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An Examination of Indigenous Australians who are Flourishing

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Abstract

Despite numerous efforts, the disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians continues to persist. In response to the high levels of disadvantage that is experienced by Indigenous Australians, consecutive Australian governments continue to pursue an approach that primarily focuses on Indigenous Australian disadvantage - which is commonly pursued in isolation of their strengths and the solutions they may hold to improve their own lives. The continuation of this approach can be problematic, contributing to imposed research, policy and programming that can compound the problems experienced by Indigenous Australians.

In response to the limited research into the strengths of Indigenous Australians, this thesis sought to contribute to research about Indigenous Australian strengths. Two primary research questions were explored to understand how Indigenous Australians employed in a tertiary education institution were flourishing in their lives. The first question was: What characteristics, beliefs and behaviours are used by a group of Indigenous Australians that enable them to function effectively and live with purpose? The second question was: To what extent does the practice of the participants' Indigenous Australian culture enhance their wellbeing?

Indigenous Australian wellbeing is comprised of a range of factors. These factors include strong physical, emotional, social, spiritual and cultural health. Further, the wellbeing of many Indigenous Australians is influenced by a range of external factors that can negatively impact their wellbeing. These factors include discursive historical, political and legal constructs and deficit discourse that can frame and position many Indigenous Australians as deficient and incapable of managing their own affairs.

The sample group comprised of 11 participants. To be selected for this study, the participants had to identify as an Indigenous Australian, be employed by an Australian

tertiary institution and have experienced high levels of wellbeing in periods throughout their lives.

To deepen the scholarly communities' understanding as to how Indigenous Australians flourish in life whilst contending with a range of influencing factors, this thesis drew on an interpretive phenomenological methodological framework that is informed by contemporary research in positive psychology and Indigenous Standpoint Theory.

Three major findings arose from this study. First, participants have a shared understanding of how Indigenous Australian wellbeing is conceptualised. Second, participants access an inventory of known Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian personal characteristics, subsequent beliefs and behaviours that enable them to function and be effective in their lives. Lastly, the practice of Indigenous Australian culture is central to the health and wellbeing of many of the participants.

Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my sister Bonnie O’Leary. Sister, you embody the enduring spirit of our ancestors and elders. Sister, your flourishing life is one that you should acknowledge and be proud of. There was no free passage to the life that you now lead; a life that is grounded in our Aboriginal culture and the love that you have for our people. Whilst the odds were stacked against you, you prevailed and manifested a life that you wanted for yourself and your children who are also leaders of our tomorrow.

The way in which you express your life is the testament to a truth that I hold close to my heart, in that we are a resilient, enduring and deeply connected people. This connection is maintained through our whirling song lines, a transcendent source of strength gifted to us from our ancestors. This is an unlimited source of hope and prosperity that is ours alone - to be free all we need do is surrender and be the ancient flow of this authority from which all things are possible.

Sister, you are outstanding.

Appreciation

I express my deepest appreciation to my supervisors Professor Elizabeth McKinley and Associate Professor Peggy Kern, for their patience, advice and guidance that supported the current study through to completion. I also give thanks to my dear friend Elisabeth Laguerre who has been a constant person of encouragement and understanding as I chart a new professional path for my life.

Indigenous Australian Cultural Introduction

As is the custom of many Aboriginal Australians, I begin by providing my genealogy and ancestral claim to my country (Martin & Mirraboopa, 2003). I offer this as a reference point of connection to Aboriginal Australians reading this thesis. It also works to confirm my authority as an active leader in the Aboriginal communities with which I live and serve.

I am a Gamilaroi man who originates from the township of Barraba in northern New South Wales. My Aboriginal Australian ancestral connection is to Yawiriawiri Murri Ganur or 'Bill Natty' as recorded by white settlers in 1855. Yawiriawiri Murri Ganur was a chief of his Gamilaroi Tribe within the Gamilaroi Nation. His son, James Natty was the father of several children, of which one was Blanche Natty who married Charles O'Leary, who are my Great-Grandparents. Blanche and Charles had two children, Charles and Mary O'Leary; Charles O'Leary is my Grandfather of which I was given my first name. I grew up on my ancestral lands and continue to connect with the culture and spirits of those lands.

Abbreviation and Terms

The terms ‘Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander’ and ‘Indigenous Australians’ are used interchangeably to identify the original peoples of Australia.

The term ‘Non-Indigenous’ refers to the peoples who do not identify as a member of the community of the First Peoples of the countries discussed in this thesis.

The term ‘CANZUS Nations’ refers to Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the United States who have been grouped together on the basis they are settler-colonial countries with an Indigenous populace that share some similar challenges with Indigenous Australians concerning their health and wellbeing.

Eