, thereby creating more receptive social environments for Aboriginal empowerment, which necessarily prioritizes Aboriginal self determination (AHRC, 2011). Gooda argues that relationship building and effective engagement with Aboriginal people and communities necessitates the resetting of relationships between Aboriginal Australia, the broader Australian community and government. Importantly however, this resetting of relationships entails acknowledging the 'brutal wrongs' and reforming systems to address the disadvantages suffered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as opposed to 'wiping the slate clean'. Utilising the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007) he asserts that a new approach to development that embraces Aboriginal culture and identity is needed, emphasising that all levels of government, "have a responsibility to ensure that society's structures, laws and processes facilitate full and open engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander citizens" (AHRC, 2011, p. 23).

It is within this broader context that the Strategic Partnership Initiative was undertaken and an aspect of the initiative will be evaluated. Of particular focus in this report will be an exploration of the perceived barriers to building strong working partnerships from both a local government and a Noongar perspective. CAN WA's engagement with the Noongar community in the context of these barriers can provide lessons for the broader Australian community and for local government in particular about how they ought to 'do business' with Aboriginal communities. This will also help elucidate the potential gateways or opportunities for effective engagement and relationship building

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<sup>6</sup>Campbell et al. (2010) discuss 'receptive social environments' as those in 'which the powerful are likely to heed the voices of the poor' (p. 964).

i.e., strong working partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Before outlining the aims and objectives of the Strategic Partnership Initiative, the background of the initiative and how it developed, will first be outlined.

## **BACKGROUND: CAN WA'S JOURNEY IN THE WHEATBELT**

Through their work with communities over the past six years, CAN WA has come to recognize the importance of not only learning about and raising community awareness of the marginalized 'other', but the need to understand the self in the midst of uneven power relations (Frankenberg, 1993). As highlighted in a previous CAN WA report, "if we do not engage in this critique of our own identity politics and privilege as part of the process of collaborating with Indigenous communities, we can be complicit in reproducing inequality and not contest the systems and practices that exclude" (Green & Sonn, 2008, p. 61). In other words, the organisation has learnt to be "cognizant of and address the implicit power and privilege of Whiteness in favour of Indigenous terms of reference" (Morgan & Drew, 2010, p. 263). In reflecting on previous projects and in the planning process of the Strategic Partnership Initiative, there was a particular concern with how contexts of inequitable power relations limit the potential of their community cultural development work. CAN WA employees were grappling with the inherent limitations of focusing community development efforts on the empowerment of individuals and groups, that is, on relatively individual, micro-level outcomes, without also working to remove structural, systemic and symbolic impediments to Aboriginal empowerment and partnership that pervade the everyday.

While a strengths based approach that promotes Aboriginal identities, culture/s and history is fundamental to engaging more respectfully with Aboriginal people, and this is something that CAN WA has always done well, the Strategic Partnership Initiative incorporates this additional concern with addressing existing structural, systemic and symbolic impediments to Aboriginal empowerment, that is, of working across multiple levels of analysis and engaging different subsections of the community in this collaborative process. Thus, the initiation of a long term and sustainable process of community change that prioritized building and strengthening relationships between the Noongar and Wadjella<sup>7</sup> community, particularly at the local government level, with

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<sup>7</sup> Wadjella is the Noongar term used to refer to White people.

CAN WA playing an important role in brokering these relationships, was seen to be the most effective way toward achieving substantial social change/social justice in the Wheatbelt. The current research was identified as important in developing an understanding of the micro-politics of culture, power and knowledge in the context of CAN WA's Community Cultural Development practice (Reyes- Cruz & Sonn, 2010), that is, the symbolic barriers that make the development of strong effective partnerships between communities difficult, if not impossible.

### **STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP INITIATIVE**

In 2008, CAN WA initiated a process that sought to facilitate Noongar consultation and contribution to the 'Granite Way' project; an initiative developed between the shires of Bruce Rock, Kellerberrin, Tammin and Quairading, aimed at exploring the development of cultural tourism opportunities at the regions granite outcrops. Through this experience, CAN WA identified the lack of Noongar input and consultation, particularly in regards to cultural protocol and the effective cultural management of the nominated sites. In addition, CAN WA identified the potential opportunities available to local Noongar people through claiming and developing their own stake in the local tourism industry. Deeper conversations with the Noongar communities of the region revealed a range of concerns about the development and management of tourism operations at the granite outcrops as well as concerns around the protection and acknowledgment of many other culturally significant sites in the region. There was significant frustration within the Noongar community around the lack of consultation to date and further meetings revealed a long history of poor relations between local shires and the Noongar community. Representatives from the shires of the Granite Way alliance as well as staff members from the Shire of Merredin have acknowledged the need to engage the whole community and take active steps to improve relationships with the Noongar community. These conversations have highlighted the need for significant groundwork and relationship building to occur before pursuing joint tourism opportunities. With this in mind CAN WA expanded the focus of the Strategic Partnership Initiative from an exploration of local connection to the granite outcrops to facilitating a community wide awareness of Noongar culture, values and perspectives.

The Strategic Partnership Initiative partners includes: Healthway, Department of Indigenous Affairs, Shire of Kellerberrin, Tourism WA, Keller Aboriginal, Challenger TAFE, Victoria University, Department of Local Government and Regional Development, CEO Advocacy Team, WALGA, Department of Culture and Art, Yok Yurok Women Care, Department of Culture and Art, Natural Heritage Trust. The initiative was funded over the period 2008-2011.

## **AIMS AND OBJECTIVES**

The overarching aim of the Strategic Partnership Initiative was to provide a strong foundation for future partnerships and initiatives between the Noongar community and local governments in the region, through:

- Engagement with and participation in community celebration and the development of arts and cultural activities.
- Celebrating and acknowledging contemporary and traditional expressions of Noongar culture as central to local identity and sensitivity to place.
- Increasing community wide understanding and awareness of the values and perspectives of Noongar people.

The specific objectives of the overall Strategic Partnership Initiative were:

1. To support partnerships between four local governments and Aboriginal communities in the Wheatbelt region of Western Australia, specifically Bruce Rock, Kellerberrin, Quairading and Tammin.
2. To identify and assist with the recording of Aboriginal stories.
3. To strengthen the capacity of Aboriginal individuals and communities, through art and cultural activities.
4. To develop and strengthen the relationships within and between Aboriginal communities.
5. To provide opportunities for artistic skills development and cultural expression of Aboriginal people and communities.
6. To enhance the cultural awareness and understanding of Aboriginal communities in local government settings.
7. To foster and promote Aboriginal participation in local government activities.

8. Identify opportunities for cultural tourism through the four local government regions by building upon the cultural vibrancy of the communities within these local government areas.

In other research projects that CAN WA has initiated in the Wheatbelt and elsewhere the focus has been on conceptualising and exploring the benefits of arts practice in communities (See e.g., *Conceptualising Community Development*, 2002; *Drawing out community empowerment*, 2008; *Naked Practice*, 2009). The Strategic Partnership Initiative continued this engagement on the ground to promote inclusion through arts practice. In this particular program of work, participation in arts and cultural activities, celebrating and acknowledging Noongar culture and the values and perspectives of Noongar people, and increasing community wide cultural understanding awareness were addressed through the following projects.

- *Bush Babies* (See Moornjukun – ‘Black Sisters’: Recording the stories of the Badjaling Bush Babies and their Noongar Midwives, 2011). The children born at Badjaling and the Noongar midwives that delivered them were honoured at a special story sharing day at the Badjaling Noongar Community Reserve. The day involved bringing together those born at the reserve, their descendants and descendants of the Noongar midwives to share their stories and celebrate the midwives and the bush hospital they built at the reserve. A film crew from FTI's Indigenous Community Stories program was on hand to assist people to capture their stories on archival quality film as well as oral historian, Mary Anne Jebb, who has been working closely with the Badjaling community and CAN WA to develop the project (CAN WA, 2010b).
- *Noongar Voices of the Central Eastern Wheatbelt*: Noongar people of the Central Eastern Wheatbelt shared their life stories in a three part radio documentary series, *Noongar Voices of the Central Eastern Wheatbelt*, which was aired on ABC Radio National's Indigenous arts and culture program, *Away!* The series drew on extracts from oral history interviews conducted by oral historian Mary Anne Jebb and radio producer Bill Bunbury. The aim of the story-sharing project was to assist Noongar people to record their life stories and provide opportunities for the broader community to gain an insight into Noongar life in the Wheatbelt. 'The programmes give Noongars a chance to tell their own stories and histories, how they had to adapt to a white world and how they kept their



- culture alive through stories of their people and the land,' said radio producer, Bill Bunbury. The programs explored the aspects of Wheatbelt life for Noongar people, how they lived and played, and experiences of growing up on Noongar reserves. The stories span the generations of families who have experienced living and adapting to Wadjella (white man) ways including those who were a part of the Stolen Generations. By sharing their stories, participants have created a moving account of family and community life, Noongar beliefs and connection to Country in the Wheatbelt (CAN WA, 2010b, 2010c).
- *Djuran excursion*: Kellerberrin Elders took Noongar students from Kellerberrin District High School for a day of traditional cultural skills at the Djurin mission site, a place where many of the Elders were born and lived. The students learnt how to make damper on an open fire and helped skin and prepare a kangaroo for cooking. Mary-Anne Jebb brought along recording equipment, teaching students sound recording skills. Throughout the day they interviewed Elders and each other, and enjoyed fresh damper and succulent kangaroo along with stories of life on the reserve (CAN WA, 2010b).

These different projects have been highly successful as indicated by the coverage and feedback from people who participated (See e.g., Moornjukun – 'Black Sisters': Recording the stories of the Badjaling Bush Babies and their Noongar Midwives, 2011; Noongar Voices paints a unique picture of Wheatbelt life, 2010)<sup>8</sup>.

In addition to these community cultural development activities, the Strategic Partnership Initiative incorporated an explicit focus on the barriers to partnership formation and the creation of receptive social environments for supporting Aboriginal empowerment more generally, in a context marked by a history and continuing legacy of colonisation. While this has always been an implicit part of CAN WA's work, the Strategic Partnership Initiative is the first time that CAN WA has explicitly sought to effect change at levels of representation and government. This required an examination of the broader sociocultural and historical context in which their community cultural development work is situated. For the objectives of the Strategic Partnership Initiative to be addressed in a

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<sup>8</sup> The benefits of Community Cultural Development activities such as these have been discussed elsewhere (See e.g., Naked Practice, 2009; Drawing out Community empowerment, 2008 and Conceptualizing Community Cultural Development, 2002) and are beyond the scope of the current report.



meaningful way, CAN WA recognized the need to critically examine barriers to inter racial partnerships (Reyes-Cruz & Sonn, 2010), thus providing the rationale for and focus of the current study.

## **STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP IN THE WHEATBELT AND PREFIGURATIVE ACTION RESEARCH**

As mentioned previously, the identified need for significant groundwork and relationship building between local government and the Noongar community influenced how the initiative eventually unfolded. In particular, these insights highlighted the need to examine the impediments to Aboriginal empowerment that exist within particular sociocultural and historical contexts (i.e., the ways in which power inequities and disadvantage are reproduced in taken for granted practices and processes of everyday life), and to engage local government in this process. This exploration of perceived barriers and the engagement of local government in this process was essentially about facilitating a shift in the way the shire does business with the Noongar community from a “position of what they do to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.....to what governments and the broader Australian population can do with (us), to support us in achieving (our) goals and aspirations” (AHRC, 2011, pp. 21-22).

The need to examine the common sense understandings that inform taken for granted ways of doing business, stemmed from the recognition of the way our different histories lock us into particular scripts or ways of relating to one another that are not conducive to the development of mutual trust, respect and understanding thus limiting the potential of even the most innovative community arts project. It was about supporting local government to see their role as ‘enablers’ and ‘facilitators’ to Aboriginal empowerment, and making explicit the often, invisible ways in which power and inequality is reproduced, that is, how symbolic power functions to further disempower and marginalize Aboriginal people and communities in everyday settings.

Accordingly, CAN WA’s work in the Wheatbelt can be understood as an example of what Kagan and Burton (2000) describe as prefigurative action research. Prefigurative action research is an approach to social change intervention that:

emphasises the relationship between action research and the creation of alternatives to the existing social order. This combined process of social reform and investigation enables learning about both the freedom of movement to create progressive social forms and about the constraints the present order imposes. It also creates disseminated ‘images of possibility’ for a different way of ordering social life. (p. 73)

The concept of prefigurative action research provides a useful way of conceptualising the challenges CAN WA faces in facilitating the creation of alternative social relations and the rationale for the development of the Strategic Partnership Initiative. Whilst CAN WA strives to create alternative settings that are empowering for individuals, groups and communities, these settings remain firmly embedded within a dominant social context, which limits the potential of the alternative setting (Sarason, 1972) that has been created. According to Kagan and Burton, in any new social setting, there will be two opposing processes, with the “prefigurative, creative, explorative, radical processes and achievements” (p. 75) on the one hand, and the “recuperative, retrogressive, traditionalist, unimaginative, conservative tendencies” (p. 76) on the other. Kagan and Burton argue that this opposition arises not only from the setting itself, but also from the “ideological and psychological heritage the participants inevitably bring with them” (p. 76).

## **THE CURRENT STUDY**

The current study is specifically interested in exploring the relationships between the Noongar community and local government from the perspectives of different stakeholders in the community, and the perceived barriers to partnership formation from a Noongar and a Wadjella perspective. The study was specifically concerned with:

- Identifying and exploring the barriers to partnership formation and participation from both a local government and Noongar perspective.
- Identifying opportunities for strong partnership formation between local government and the Noongar community.

We next outline how ‘barriers’ to partnership formation or ‘recuperative tendencies’ are understood in the current study. Following this we will outline what we did to explore these barriers, and next,

what we actually found in speaking both to the shire representatives and local Noongar people across the shires of Tammin, Quairading, Merredin and Kellerberrin, that is how barriers were constructed by the differently positioned speaking subjects.

## **CONCEPTUALISING BARRIERS**

As part of the Strategic Partnership Initiative, CANWA was interested in understanding and making explicit the barriers to partnership formation within the broader sociocultural, historical and political context. Accordingly, the current exploration of barriers will be contextualised within the longer history of race relations in Australia and informed by an understanding of oppression as “structural, institutional, interpersonal and intrapsychic, outrageous and civilised, cultivated in the media, the market and the academy” (Fine, 2006, p. 90). From this view, systems, identities and ideologies, while tied to existing and historic power relationships are considered to be fluid so that social change is always possible. As noted by Christens, Hanlin and Speer (2007) however, the “ability to facilitate systems change is constrained by social power, particularly the capacity to shape ideology” (p. 229). Therefore it would seem intuitive that to institute social change, dominant groups constructions of ‘others’, notions of justice and equality, and the social practices and processes that structure everyday life need to be identified, critically reflected upon and where necessary, transformed. Importantly, the current study reflects the perceived need to theorise the listening, as opposed to solely focusing on the speaking out by the oppressed, thereby encouraging exploration of the conditions under which relatively privileged people are willing to hear and act on oppression (Campbell et al., 2010; Fine, 2006, p. 87).

Deutsch (2006), drawing on Harvey (1999), offers a framework for thinking about oppression (i.e., domination) that emphasises the role of symbolic power. For him “oppression is the experience of repeated, widespread, systemic injustice. It need not be extreme and involve the legal system (as in slavery, apartheid or the lack of right to vote) nor violent (as in tyrannical societies)” (p. 10).

Similarly Harvey describes civilised oppression as:

The vast and deep injustices some groups suffer as a consequence of often-unconscious assumptions and reactions of well-meaning people in ordinary interactions, which are supported by the media and cultural stereotypes as well as by the structural features of bureaucratic hierarchies and market mechanisms. (Harvey, 1999, pp. 3–4 quoted in Deutsch, 2006, p.10)

Deutsch (2006) highlights structural, institutional, ideological and individual-level factors that play a role in the maintenance of oppression. These include cultural imperialism, procedural and distributive justice<sup>9</sup>, the exclusion of others as not worthy against normative and universalized standards determined by the dominant culture. Moane (2003; 2009) identified similar mechanisms of control in colonialism and patriarchy, which create considerable challenges for individuals through the practical difficulties of everyday life, the impacts they have for psychological functioning, and the barriers they pose for social change. Moane (2003; 2009) like others (see, e.g., Rappaport, 2000; Watts & Serrano-Garcia, 2003) has highlighted the interconnectedness of the different mechanisms of oppression, that is, how sociopolitical patterns shape personal responses as well as interpersonal and community relationships. The complexity involved in the working of oppression underlines the multiple levels of interventions required to effect social change. Table 1 below highlights the multiple levels of intervention required to effect social change. The Strategic Partnership Initiative exemplifies CAN WA’s commitment to engage across these multiple levels of the social ecology.

**Table 1: Processes and practices associated with empowerment in the context of CAN WA’s Strategic Partnership Initiative**

Level	Aims	Practice
Personal	Building strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Recording and sharing stories about Noongar history, culture, values and perspectives.</li> <li>- Provide practical support, assistance and resources central to empowerment processes including governance</li> </ul>

<sup>9</sup>Distributive justice relates to the distribution of resources and burdens in society, while procedural justice refers to the perceived fairness of processes and procedures.

		skills training.
<b>Interpersonal</b>	Making connections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Bringing people together to create an increased sense of community, belonging and connection.</li> <li>- Providing opportunities for Noongar people to participate in community life.</li> <li>- Worked with the community to try and create connections. and link Aboriginal people with non-Aboriginal people and organisations.</li> </ul>
<b>Political</b> I.e., structural, systemic & symbolic	Taking Action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Collaborating with local government to facilitate partnership formation between shire and the Noongar community.</li> <li>- Engaging local government in dialogue about the barriers to partnership formation.</li> <li>- Developing analysis of power relations and exploring barriers to partnership formation between local government and the Noongar community.</li> <li>- Providing opportunities for Noongar people to voice concerns and sharing Noongar perspectives on issues affecting the Noongar community.</li> <li>- Sharing and recording stories about Noongar history and life in the communities for Noongar people.</li> </ul>

(Adapted from Moane, 2003, p. 98).

Importantly these different levels of intervention and empowerment are interconnected, with change at the individual level promoting change and/or increasing the likelihood/capacity for change at the interpersonal and political levels. While the Strategic Partnership Initiative involved a variety of activities with outcomes achieved across the multiple levels outlined, the objectives most specifically relating to the current report are situated at the political, that is, structural, systemic and symbolic level of the social ecology. These objectives point to the need for change in structures, systems, and settings as well as in everyday understandings of Aboriginal people and culture. The specific objectives pertaining to the current report are:

- Supporting partnerships between local governments and Aboriginal communities in the Wheatbelt region of Western Australia, specifically the shires of Merredin, Tammin, Kellerberrin and Quairading.

- Enhancing the cultural awareness and understanding of Aboriginal communities in local government settings.
- Fostering and promoting Aboriginal participation in local government activities.

In the current study, there was a concern with exploring “the symbolic power and privileges afforded by our different social group memberships and how these may impact upon relationships and everyday interactions” (Sonn & Green, 2006, p. 3). From such a perspective, relations between differently positioned groups (or speaking subjects) are seen as simultaneously constitutive of and constituted by language (i.e., discourses), where discourse refers to “the common-sense assumptions and taken-for-granted ideas, belief systems and myths that groups of people share and through which they understand each other. Social, cultural and historical processes are produced through discourses, which limit our experiences, understandings of self, and our relations with others” (Mama, 1995, p. 98). With the ideological reproduction of dominance and privilege positioned within the symbolic domain, the imperative to explore the discourses circulating in the sociocultural, historical and political contexts of everyday life becomes clear. An understanding of how dominance and privilege is reproduced in the structures, systems and narratives of everyday life, is necessary in supporting partnerships between local governments and Aboriginal communities, enhancing the cultural awareness and understanding of Aboriginal communities in local government settings and for fostering and promoting Aboriginal participation in local government activities.

### **DATA SOURCES AND DATA GATHERING: PEOPLE AND PROCESSES**

Interviews were conducted with both Noongar community members and local government representatives, usually the CEO and the Community Development Officer, in the Central Eastern Wheatbelt towns of Quairading, Kellerberrin and Merredin. Interviews were also conducted with the CEO and CDO of Tammin. Unfortunately Noongar people from this shire were not interviewed as we were not able to organise an interview at the time largely because CAN WA has not built up the same relationships with the Noongar people in Tammin as they have in the other shires. We have included the Tammin shire interviews in the data analysis as consistent themes were identified across interviews, in relation to what the challenges are seen to be and how these challenges are understood. It should be noted however, that there were some differences across the Wheatbelt

towns, mainly based on the size of the community and in particular the transience of the population (e.g., Merredin as a larger township with a more transient population, and Kellerberrin with the CAN WA office, KAPA and a relatively strong history of Noongar participation).

The topics we explored in semi-structured interviews, and in one case, a focus group, were:

- How local government has invited the Noongar community to participate in shire activities/events/decision making (focusing on specific examples).
- Associated challenges to and opportunities identified for working together.
- How the Noongar community has invited local government to participate/partner in events and activities (focusing on specific examples).
- Associated challenges to and opportunities identified for working together.
- What has been learnt from these experiences.

Participants were provided with information regarding the research and the questions that would be asked, in advance. Potential Noongar participants were informed about the research and the research questions on prior home visits. Local government CEO's were informed of the research through CAN WA and provided with information through email and in a prior meeting with CAN WA and the researchers.

The specific questions we were interested in exploring, which were provided before hand and drawn on throughout interviews are provided below.

- The experiences community members and shire representatives have had in working collaboratively.
- What it means to listen and be heard.
- What the frustrations are and where are the opportunities.
- Stories of the past and the present and how people want to work together in the future.
- What changes people want to see at a community level.

## **GAINING ACCESS**

Before we were in a position where we (and particularly CAN WA) felt comfortable in conducting the interviews, there was a recognized need to allow some time for comfort, familiarity and trust to be developed<sup>10</sup> of the external researcher and the research project being undertaken, within the Noongar community. Entry into the community for the purpose of research was facilitated by the links we had with CAN WA, who has built up relationships with the community over the past six years. This phase of the research involved spending time in the different communities, sometimes in the CAN WA office in Kellerberrin, but mostly visiting people in their homes and having informal conversations about the Strategic Partnership Initiative in general, experiences of working collaboratively with the shire and the aims and potential outcomes of the research (often over cups of tea).

As mentioned, this process of gaining access was fast tracked because CAN WA has built up relationships and trust over a number of years with the Noongar community, and could vouch for the researchers and the research that was being undertaken. There was a particular concern with conveying to the community what was to come of the research and how it was to be useful for the community. This was particularly important considering the history of research (and intervention) in Aboriginal communities, which has often been exploitative, involved the appropriation of knowledge, and often without giving anything back to the community or following through with outcomes (AHRC, 2011). This was expressed on one occasion by a Noongar woman who asserted that people come in and take their knowledge and they never hear back from them again, that while they have never travelled out of the State, Noongar knowledge has been taken from them to other places. The CAN WA worker involved in this research took this process very seriously and when her 'gut instinct' told her that we weren't ready, we did not proceed. Instead we spent more time getting to know people in the community, and decided to come back for interviews at a later stage.

The interviews were conducted with one of the researchers and the CAN WA worker. This facilitated the interviews by allowing for a greater depth of contextual understanding to be brought

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<sup>10</sup>The approach taken to the current research was informed by lessons learnt through past projects, and outlined in *Drawing out Community Empowerment* (2008), particularly in terms of how trust is understood.



to the interviews. Moreover the Noongar interviewees have a relationship with the CAN WA worker and would have therefore felt more comfortable and at ease in her presence. The shire representatives also have a relationship with the agency, and would presumably have felt less on the 'back foot' and as though they were going to be interrogated by having a CAN WA person present. We wanted to convey that the research was clearly connected with the broader goals of the Strategic Partnership Initiative, and was not about pinpointing 'racist' people and practices, but about establishing dialogue between the Noongar community and local government.

### **INTERVIEWS WITH NOONGAR PARTICIPANTS**

A total of four interviews with Noongar community members were conducted across the shires. In the case of Merredin, a focus group was held and attended by six Noongar people including both males and females attendees. In addition to this an individual interview was conducted with a Merredin local, now living in Perth. Therefore a total of nine Noongar people participated in interviews, which ranged from one to two hours in length. There was only one 'young adult' involved in the research, with the other Noongar interviewees ranging from the ages of approximately 40-75. The Noongar people involved in individual interviews were each considered community leaders and respected Elders in their communities, with one of those Elders being female. The young Noongar woman who participated has also taken on somewhat of a leadership role within the community, and also works for one of the shires. Participants' were each paid an Elders fee by CAN WA in appreciation of their time and knowledge. For the focus group, the Elder fee went to the Progress Association, upon participants request.

Of those who attended the focus group, it should be noted that there was one individual in particular who did not really get involved, and was perhaps not entirely aware of what the research was all about, having entered the interview during proceedings; he happened to be with an invited participant at the time. At the same time however, it is important not to equate silence with disinterest, or non-participation. This is considered noteworthy not because it places limitations on the data gathered, but because it offers lessons on engaging with Noongar people in research or practice. In particular it points to the informality of the interviews, which are better seen as conversations. In conducting the interviews we were mindful and respectful of what Aboriginal

writers have written about yarning (see, e.g., Martin, 2008). Bessarab and Ng'andu (2010) explain that Yarning is:

conducive to an Indigenous way of doing things; its strength is in the cultural security that it creates for Indigenous people participating in research. Yarning is a process that cuts across the formality of identity as a researcher and demands the human to human interaction where both are knowers and learners in the process. (p. 47)

We did not stop the interview to explain to the newcomers in great detail what was happening, they could join the discussion if, when, and where they wanted. Moreover we allowed the group to steer the conversation around the themes advanced by us. Interviews with Noongar participants were conducted at cafes, the CAN WA office in Kellerberrin, or Aboriginal Progress Associations. We left it up to the Noongar participants to decide where they would like the interviews to take place.

## **INTERVIEWS WITH LOCAL GOVERNMENT REPRESENTATIVES**

Interviews with local government representatives, usually involved both the CEO and the Community Development Officer (CDO), except in the case of one of the shires, where the CDO was unavailable. The interviews with local government were conducted at the shire offices. Interestingly all shire CEO's were male, while all Community Development Officers were female. Some of the shire representatives were relatively new to the area and/or their role, while others, particularly CEO's, had worked in local government for many years. Thus some had a great deal of corporate knowledge, while others commented that they were lacking in this regard. Four interviews were conducted, involving a total of seven Wadjella participants.

## **OTHER DATA SOURCES**

In addition to the interviews conducted, this evaluation is informed by the ongoing conversations as critical friends that we<sup>11</sup> have had with CAN WA staff as part of the broader partnership. As part of this ongoing dialogue, CAN WA developed a Creative Think Tank that aimed to explore the role of local government in working with Aboriginal communities, and the issues associated with genuinely engaging Aboriginal people in developing and managing their own programs. Strategically, CAN WA's Creative Think Tank included people along the continuum of policy development and service

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<sup>11</sup>Christopher Sonn has collaborated with the agency for over ten years, taking on the role of 'critical friend'.

delivery, and was about generating ideas to inform future work with Aboriginal people and communities. The Think Tank examined “the collective learning and ideas people had about building relationships between Noongar people and local government” (CAN WA, 2011a, p. 2), and incorporated some of the preliminary findings from the current study. As part of this Think Tank, which was attended by one of the researchers, perceived barriers to effective engagement and relationship building between the Noongar community and local government were discussed. Table two below was presented to demonstrate the lessons CAN WA has learnt about the conditions necessary for working effectively with Noongar people and communities and to trigger discussion of the barriers to effective engagement and relationship building between local governments and the Noongar community.

**Table 2: Lessons that CAN WA has learnt about the conditions necessary for working effectively in communities.**

Domain and Process of Community Empowerment	Examples of process and domains
<b>Gaining trust</b>	Addressing people’s mistrust is important to getting people involved in community projects. This included employing Aboriginal people.
<b>Being Responsive</b>	Community development workers to be aware and sensitive to different institutional, cultural, and socio-historical contexts. Responsiveness requires staff to be flexible, patient and persistent, particularly unique qualities for an organization also dealing with the timelines and demands of funding bodies.
<b>Providing Resources and expertise</b>	Provided resources and skills central to the empowerment processes.
<b>Making connections</b>	Worked with the community to try and create connections and link Indigenous people with non-Indigenous people and organisations through different workshops and events.
<b>Building alliances</b>	Another level of connection is the collaboration between the local

	community and those who control funding or resources.
<b>Letting go</b>	Relinquishing control of projects and succession planning.

Participants talked about the many social, structural and government level factors that undermine collaboration between local government and the Noongar community and which prevent the development of the dynamic and responsive approaches required in responding to issues threatening community wellbeing as well as those presenting opportunities for growth. With an emphasis on the inflexibility of bureaucratic systems as a major barrier to appropriate engagement and relationship building with Noongar people, many participants commented on the importance of 'letting go', that is, relinquishing control, and 'being responsive' at the level of local government, while others expressed cynicism about the capacity of government to change and do things differently. Indeed, many shared the "view that past approaches to service provision for Aboriginal communities have not worked and that this is supported by a decline in key indicators of health and wellbeing" (CAN WA, 2011, p. 5). While insufficient resources was acknowledged as one of the problems, many also commented that the resources that are available could be used far more effectively, emphasising the need to find a new way of 'doing business' with Aboriginal people. Significantly, most participants felt that local government did have a crucial role to play in responding to Aboriginal needs, provided State and Commonwealth governments appropriately support local governments (See Discussion Paper: CAN WA Creative Think Tank, 2011a).

Other data sources we had available come from the conversations and observations made during the different phases of the research, which helped to guide the development of the interview questions and to further support the themes identified. This not only included ongoing conversations with CAN WA staff, but also the informal conversations with Noongar community members, non-Aboriginal community members and shire representatives, as well as other more general observations of community life in the different towns. For example, upon one of the researchers first visits to one of the shires, she had the experience of being questioned about the purpose of the research in quite a confronting manner; this anger and hostility reflecting a history of research that has exploited and given nothing back to Aboriginal people. There were other

significant experiences that were not necessarily captured in interviews that pointed to the tensions within the different communities, experiences of blatant racism and degradation and the lived reality for Aboriginal people. Some of these experiences include; hearing about an incident where a Noongar man was tazered repeatedly by police in front of his children and his father asking in dismay ‘what do you tell the grandkids?’, hearing from one Noongar woman in a quite aggressive manner that Noongar people are ‘treated like dogs’, and of visiting a town where there had been a very recent suicide death of a young teenage girl. This was confronting not only because of the circumstances of the death and the age of the young girl, but because there seemed to be a lot of suspicion from the family associated with the death, and because of the way the community just had to ‘get on with things’. Talking to non-Aboriginal community members about the barriers to effective engagement and relationship building shed further light on the perceived barriers.

## **DATA ANALYSIS AND KEY FINDINGS**

The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed in the first instance following standard procedures for doing thematic analysis. The second stage involved analysing the interviews to explore ‘discourses’, defined as “the common-sense assumptions and taken-for-granted ideas, belief systems and myths that groups of people share and through which they understand each other. Social, cultural and historical processes are produced through discourses, which limit our experiences, understandings of self, and our relations with others” (Mama, 1995, p. 98). Analysis focused on the common sense understandings of the barriers to partnership formation from both the Noongar and Wadjella perspective, thereby elucidating understandings of the ‘other’, which have implications for effective engagement and relationship building. These common sense understandings, as outlined by Mama constitute the symbolic barriers to partnership formation.

In the following section we present themes and interpret those in terms of pertinent literature to clarify how barriers to partnership formation are constructed by differently positioned speaking subjects, and the sociocultural, historical and political contexts in which these discourses/narratives arise. The implications these common sense understandings may have for building strong working partnerships between Noongar people and local government will also be outlined. We present the

data in two sections, first we present the themes representing the ways Noongar participants constructed the barriers to partnership formation, which help to elucidate the power imbalances that exist between groups. Importantly, Noongar constructions of barriers are reflective of but can also work to reproduce or challenge existing power imbalances, that is, Noongar people are not exempt from the dominant discourses that pervade the everyday. Moreover, they can draw on discourse of cultural strength, belonging, Indigenous ways, but these are often silenced by dominant exclusionary discourses. Second, we present the way local government representatives and staff constructed the barriers to partnership and the ways in which the discourses in those constructions reproduce power imbalances. We refer to their narrations in which they draw on resources to make meaning as themes or narratives, which can contain discourses<sup>12</sup>.

### **HOW WERE BARRIERS TO PARTNERSHIP CONSTRUCTED BY THE NOONGAR PARTICIPANTS?**

Following the analysis of transcripts we developed four interrelated themes for how Noongar constructed the barriers to participation. These themes are: disregard, dispossession, cultural mistrust and being misunderstood, and are presented in Table 3. Some of the themes reflect the terms Maggie Walter (2010) uses to describe the lived experience of Aboriginal people in the era of Neoliberalism. This framework consisting of four interrelated components: socioeconomic position, absences, disregard and dispossession can be attributed to a history of colonisation and racism and the subsequent lack of material and symbolic power for Aboriginal Australia (Glover, Dudgeon & Huygens, 2010; Purdie, Dudgeon & Walker, 2009).

The different themes represent different social and symbolic resources participants used to account for the barriers to partnership and the subsequent implications for themselves and their communities within the broader context. Central to the themes are the legacy of racialised oppression and the ongoing relations of dominance and subjugation that is reflected in participants talk about feeling as if they are second class citizens, they and their culture continue to be misrecognised and racialised, they do not trust white people and white society, and their struggles for survival are often silenced or overlooked in the histories of the communities. Importantly,

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<sup>12</sup> To ensure that participants remain anonymous, pseudonyms have been used and other information that could identify participants has been removed as much as possible.

dominant discourses that function to exclude Aboriginal people from Australia’s scope of justice can be heard from the top and the bottom of the social hierarchy, that is, they can be internalized by those who are subjugated by inequitable power relations.

**Table 3: Key themes and descriptions for Noongar constructions of barriers**

Theme	Description
<b>Disregard</b>	<p>Drawing from Walter (2010), this theme refers to the treatment of Aboriginal people as inferior, as less than. It describes the feeling of being treated as inferior.</p> <p>e.g., Lack of consultation and not being considered as part of the community, being dominated, myths and stereotypes, experiences of overt racism.</p>
<b>Dispossession</b>	<p>Drawing from Walter (2010) this relates to the dispossession of Aboriginal people from culture, family, community, land and hope. The narrative of dispossession emphasised the importance of culture continuity and the fragmentation of culture, family and community brought about by processes of colonisation, which continue today.</p> <p>It can also relate to the lack of awareness and recognition of Aboriginal culture and identity.</p>
<b>Cultural mistrust</b>	<p>This narrative reflects a deep mistrust of White people and society, based on the history of colonisation and racism, and continued social exclusion, marginalisation, exploitation and disregard.</p>
<b>Being misunderstood</b>	<p>This narrative relates to the silencing or erasure of history, and disconnection of this history from the issues currently facing Aboriginal communities, that have their roots in colonisation, racism and failed government policies.</p>

## **DISREGARD**

The theme of disregard refers to the treatment of Aboriginal people as inferior, as less than white people, and being treated with disrespect. It describes the feeling of being treated as inferior as reported by some of the participants. Disregard points to the over-visibility of Aboriginal Australians



as social problems and the normalization of disrespect for Aboriginal people and culture, with the “constant denigration of Aboriginal people...twisted into the daily fabric of the nation’s conversations” (Walter, 2010; p. 30). This is illustrated in the following quotations in which participants say Noongar are positioned lowly in the social hierarchy and is also viewed negatively by mainstream society, even to the extent that they are not recognized or acknowledged at the end of football season by some fellow club members.

*Tony:* It’s always been the white man’s the dominant people. The Noongars were meant to be down here, not to rise any higher than they are now, you know?

*Maria:* Dad arranged a meeting with (new Shire CEO), because that was when he finished his term as Councillor and that was just to introduce himself but other than that, there’s been no other effort. It was just the same when I started my traineeship, there was just a few non-Aboriginal people out there didn’t want an Aboriginal training, working at the visitors’ centre and they didn’t tell me till after I accepted the traineeship because they didn’t think I could handle the negative attitudes out there in the community.

*Interviewer:* So there was community members who ...

*Maria:* Yeah and they didn’t tell me till after I started, which I felt a bit .....Yeah like they didn’t give me the opportunity to know that there was that attitude out there in the community. Like I couldn’t say no I don’t want this traineeship now because fellas don’t want me to have it, but the fact that they didn’t tell me till later.

*Darren:* I mean it boils down to a lot of people, Shire Councils and what their relationship is with the local community as well as the local Aboriginal community. And I mean you can get, if I be honest, you can get redneck councillors, and you can get some good council.

*Leslie:* You know with two of those Shire Council members there, oh yes, so what if they played football with Aboriginal people, you know I bet you not one of them two invited a black man back to his house. They think oh yeah because they played football

*Frank:* On the footy field, like when I was playing football but if I meet them down the street and I walk past them they’ve got their nose stuck up in the air. That’s what it’s like. Just because we play footy with one another makes them a good person, but it don’t.

*Leslie:* That’s the way they were thinking.

*Frank:* I could name the good people on this one hand that I know that I’ve been playing footy with who will stop and talk to me now. And I can name them on one hand and that’s only a few people out of, probably 18 or 20 of them out there on the footy oval.

*Kathy:* It’s still sad that the community has these people...

*Leslie:* But growing up here and going to school and going to school and thing today, this town is a very racist little town now.

*Interviewer:* You think it’s gotten worse?

*Kathy:* Uh huh.



*Wendy:* They've got to come out to us and ask us. We go to them like we're invading their privacy or something, or telling them what to do, and they don't like that. Even a white fellow. Like they went out to ##### my husband worked there..... Couldn't be foreman because (Wadjella's) won't take orders from a black person, and then they all left and then ##### started..... He was lead man so he was telling them what to do: they wouldn't take notice to a black person. You have to be white to be right. This is wrong. They don't see us, have a brain.....But they don't like to be told by black people what to do. But they've got to accept things like the American President Obama. What's he got to put up with? The same as we have to put up with. They don't like black people telling them what to do. But too long we've been standing back. It's time we spoke out

Another participant offered the following narrative in which a participant discussed not being consulted:

*Tony:* I get the impression that there's very little consideration for the Noongar in terms of how they should fit in, into what the Shire's achieving. That's sort of they're left out on quite a number of things. For instance the new highway, part of the highway's been done here. On the street here. They just went ahead and sort of, without any consultation with Noongars concerned, they just went ahead and did it. And I pulled them up and asked them what happened, why didn't they contact us in terms of...a lot of the trees are gone and sort of, you grew up with it. And one day it's there and the next day you look, and "where are all the trees?" They're all gone. And it's as if, you paint a picture, it's there one, next, one day you get up and somebody's scratched the whole thing.

*Interviewer:* How did the Shire respond to you asking, that there should have been a consultation?

*Tony:* It's merely progress- that was their response. Progress. Nothing in terms of "oh sorry we didn't get into a consultation with you", which evidently they sort of worked as if we were ghosts, you know? We weren't there. And that was a big disappointment as far as I was concerned, the fact that they didn't contact any of the Noongars.

Some spoke about not being listened too in face-to-face encounters as well as in matters of symbolic representation at special events within the community.

*Maria:* It's just a waste of time talking to those people over there, because they don't want to listen to what you, the Aboriginal people want and know what's best. I mean even before when it was NAIDOC, we, ##### had to write a letter to the Shire, give them an Aboriginal flag before they would fly it during NAIDOC week. So we just don't bother any more.

*Leslie:* Every shire should have their own flags.

*Kathy:* Well that's it or they borrow it from the high school.

*Leslie:* Oh getting a flag is not that big a deal, you know in the Council budget

*Maria:* That's what I don't get 'cause you know ...

These different stories constitute the discourse of disregard through which Noongar people spoke about issues of partnership and their place within the broader community.

## **DISPOSSESSION**

This theme draws on Walter's (2010) definition that speaks to the ongoing effects of the dispossession of culture, family, community, land and hope. Participants variously spoke of forms of dispossession and also the non-recognition of Aboriginal people's experiences and worldviews and how these may influence everyday life. This non-recognition is often discussed as cultural insensitivity, but the dispossession has deeper and longer roots and is not only a matter of insensitivity. The quotations below illustrate how understandings of barriers to partnership are constructed through knowledge about dispossession, cultural oppression and how it shapes relationships with white society.

For example, one person commented about cultural matters such as "our kinship system" not being considered, while another spoke of the denial of belonging and the significance of places to community:

*Maria:* I think they all need a cultural awareness course because there's no sensitivity. Like when I lost my auntie, they put it down as, I had to take days off my annual leave because it wasn't my, to them immediate family and I said to them, she is my, you know my immediate family, our kinship system is different, but they didn't acknowledge that. If we do that for you then we'll have to do that for everyone. You know that's the kind of attitude I got from the

*Tony:* Education is something that we have to instill in the younger generation from schools and...I mean Noongar education, not locals' education. We didn't ask to come into town to be in big flash houses. We didn't have any sickness years ago. And through the inception of Mr. Cook and other people coming into the country...it's a whole load of bringing in something that wasn't there, you know? And hence we've got half our population wiped out. We're lucky to be here today, you know? Because of the white man's domination. Still, I find people, doesn't matter where you go, what you do, you see this, the guy walking around, you know? He's the dominant fixture of the community or the city. And if you approach him wanting some information, you get the cold shoulder. It makes you think twice, what's the use of trying to make conversation if you're going to be .....

*Maria:* As you say I think they're trying to say that there's no Aboriginal connection round this rock up here and that, but before the white man came, there was a big rock wall that

the dam has moved, the Government of the day back in 1800 somewhere, they dug that rock all out and put the dam there and there would have been a lot of Aboriginals round there because they were picking all the berries and the kwandonges and all that up round the rocks up there. But they can't say there was no Aboriginals round here before that. I mean a lot of the stuff around there was disturbed by the white man when he came down under you know.

*Wendy:* 400 to 500 full bloods lived up there. I'm trying to find out why, what happened to those full bloods.....My father always said, "Don't go to that bush over there: it's a burial. People's buried there." And I didn't know why. And now I wonder, well I read these books and see what happened to these full bloods up here. They just shot them and buried them out here. So I was going to go and have a look....and have a look for the remains, if they're buried there. So I'm going to do that. That is my next thing. There should be some bones.... remain out there, 'cause we're told not to go there. What happened to them full bloods? There was 400 to 500: where are they?

## **BEING MISUNDERSTOOD**

Closely related to the notion of dispossession is the idea that white society does not understand and chooses not to understand the deeper roots of Aboriginal exclusion and how this plays out as a barrier to partnership. In particular, participants spoke of the silencing of violent history and blaming Aboriginal people for their situation. The dominating power relations are still reflected in the ways in which Noongar people feel they and their cultural values are not respected, undermined, and portrayed in negative ways. These are powerful narratives that others hold of Aboriginal people and that Aboriginal people are fully aware of and report as barriers to their participation in broader community and in local government.

*Maria:* With cultural awareness, they need to go back and look at things that happened way before white men came to this country. How they lived in harmony with the land and with everything else.

*Kathy:* It's not our fault.

*Maria:* And show them that video of the 1905 Act. I bet you a lot of them never seen that.

*Maria:* Michael, he did a questionnaire at work and it was about four topics about Aboriginal people, so one was, sport, one was a social thing, history and they didn't get half right.....I said to him, were you shocked by the results? And he just said 'nuh'. He kind of knew that they wouldn't even get half right. There was a few there.

*Leslie:* Maybe next times you meet with the Shire office, maybe that's something you's can give them.

*Kathy:* Yeah a questionnaire.

*Leslie:* What do you know about your local Aboriginal community? That they're lazy, no-hopers, drunks, some of that will be the answers

*Leslie:* The Australian Government has never given the proper right history to the kids going to school. They didn't tell them, when I went to school, we learnt about John Forrest and all these blokes, they didn't explore this land by themselves. It wasn't them, they had old black fellas chained up like a dog, they never give him a drink of water all day until he led them to water. That was how they got around this country 'cause they'd die out here. They'd perish. They wouldn't have known where to find the water if they hadn't tied the old black fella like a dog and not give him a drink until he led them to water. That's the only way they found water round this country, not through their bush knowledge..... Until the Government starts giving the right history, there's nothing going to be..... They've got to start going back through all the history books and start to do right and write all this down. Don't give us the white man's history, they've got to put the black man's history in there too, what they done to the land.

## **CULTURAL MISTRUST**

The notion of cultural mistrust reflects the way in which Aboriginal people have constructed ways to deal with the broader white society as a result of the history of oppressive race relations. The theme is connected with the other notions and it speaks to ongoing disregard, dispossession and the continuing failure to work in respectful and inclusive ways with Aboriginal people. Cultural mistrust is rooted in the history of colonisation and racism, and it speaks to the responses to those practices and how these are perpetrated today. The following quotations are examples of how participants reported mistrust in institutions, practices and representatives of institutions. They also offered ways of remedying this mistrust, which, importantly often means changing the mainstream structures and discourses.

*Maria:* and the Shire was supposed to send two representatives from that. Most meetings, no one turned up and when one of them did, one of the Councillors, she, her and Dad had a few words because she thought she knew everything about Aboriginal people and so when she got involved unless people came, we kind of just scrapped it or whatever 'cause the Shire wanted us to have it all the meetings at the Shire Council and we said no.

*Kathy:* I put in for a job back in the 90's and I never heard nothing and I never worried about it again. And I think a few other family members have also put in there and they, you know you never hear nothing from them.

*Leslie:* It's just like the other Government agencies, they just don't have anything to do with us. And when you try and want to talk with them, you never get them.

*Kathy:* They're either out somewhere else or they just haven't got the time, they find some excuse.

*Kathy:* Information going backwards and forwards, you from here going that way, that way back here. But with all that information you fellas are getting, we're not going to see the outcome and the end of the story. Which we would like to see, so we can get things happening and moving, but if we can't see what the problem is or why, then how the hell are we going to come together as one

*Leslie:* That's their way of working. They got a blackie in that office and they know it's their job to go and do this, but they'll sit, sit, sit and wait till a day or two before, oh we'll just ring the black Jackie, Jackie or send an email or message to them. They'll run around and do it for us and we'll get the, what do you call it? Slap on the back, pat on the back. Slap in the face

*Maria:* Do you know that the high school, this mob over here got money, \$600 they got last year from the Shire for NAIDOC, but it did not happen at the high school.

*Kathy:* I mean if some of them its like this bloody health centre. You know they want to put in programs for the Indigenous community of #####. I said, well what programs or projects are they going to be putting on, I said because no one's been out and spoken to the black fella community about it and getting their input into it. I said they just go in and say, oh we're going to do this, this and this and they'll come without consulting anybody.

P: If they're getting money for Aboriginal projects or anything like that, we're not aware of any of that. So they could be spending it elsewhere for themselves without letting the community know that it's available.

The significance of seeing Aboriginal people employed in the community was emphasised throughout the interviews, with many commenting that things have in fact gotten worse, rather than better and attributing the lack of employment for Aboriginal people to discrimination and racism.

*Wendy:* But there's a lot of things there the Shire's responsible for Aboriginal people, they are not coming up to it.

*Interviewer:* Yep. In what way?

*Wendy:* Well, there's no employment for Aboriginal people. They've got to support the, oh, I don't know what to say. Well.....look after the Aboriginal people in the town, and they're not. They're going to go, five, four or five lots of people going out of town to get work. And they've got work, there is available: they don't get an interview. They don't get interviews. So what's happening?

These four themes capture some of the social and symbolic resources Noongar participants used to discuss the barriers to partnerships and relationship with the broader communities. These stories illustrate the role of symbolic power and representation in establishing and maintaining Aboriginal inequality and disadvantage in the Australian context, and specifically, in these smaller

communities. In the following section we will explore the ways in which local government representatives and workers constructed and understood barriers to partnerships. We will also explore some of the dynamics and implications of the discourses through the lens of critical race theory and whiteness studies to help explicate the working of symbolic power.

## **HOW WERE BARRIERS TO PARTNERSHIP CONSTRUCTED WITHIN LOCAL GOVERNMENT NARRATIVES?**

While there were similarities between interviews with the shire and Noongar people, for example, recognition of community division, barriers to partnership formation, and the causes of this division were constructed in very different ways. The quotation below exemplifies the perception of division between the Noongar and Wadjella community.

*Erica:* Look, when the school has meet and greets, for example, something I've noticed, even there, there's a huge segregation. You'll have your Noongar communities sitting on the one side and your white people on the other side and there's no interaction between the two cultures, whatsoever. Coming from South Africa, I thought I would understand the cross-cultural relationships a lot better than what I do. But this is a whole other kettle of fish.

Another similarity across Noongar and Wadjella interviews was the identification of sporting clubs, and the footy field as the most successful site for interaction between communities. However for the Noongar community, this was understood as being the only time the Wadjella community had anything to do with them, and it only lasted the footy season, but for the Wadjella community it was presented as evidence of the openness of the broader Wadjella community and the acceptance of Aboriginal people and an indication that racism is not an issue within the community.

An additional theme that came up in these interviews was around the challenge of engaging the community generally with people only tending to get involved in their own special interest groups. Another general theme throughout interviews was the identification of a lack of resources as a barrier to forming partnerships with the Noongar community, with community development seen as having a secondary role. While the Noongar community emphasised the need for the shire to go out and get to know the community, the shire expressed that they were there for the whole community, and that if they needed anything, they knew where to find them. Similarly, it was

evident that attempted engagement with the Noongar community only really occurs when there are problems or the Shire need to negotiate with Native Title Claimants, rather than as standard practice within local government practices and processes, as demonstrated in the quotation below.

*Steve:* but we have a very low crime rate we don't have any graffiti, we have very little litter, so things are running along pretty well and very, so public drinking street drinking, we have very little of that so, to that end there's not a lot for us to have meetings about, doesn't stop from having the occasional forum, but as long as it just isn't a long list of claims or complaints more so the how can we help or get involved or whatever, its generally been the what can you do for us, which unfortunately is a bit of the mentality as well but the welfare side of thing I suppose.

Three interrelated themes were identified in 'shire talk', representing the different social and symbolic resources participants used to account for the barriers to partnership. The shire told a very different story of the barriers to partnership formation and where they arise, as demonstrated in the extract above. This is because the shire has available very different resources for understanding/ constructing Aboriginal people and culture, the role/responsibility of the shire/White Australia in relation to the continuing disadvantage of Aboriginal people and race and racism. The way that barriers are constructed by the shire representatives has implications for the way that the shire 'does business' with the Noongar community, and thus the potential for partnership. The themes from Wadjella talk are provided in Table 4 below.

**Table 4: Key themes and descriptions for local government constructions of barriers**

Theme	Description
<b>Abstract liberalism (Bonilla Silva, 2006)</b>	This involves using ideas associated with political liberalism (e.g., equal opportunity) and economic liberalism (e.g., choice, individualism) in an abstract manner to explain racial matters (e.g. Aboriginal disadvantage). This discourse has the effect of constructing Australia as a society not divided along racial lines, and in that sense as post-racial. This discourse involves assertions that everyone should be treated equally and not given 'special privileges' or 'tokenism in employment', in fact affirmative action of any kind is presented as divisive of the broader community. This discourse assumes we are all the same and therefore there is no need for special measures for engaging with one group over another, e.g., regarding each person as an individual" with "choices".



	<p><i>Equality of opportunity</i>, one of the assumptions of abstract liberalism, sits under this broader theme. This theme, which constructs Australian society as egalitarian, fair, with equal opportunities available for all is accompanied by the construction of White Australia as ‘understandably fed up’, having done all they (we) can, and the assertion that it is up to ‘them’ to make the most of the opportunities that are available.</p>
<p><b>Culture blame</b></p>	<p>This narrative constructs Aboriginal people and culture as the root cause of Aboriginal disadvantage, marginalisation and disempowerment, rather than locating these circumstances in the sociocultural, historical and political contexts.</p> <p>e.g., Family feuding, apathy &amp; welfare dependency, the construction of the ‘good Aboriginal’.</p>
<p><b>Silencing and forgetting the past</b></p>	<p>Silencing and forgetting the past is about the erasure, denial, mitigation of the history of colonisation and racism in this country and the failure/refusal to recognise/acknowledge the continuing impacts for Aboriginal people and culture of this history and contemporary circumstance. This theme is about what we choose to remember and choose to forget, which has implications for where blame is attributed.</p>

Each of these identified themes are interrelated, but presented separately for analytical purposes. For example, within shire talk about the barriers to partnership formation between the Noongar community and local government, there was an emphasis on the idea of Noongar “perceptions” of racism, disadvantage or lack of consideration, rather than understanding these “perceptions” in their broader sociocultural, historical and political context. This tendency to identify the barrier as “perceptions”, and thus deny, mitigate or fail to acknowledge the existence of barriers at the structural, systemic and sociocultural levels clearly fits within the narratives of abstract liberalism and equality of opportunity, e.g., constructing the shire as welcoming and accepting of all and therefore situating the problem as their “perceptions”, employment opportunities are available but are not taken up due to Noongar “perceptions” of discrimination. This process is facilitated/ accompanied by the silencing and forgetting the past, e.g., disconnection from history of exclusions and poverty, and results in a culture blaming discourse i.e., ‘victim blaming’, for example, construction of the Aboriginal community as endlessly complaining and as needing to move on. An example is provided below.



*Interviewer:* So why do you think that they don't approach the Shire?

*Jess:* Don't know. I really don't know.

*Paul:*..... it's probably something that's entrenched in time. There might have been some incident that occurred 30, 40, 50 years ago and that then sets up a confrontational arrangement. Might be just perceived. The local Council's government and it's big white fella politics and it's more government and we don't want to know about it.

Each of the four themes, to which we now turn, can be understood in terms of Whiteness. In settler societies like Australia where the dominant ethnic group is white people, Whiteness offers a conceptual lens for understanding “the way in which dominance and privilege is constructed and maintained and how it perpetuates the unfair distribution of power” (Sonn & Green, 2006, p. 9); this is akin to ‘civilised oppression’ (previously outlined). From the perspective of Whiteness,

social group memberships based on ethnicity, race, gender, afford people differential access to power and privilege in different contexts. Power is (re) produced in and through cultural means, and this is manifested in everyday interactions (Reyes- Cruz & Sonn, 2010, p. 206).

## **ABSTRACT LIBERALISM**

Drawing from the work of Bonilla Silva (2006) who discussed abstract liberalism as one of the central frames of a colour blind racism in the American context, we use abstract liberalism to describe a narrative common across interviews with shire representatives that constructs the nation, and more specifically the shires, as not divided along racial lines, and in that sense as post-racial. This involved assertions that everyone should be treated equally and not given ‘special privileges’, or ‘tokenism in employment’, in fact, affirmative action or differential treatment of any kind is presented as unfair and divisive of the broader community. This narrative assumes we are all the same and therefore there is no need for special measures for engaging with one group over another, or for engaging differently with different groups. Regarding each person as an ‘individual’ with ‘choices’, this narrative is underpinned by the assumption of an egalitarian society.

Another central tenet of abstract liberalism is the idea of meritocracy, that is, that every individual is rewarded according to merit (Bonilla Silva, 2006). These ideas premised on a blatant disconnection from the history of colonisation and contemporary forms of domination and symbolic violence,

construct a very different understanding of the causes for the differential status of Aboriginal people across a range of social, economic and health indicators. Constructing the issue of Aboriginal disadvantage and the barriers to disadvantage in individualistic terms or as a cultural deficit, rather than locating the root cause of the issues in their sociocultural, historical and political contexts, whiteness remains unchallenged. Indeed there was an emphasis across shires that the whole community needs to be dealt with in the same way; that we should all be treated equally. The narrative of abstract liberalism is demonstrated in the quotations below.

*Paul:* I try and council has the philosophy of it's whole of community, really, whilst recognising they may have specific needs or ah say demands or significantly differences to white people, and white community, council tries to deal with everyone equally and fairly, and not overly or over emphasise one part of the community over another and be very careful there's no separation, we're dealing with everyone equally.

*Interviewer:* another question I wanted to ask is how the Shire communicates a commitment to working with the Noongar people in a way that invites the community, or just single different things they do?

*David:* There's no specific, cos the Shire doesn't differentiate, we're all one community and we don't have any special rules. We certainly acknowledge all of the various, if you want to call it symbolic weeks, you know Reconciliation, NAIDOC, and the like. We certainly acknowledge that the Noongar community are part of the community itself. Does council go out of its way to target communications with the Noongar community. Probably no. Do I have regular contact with the Noongar community? Yes. I have regular contact with all the community. ....I have no issues and sometimes getting down the street during the day can be a bit of a chore, people think I have a two hour lunch break because I get accosted...but you know I'll say 'g'day' to anybody I'll stop and discuss issues with anybody. And when I get the opportunity, I certainly do that.

In the quotation below the shire representative (CEO) constructs racism as something that goes both ways, and invokes the idea of a 'reverse racism'. Indeed this individual was not the only one to speak of the racism experienced by white people perpetrated by Noongar people, with one going as far to say that Noongar people are actually more racist. Such an understanding of racism reflects a blatant disconnect from the everyday lived reality of Aboriginal people, contemporary disadvantage and racism and the history of colonisation, and represents an abstract usage of liberalism, particularly the idea that we live in an egalitarian society.

*David:* Yeah there is a lot of challenges. There's a certain element of racism within any community, and that racism goes both ways. There are a lot of people who see racism as a white issue against Noongar's. My experience is that it's a 50/50 scenario, particularly when you get some of the comments that you get from within the Noongar community, if they were reported by a White person, they would be hung out to dry. There's certainly double standards there. And they have to be overcome. And that's not just a Noongar thing as well. I mean within any community you've got your good ones and your bad ones. And here are some very very good people within the Noongar community, and there are some very very bad ones within the non-indigenous community in #####. There's certainly people you would cross the street to avoid. But I know that the Noongar community are working hard and certainly ..... and there's a few others who are trying to break the mould and they're copping a fair bit from within the Noongar community for doing that, because that's just something that's not done.

This example also highlights the discourse of culture blame, which constructs Aboriginal people and culture in a negative way, and as the source of existing disparities between groups - 'if only they would help themselves'.

The example below highlights the use of abstract liberalism to argue against the idea of 'tokenism in employment', problematizing affirmative action or differential treatment, by drawing on the idea of reverse racism, that is, the idea that marginalized groups are awarded special privileges that are not fair to the rest of the community. This example also draws from the broader stereotype about Aboriginal people and handouts.

*David:* I have, I mean I personally have a pretty good relationship with the Noongar community. I know there are elements in the community that don't, and there are elements in the ##### community that just don't want to see (the town) get ahead as well, and they're just the sort of people that you don't want in your community. I know that there are elements in the Noongar community that want some form of instantaneous employment opportunities. They believe that Noongar people should be, should have a different set of rules than what would normally govern an organisation like the Shire. We require people to have particular skills and licenses when they become employed here. We require that they be able to write. Now, I've been tackled on that scenario. They've got to put in a job application. They've got to show that they've got some skills. But they believe that they should be given an opportunity ahead of other people who have the prerequisites. Now where do you go from there as an employer? We require that they have particular licenses to be able to drive trucks. They don't drive them all the time, but they need to drive them from time to time. You can't just sort of, just because you've got to meet the perception that you've got to meet equal opportunity polls, no. I mean the idea is that the employer has to benefit as well as the employee, and do you put somebody on and spend two years purely developing them, ahead of someone who, you know, will generally slot in rather

seamlessly? The answer is probably no, not unless you have a workforce that's sufficiently big enough to sort of do that. And we've just lost one of our Indigenous employees because he broke the rules one too many times. Same rules apply to him as they apply to the rest of them. And when he was shown the door last week. That was reinforced to the whole organisation. He was very fortunate that he actually got a second opportunity that he didn't deserve several months ago. He failed to take advantage of that. The fact that he was Indigenous was unfortunate. I haven't got a backlash yet. It'll come. Bad luck

The above extract also draws on the culture blame frame, and particularly, the construction of the good Aboriginal citizen, that is, one who 'fits in seamlessly' (assimilates). Another shire representative expressed similar views, using the idea of meritocracy to justify his position.

*Kelly:* you think that it would be getting easier as the generations get along for them to be staying at school longer and, but I, I was quite surprised when I got out here, it wasn't, I thought it was like 100 years behind

*Interviewer:* Have you seen things shift over the years in your time here in this community?

*Peter:* minor shift. Minor shift to the positive, but as I say I couldn't say it's across the whole board, and some have not progressed in the 17 years, what I call progress, you know, someone will measure it in a different way.....I've had some great Indigenous workers, I've had some poor workers as well who haven't been able to, I couldn't keep them on and I don't believe in tokenism for employment at all, or appointment to a committee or whatever else, they are there on their merits.

The example below also draws on myths and stereotypes about 'special privileges' for Aboriginal people.

*Jess:* I know, well on a personal level, I know there was issues at the high school when our kids went there. Yeah. They always felt that the Aboriginal students were favored because if there was a fight like there was quite often, physical fight, and I know a boy from ##### that was in the same year that, he was in the fight, he got expelled and the Aboriginal child that started it and caused it and everything got nothing. And this boy ended up in hospital, like, he was really beaten up. And that seemed to happen a lot..... But I felt at that stage it was the principal that caused that, that whole, that principal's gone now but she, I think she was trying to do the reconciliation the wrong way and it actually caused a bigger rift because the non, like, our kids, well that's not fair we actually saw that fight and etcetera and they never got a thing. And so therefore the Aboriginal kids in that age group thought they could get away with anything and it was happening downtown and it was happening at the sports. And that's why basketball actually folded at the old basketball because in the end when the Aboriginal teams were playing the police had to be there because it just got, it was just really bad. There was fights, we had public meetings with the police and the Aboriginal people there because there was cars going around town

both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal with softball bats. And it just got out of hand. And kids, you know, come's from kids too.

In the above extract, a 'right' and a 'wrong' way of 'doing reconciliation' is constructed. The idea of a reverse racism is alluded to in talking about the wrong way of doing reconciliation. While the right way is not elaborated here, you get the sense that such an approach does not involve challenging Whiteness, and that such an approach would be met with resistance.

One of the assumptions of abstract liberalism is the idea of equality of opportunity. The abstract use of this ideal of liberalism is demonstrated in the quotation below.

*Interviewer:* what have you learnt along the way?

*Peter:* patience, I've learnt.... because it is extremely frustrating I find, upsett ... use the term upsetting, but it upsets me that people aren't utilizing their full potential, themselves or their family or the community, and that can apply to white people, as well, there's no doubt about that, they are not grasping the full opportunities that are there.... That applies to the whole community, but you can only do so much and lead them to a certain point, if they don't wish to do it, or there are reasons they don't want to do it, as long as you're not, as long as you're utilizing your time most effectively and getting the most effective programs up for the community as a whole then that's all that we can really ask for I think so we shouldn't beat ourselves up over it necessarily but it is frustrating.

This narrative constructs the shire and the broader Australian community in a positive light, as 'understandably fed up', having done their best. Such a construction is facilitated by the culture blame narrative, which presents the Aboriginal community as unable to help themselves. In constructing the shire and the Noongar community in these ways, speakers are effectively constructing their scope of justice, or their moral community. Positioning Noongar people as undeserving, that is, outside our scope of justice, failure to treat them according to the same standards of justice we afford to those within our scope of justice is legitimized (Drew, Bishop & Syme, 2002).

## **CULTURE BLAME**

This narrative constructs Aboriginal people and culture as the root cause of Aboriginal disadvantage, marginalization and disempowerment, rather than locating these circumstances in the sociocultural, historical and political contexts. There were a number of ways in which shire talk

effectively constructed the Noongar community/ Noongar culture as deficient and as creating barriers to partnership and overcoming disadvantage within Aboriginal communities more generally. For example, Aboriginal people were constructed as 'Needing to pull themselves up by the bootstraps', that is as apathetic, welfare dependent and lacking in agency (i.e., unwilling to help themselves). Family feuding was constructed as irrational and unfounded, or based on old tribal conflicts or superstition or black magic (Davies, 2010), and attributed to Noongar people and culture alone. Across interviews no genuine attempts were made to understand the complex causes or to consider these conflicts within the context of, and as a possible response to oppression (See Davies, 2010 on a journalistic study of Narrogin's Family Feuding). The culture blame discourse also involved the construction of the 'good Aboriginal citizen'. Each of these themes will be discussed below with examples.

*Needing to pull themselves up by the bootstraps*

The following extract presents Noongar people as apathetic and as endlessly complaining and to some extent, provided with special privileges. Simultaneously the council is presented in a positive light, as being there to support Noongar people if only they would pull their weight.

*David:* So and from a Shire perspective, we're more than happy to continue to work with them and as I say, and as I've said previously, if they want assistance, they know we're here. The offer is open to them. If they expect something instantaneous, they're coming to the wrong place. I don't have a silver bullet, I don't have a magic wand, I don't have a crystal ball. If I did I'd probably be in the circus I suppose! But as I say, I'm more than happy to work with #APA, provided that #APA keep their end of the work up as well. So...I suppose my experience having worked with #APA over the last 12 months is an element of apathy within the community, within their group. It can be, and it is, very hard to get them to work to help themselves. And the specific project that I'm relating to, obviously is the ..... Now this has evolved very, very slowly..... But the funding has been there for four years. Now normally funding doesn't stay available for four years, you know. Its the old 'use it or lose it scenario'.....I don't know if it's a culture thing. And as I say. I don't know that that's unique with #APA....it's just they sit back and they want things done for them.....but you know it's no different , I see it as no different to somebody who picks up the phone and want's to speak to me and says, "I've got a problem", won't be as well received as somebody who picks up the phone and says, "I've got a problem, but I think I've got a solution to that problem. Can I run it past you?" or whatever. So therein lies the difference between somebody who comes up with an issue and then other people who want to help themselves or help to solve issues.



### *Family feuding*

This theme is demonstrated in the quotations below.

*Jess:* same thing back to their building to see if we can get some more activities and stuff there um, same scenario, one family won't give it to the other family sort of thing. One family's complaining that the other family hasn't done anything with it, hasn't won't, don't get involved, and if they do they don't look after it so it's sort of yeah the same two family issues

*Kelly:* I can see opportunities to get them more actively involved in themselves, but to integrate more I don't know how we could do it any better or more than what we've

*Peter:* and I think this town is a very understanding community and a good spirit, and quite welcoming, I think most people, ok they're not necessarily gonna be your best friend or be at your house or whatever else, but if you participate in the community in events and things the community will welcome you and bring you in but if you choose not to participate then that's black or white, you do your own thing people leave you alone anyway, so, there, I just don't know, it obviously goes back many generations and history of, why some families want to remain distant whereas others here you can quite easily talk to them down the street, have a chat to ##### or whatever ##### not too bad to have a chat with as well so but there's obviously a lot of history but as I say , white settlements only been 200 years, prior to that, and the difficulties between, which is nothing to do with black or white, is between each of their own families, there must be a massive amount there that, I can't comprehend to the point that people, we have had crime in town, we've had a stabbing previously we've had a house burnt down many years ago now but those particular people came in on and committed that crime I don't even think they would know what the original feud or anything was about so there is this collective history slash baggage within their own families, the mobs or whatever else so it's hard for white people to understand, cos we haven't got 40,000 years of history living in the patch or being in the region or whatever else but.

In the above excerpt the speaker positions the problem as a problem of family feuding within Aboriginal communities. The unwillingness to acknowledge the history of dispossession demonstrated within this culture blame narrative forecloses opportunities to deconstruct the causes of violence and the struggles for reclaiming historical memory. In the above example, the problem is not attributed to a history and continuing legacy of colonisation, that is, continuing social, political and economic inequities and racism, but as one of family feuding, as something about them and their culture. Wadjella people are thereby not implicated in the problem. Within the research on oppression and structural violence, some writers (e.g., Dudgeon, 2000) have used the notion of violence turned inwards (or sideways) to explain family feuding, within marginalized or oppressed

communities.

### *The good Aboriginal citizen*

This narrative that ran through the broader tendency toward culture blame, constructs the good Aboriginal citizen (an exception to the rule), against an unambiguously negative 'other'. Some examples are provided below.

*Peter:* Yeah very hard and that would be no matter what their background is, but as I say there's a couple of established families, so the ##### family, that we have quite a lot of dealings with they have a good work history with farmers and also with the shire as well so their children and their grandchildren coming through have good work ethics and good family standing and whatever else.....They, I'll use the term fit in easily, but it's not the correct, don't get me wrong with that, there appears to be more integration but they are also very, they are some of the families that also hold dearly their indigenous cultural background and the significance of it versus some of the others who don't have any of these discussions about cultural significance or sites or, and it's just hard to interact with them, whereas with (CAN WA) deal with anyway are, the same people, could be they've drawn in a few like the ##### or the ##### and those sorts of... they're drawn in, but there's only 3 or 4, 2 or 3, 3 or 4 that we're dealing, have specific dealings with so at least we've got those ones to hang onto, if we didn't have those people semi engaged we wouldn't know how to start with the other families”.

*Peter:* I had an outstanding guy that came through from a greenkeeper to a leading roter driver and he was under that much pressure from his own people, that he ended up going to Perth away from his family because he couldn't stand the pressure, I use the term by his own people he was classed as a coconut, brown on the outside, white on the inside and he was just under that much pressure from other families or his own family, he is still very successful with Australia Post in Perth, kids have grown up very well, they do come back here occasionally.

This example also highlights 'dispossession', presenting the Noongar community to blame for their position in the social hierarchy- 'even turning against each other', without acknowledging the sacrifices that may be required to be considered 'a good Aboriginal citizen', that is, dispossession from culture, community and even family. Indeed Moreton-Robinson (2009) talks about the construction of the good Indigenous citizen, achieved through means of disciplinary surveillance, in particular the pervasive discourse of Indigenous pathology.

## **SILENCING AND FORGETTING THE PAST**



Finally silencing and forgetting the past is used to describe the tendency within Wadjella talk to mitigate, deny, or fail to acknowledge historical realities. The silencing and forgetting of the past is about the erasure, denial, mitigation of the history of colonisation and racism in this country and the failure/refusal to recognize/acknowledge the continuing impacts for Aboriginal people and culture of this history and contemporary circumstance. In interviews with shire representatives, there was minimal recognition of the history of colonization and racism and its continuing impacts. When references were made to historical realities, that is, the reserve or the mission days, it was done so in a very disconnected manner, and was accompanied with the discourses we have already introduced -- culture blame, abstract liberalism and equality of opportunity. What we choose to remember and choose to forget, as a nation and as individuals, has implications for where blame is attributed and how Aboriginal empowerment is approached. Some examples are provided in the extracts below.

*Jess:* Well, we recently had an Anzac ceremony here this year and to wear the Aboriginal flag the way it was done was really, you know, they served as soldiers like everyone else and we thought, but it was like, “No, we’re not going up there.” They stood back and it just didn’t seem right. And the same thing we invited them last year to be part of the Anzac service and they wore jeans and wore the Aboriginal flag up on stage to put the wreath and it just came across as confrontationalist. It didn’t need to be like that. And that causes a problem because we don’t walk up there with an Australian flag.

*Interviewer:* Was the Aboriginal flag, does that get raised?

*Jess:* That is not part of the traditional ceremony. We looked that up didn’t we; the protocol?

*Paul:* Oh, well there was a bit of aggravation this year between the RSL and the Aboriginal group, well, specifically on the part of the RSL. So we thought that rather than have a confrontation on the day we’d try and circumvent that so we stuck to the script for Anzac Day ceremonies which doesn’t really go anywhere into recognition of Aboriginal issues. So we just played it fairly straight. With an invitation to participate. So that seemed to work without any unforeseen problems.

*Interviewer:* What was the source of that confrontation? What was going on?

*Jess:* I think there was perceptions on the part of some people. And last year when it was the forgotten soldier, yeah, the way a couple of the Aboriginal people acted and spoke was quite negative. You know, to be on stage and say, what was the comment that pretty much riled people, “We fought for Australia but when we got back we weren’t allowed into the RSL halls. We were kept outside.” And one of the other guys, you know, the Vietnam Vets got up and left the hall. It didn’t need to be said. The way it was said was wrong. Everyone knows that, that’s why we were doing it. We did the displays we, you know, it was sort of in front of 400 people was really quite, yeah, hard to take.

*Peter:* ah but formally trying to engage has been through the CDO's position, um...with varying degrees of success but most our greatest achievements been the recognition of the sort of NAIDOC or ah unity walks as we call them, which aren't always set on NAIDOC week but sometime around this time of the year, when the weather's a little bit finer and every second year we have a, well people use the term reconciliation walk but we prefer the unity walk, um and recognition of the indigenous folk with some awards, get together for morning tea etc so that's a once a year, sorry every second year event but trying to have ah indigenous community members also feed into projects.

In the above quotation the word reconciliation is problematised, with a preference for unity stated. This has been included here, because such a move reflects resistance to name and act on past injustices.

*Kelly:* Well I'm originally from NSW, so my interaction with Aboriginals was they were the same as me, they went to school, they were a different colour, that was the only difference I ever had, then we moved over here when we first got to Western Australia, we went to Kalgoorlie so I went from one extreme to the other seeing the mass segregation in Kalgoorlie and the bad behaviour of blacks and of whites and I was raised, it didn't matter what you were or who you were you had ethics and stuff like that, so I'm just as strong on being white people to be pulling their weight and doing their stuff as I am with Indigenous people. For me coming here, and being closer working with em I see the more segregation and racism coming from the Noongar than what I do of the whites, the whites want the Noongars to be involved but the Noongars separate themselves all the time, and I've even said to them

*Peter:* Yep I totally agree

*Interviewer:* Why do you think that is, and how do you get through that?

*Kelly:* um some of its baggage from like, just because there was a stolen generation and stuff like that but there were a lot of white back in the day too that were taken away from their families as well

*Peter:* like war and things

*Kelly:* yeah

*Peter:* or out from England or whatever it might have been, foster homes and things, yeah

*Kelly:* so sometimes I struggle a little bit with the, cos I think you help people who help themselves and you should be helping yourself and if you're not then that gets frustrating, for people who want handouts constantly, um like just organising the NAIDOC walk an Aboriginal welcome is to be done by a Noongar community member they were wanting to be paid, when we had the first committee meeting they were asking to be paid to pay the didgeridoo, paid to do the welcome and it was for a like a Noongar event, a Noongar recognition event, and they all wanted to be paid

*Peter:* as far as we're concerned that's not on

*Kelly:*.....So it's frustrating to see that they segregate themselves too that way, if they're not getting paid they don't want to do it, and it's a Noongar event and that's where

we revert back to the family who obviously are workers and will do the stuff for free cos it's for themselves, it's not like we're asking them to go out with a whole lot of white people and have a day out or to do anything.

The above extract exemplifies a number of different themes present in Wadjella talk. The speaker draws on the ideas of abstract liberalism, particularly egalitarianism to construct racism as a problem experienced by white people as much, if not more, than Noongar people, and also draws on the broader stereotype of Aboriginal people and handouts. Constructing the problem in individualistic terms disconnected from an analysis of power and history, thus evoking images of a post racial society, the local Noongar people are positioned as individually responsible for their circumstances, and needing to pull themselves up by the bootstraps. In this way, their culture again is constructed as inherently deficient. This narrative effectively mitigates the effects of a history of colonisation and racism for the lived reality of Aboriginal people, thus constituting a major barrier in the creation of receptive social environments for shifting the dynamics of race. Presenting Australia as egalitarian, and racism as something that is experienced more by the Wadjella community, the speaker points blame at the Noongar community for segregating themselves. What is particularly problematic about this understanding is the mitigation of the impacts of a history of colonization and racism, specifically the Stolen Generation. Effectively this extract presents Aboriginal people as needing to move on.

### **LOCAL GOVERNMENT TALK AND WHITENESS**

Whiteness is particularly useful in understanding the processes by which Aboriginal disadvantage and moral exclusion is ignored, denied, mitigated, justified or sometimes even reversed within the broader Australian community, with Whiteness often dictating how justice is understood. Indeed, the social constructionist view of justice posits that what is considered as just and fair in a given sociocultural, historical and political context is “constructed through everyday discourse, including conversations, narratives, explanations, excuses, myths, reasons, plans, gossip, anecdotes, jokes and so on” (Hodgetts et al., 2010, p. 260). Therefore “when confronted with unjust treatment, people do not seek recourse to invariant and somehow universal rules or principles; it is through the discourse that people come to believe what is just and unjust” (Drew et al. 20002, p. 626).

Drew et al. (2002) offer a framework for thinking about justice. For them understandings of justice must:

Recognize the socially constructed discursive nature of justice, (2) locate justice within the appropriate sociocultural, historical, political milieu, and (3) recognize the particular importance of procedural fairness as mechanism for enhancing collaboration and empowerment beyond the traditional focus on distribution of resources or distributive fairness. (p. 626)

Therefore in local government talk about barriers to partnership between the local government and the Noongar community shire representatives are actively constructing their scope of justice, or moral community, that is, to whom conditions and considerations of fairness apply. These assertions may seem reasonable, just and fair, in the absence of an understanding or acknowledgment of the operation of symbolic power in the sociocultural, historical and political contexts in which they are embedded and of the history of dispossessions and exclusions experienced by Aboriginal people. This exemplifies the important need to examine the different ways in which common sense understandings can function to further marginalize and exclude Noongar people from community life, and also of sharing stories about Noongar history, culture and identity.

The consequence of the way local government constructs their moral community, is reflected in the narratives identified in Noongar talk: dispossession, disregard, being misunderstood and cultural mistrust. It is these narratives that need to be transformed, and this can only be achieved by changing the way government (at all levels) 'does business' with Aboriginal people and communities, and the way broader Australia thinks about Aboriginal people, that is, by creating new narratives for partnership. The creation of new narratives for partnership is essentially about thinking differently about 1) Aboriginal people and culture, 2) the role/responsibility of all levels of government in facilitating Aboriginal empowerment and 3) necessarily viewing issues affecting Noongar people and communities in all their complexity, thus avoiding the tendency to engage in culture blame, silencing and forgetting the past and the application of abstract notions of liberalism. Creating new narratives for partnership is about widening non-Aboriginal Australia's scope of justice to include Aboriginal people, where justice is taken to refer to the outrageous and the

civilized, the violent and the mundane, complicity and intentional acts. Furthermore, 'justice' here must be understood in the context of a history of dispossession and exclusions and the lived reality of Aboriginality. In this way, ignoring, silencing or choosing to forget the history of colonisation and the complexity of the issues affecting Aboriginal communities, is a social injustice, which stands as a major barrier to partnership formation between communities.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Relationships cannot be established where there is mistrust, misunderstanding, intolerance and a lack of acceptance, dialogue and respect. Therefore relationships must be rebuilt on a strong foundation of understanding, tolerance, acceptance, dialogue, trust and reciprocal affection. Building stronger deeper relations offers the Australian nation an opportunity for healing. (AHRC, 2011, p. 14)

The central aim of CAN WA's Strategic Partnership Initiative was to facilitate a community wide awareness of Noongar culture, values and perspectives. As part of this, CAN WA identified the need to understand the broader sociocultural, historical and political context in which their Community Cultural Development practice is situated. In particular, there was an identified need to explicate the micro-politics of culture, power and knowledge, and implications for community relations because even though CAN WA has been very successful in partnering community groups to express their needs, culture, and aspirations, they have also recognized the existence of deeper, enduring barriers to partnerships in communities in the Wheatbelt and elsewhere.

We presented the different social and symbolic resources Noongar participants used to account for the barriers to partnership and the subsequent implications for themselves and their communities within the broader context. Evident in each of the four themes identified was the legacy of racialised oppression and the ongoing relations of dominance and subjugation. The themes identified were disregard, dispossession, cultural mistrust and being misunderstood. We then presented the way local government representatives and staff constructed the barriers to partnership and the ways in which the discourses in those constructions reproduce power imbalances. We identified three interrelated themes in Wadjella talk about barriers. These were

culture blame, abstract liberalism and equality of opportunity and silencing and forgetting the past. We explored some of the dynamics and implications of these narratives through the lens of critical race theory and whiteness studies to help explicate the working of symbolic power. While we focused on barriers to partnership formation, we did so with the understanding that only through understanding the barriers, can the opportunities be identified.

In creating more receptive social environments for Aboriginal empowerment and thus resetting relationships between Aboriginal people and broader Australia, and Aboriginal people and government, we emphasised the need to incorporate Aboriginal people into wider Australia's scope of justice, which necessitates the deconstruction of normative understandings of ourselves and others that can often work in ways to silence and exclude minority communities. While this can be addressed through sharing stories about Noongar history and culture and life in the Wheatbelt with the broader community, it is also necessary to critically reflect on the common sense understanding non-Aboriginal people have about Noongar people, culture and issues and the implications that these understandings have for relationship building and engagement efforts with the Noongar community. As expressed by Sonn and Green (2006), "rather than simply focusing on the 'victim' of these unfair power relations, interrogating whiteness as the source for continuing disadvantage and colonizing practices and discourses aims to de-centre and displace the central position of dominance and privilege" (p. 4). Such an understanding of race and power asserts the deconstruction of normativity as an essential part of the broader project of anti-racism and reconciliation. The change efforts of social change agencies such as CAN WA are also rendered limited without critical attention to the reproduction of power in everyday social interaction and practices, including community cultural development.

### **POINTS FOR DISRUPTION: WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS OF THIS WORK?**

The complexity involved in the working of racialised oppression highlights the importance of multiple levels of interventions required to effect social change. Researchers have highlighted different strategies for social intervention guided by a commitment to participation, working from the ground up, and developing solutions to problems drawing on the different knowledge and experiences of all stakeholders

The strategies can include:

- a) Working together with a view to raise critical awareness about sources and processes of exclusion and identifying and reclaiming strengths that can form the basis for resilience and action.
- b) Fostering the creation of social settings in which people can come together to create partnerships across social and cultural divides and gain access to networks and resources.
- c) Generating counter stories and representations and engaging in the deconstruction of dominant ideologies as part of the process of promoting broader level social inclusion.

Working on the ground through arts practice on the one hand and seeking systemic and structural change on the other, CAN WA's Strategic Partnership Initiative provides lessons about collaboration for change.

Community arts such as the oral history project, "Bush Babies" and "Noongar Voices of the Central Wheatbelt" have illustrated the importance of storytelling for reclaiming silenced stories. These projects are powerful and should be encouraged because they are vital to providing spaces for joint participation and they are examples of communities telling their own stories that are important for cultural continuity and for change. It is recommended that community arts projects continue to be developed in partnership with communities as an important means to tell about Aboriginal lives in communities and to contribute to the broader projects of reclaiming and rewriting devalued and silenced identities, and moving towards complex shared understandings of issues.

Collaborating with the Noongar community has meant that external agencies such as CAN WA provide pragmatic support and assistance to Aboriginal people. These types of support are important aspects of community empowerment. At a different level, there is bridging and networking activities with local government and other relevant agencies that are concerned with the promotion of community wellbeing. Based on this it is recommended that CAN WA continues to disseminate the knowledge about building partnerships for change within the broader context of histories of oppression.

These programs were limited in terms of time and resources but significantly, provided opportunities for Noongar people to be included in projects aimed at reclaiming and telling stories



about their lives in the broader community context. Importantly as prefigurative action, this work lays the foundation for future actions aimed at community inclusion and the telling of stories serves to break down barriers and to inform/shape relationships. In this regard CAN WA recognizes that approaches to Aboriginal empowerment can't be piecemeal, as reflected in their long term commitment to the Wheatbelt. However CAN WA recognizes the importance of understanding the social, ecological and historical context of change work. In their view LGA's are best positioned to promote change and social inclusion of Aboriginal people into everyday community life. Moreover, as asserted by Social Justice Commissioner Gooda, a new approach to development that embraces Aboriginal culture and identity is needed, emphasising that all levels of government, "have a responsibility to ensure that society's structures, laws and processes facilitate full and open engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander citizens" (AHRC, 2011, p. 23). Because of this there is a need to recognize the importance of changing narratives that work in exclusionary ways, because it is through reworking these that we begin to create new stories for partnerships. Only by developing an awareness of how different narratives function in everyday common sense ways to exclude the Aboriginal community from participation in broader Australian society, are we able to move forward together. These narratives, as we have shown, while seemingly benign, work to further marginalize and exclude Aboriginal people, but do not necessarily involve malice or 'intent to be racist'. Indeed the construction of the 'intent to be racist' as necessary to label something as 'racist' or exclusionary, is itself a further barrier to effective dialogue about racialised exclusion/oppression.

## **DISRUPTING COMMON SENSE EXPLANATIONS OF BARRIERS TO PARTNERSHIP IN SHIRE TALK**

While it is important to make explicit the exclusionary narratives at work in local government talk about barriers to partnership formation with the Noongar community, it is also imperative that examples of the disruption of these narratives be acknowledged. Indeed there were instances where exclusionary discourses or common sense explanations about barriers were actively challenged in local government talk and opportunities for the creation of new narratives were being opened up. In the extracts below participants acknowledge the need for flexibility, dialogue and for local government to be proactive in building relationships with and engaging the Noongar



community. There is also acknowledgement that while this work is not easy, it is extremely important that this groundwork is done.

*Erica:* One of the ideas that came out of the community consultation process that I did for the artist in residency program was a creative writing series of workshops. And an idea that came out of that there was to actually create a book, similar to *Voices of the Wheatbelt*, encompassing all poems and essays and short stories that would have come out of the workshops. And, you know, publish a book and call it *Write Around the Wheatbelt*.

*Erica:* It's lovely (new building). And I was thinking..... to try and get them there. I was actually going to give them a personal invitation. You know, like, everybody else will get an invitation but, more than just posting it, maybe do a one on one or something. I don't know because I think it's something, if they felt that they were involved with the opening – not so much the decision-making – they might be more inclined to utilise the facility, also, and not see it as, "Only the whites can use it." Kind of thing."

*Erica:* So there's an annual art show and, obviously, they haven't been giving for the last ... which is sad because, I mean, it's probably attractive to a lot of people would like to see that. It would certainly add another dimension to it. So maybe that's something that maybe some consideration could be given to the art committee, maybe, for next year's one. It's probably too late to set it up for this year because we've got it all underway. But maybe a way of doing it is to have a special Indigenous art thing, change the rules for them, and allocate some space. But, sort of, limit it and say we'll select the best 10, or whatever. You know, maybe we need to think outside the square to overcome that. Because those sort of things have got the potential to make the show become a really wide attraction and I think it's a good way of getting the community involved. And that's the problem, you know, is trying to make people fit into a box that it's not their culture to fit in boxes. You know, it just needs a bit of....Again, dealing with that, you're dealing with an older generation that is all on this committee, that have done the same thing every single year, and if you try and change anything, oh, my goodness. It's a challenge but I just do it and tell them about it afterwards, sometimes. You know if I don't think it's that much of a big deal. Because it's just easier that way. I know you shouldn't. I guess, you've got to try and re-engage them and get their confidence to go back into it. Because you need a champion, dealing with someone good, and will get a result.

*Interviewer:* Do you have that connection within the community, with an Elder?

*Erica:* I've tried to make that connection and I just ... you know.

*Interviewer:* It's hard.

*Erica:* As I said, after I was knocked back with that consultation, I was really deflated and I kind of thought, why do I even try, kind of thing. And since then, I've had quite a lot on my plate, so I haven't – whether it's been consciously or subconsciously – tried to redo it. I don't know but I haven't had the opportunity to re-engage them.

*Interviewer:* So what are some of the things that you've learnt along the way?

*Erica:* Don't get hung up on things. Just move on (laughter)

*Steve:* You've got to be patient and it's not all just going to fall into place. It's going to take time and a lot of effort but it's worth putting that effort in.

*Erica:* It is.

*Steve:* You know, I just think this discussion here is good, get the creative juices going rife and, you know, talking about an art prize. And maybe that's a way of getting some engagement and doing that and we seem to spend a bit of time trying to think outside the square and come up with some ways of doing things.

*Erica:* And sometimes having outsiders that you can bounce off. Not walking into a meeting with the same old people and you know that you're going to get the same old, "No, but we can't. It hasn't been done like that."

*Steve:* Yeah, 'we've always done it this way and we don't do that here.' Yeah. It's breaking down those barriers within the community.

*Interviewer:* Yeah, that community legacy. Yeah.

The last two extracts also highlight some of the barriers for local government in 'doing things differently', in terms of the resistance of the broader community to change. This extract also alludes to the issue of organisations being stuck, in emphasising the need for dialogue around the issues and the importance of fresh eyes, or outsiders to bounce ideas off, and thinking outside the box.

It should be noted that these disruptions were most evident in interviews with local government representatives who were relatively new to their role or the area. This is significant because it highlights the challenge with disrupting exclusionary narratives for local government representatives who are dealing with the frustrations of trying to engage in this context of a history of racialised exclusion on a day-to-day basis and the potential for burn out and tunnel vision to develop. The challenges associated with trying to engage the Noongar community are evident throughout these extracts. What is significant however is that in these extracts there is a willingness to engage proactively despite and perhaps because of these challenges, and there is a clear awareness of the need to see barriers differently, that is to put them into context.

## **ENGAGING WITH COMPLEX UNDERSTANDINGS OF ISSUES**

Another important aspect of CAN WA's engagement with the Noongar community is the commitment to a complex view of understanding the challenges confronting communities, and that a long term commitment is required to create inclusive communities. The Strategic Partnership Initiative builds on previous projects and embodies this commitment. It draws from the knowledge of working on the ground with Noongar and local government to understand barriers and the

possibilities for change, based on institutional knowledge generated through cycles of reflection on action. It is through these practices that CAN WA has created an understanding of the importance of anchoring projects and programs in the cultural realities of communities that they seek to partner in empowerment work.

Based on this work it is recommended that there be a follow up Creative Think Tank to provide feedback and opportunities for dialogue about how barriers can be understood and the powerful ways in which they shape community relations. This research shows the complex problematic understandings that people have about the issues in communities, but it also suggests that by coming together people can begin to name the issues and the different ways they are understood. It is in this context that community arts projects have a powerful role as a vehicle for making explicit the issues and aspirations in communities and provide important tools for producing shared agendas and breaking down the cycles of blaming people for problems, which they have little or no control over, but which stem from a history of dispossession and exclusions.

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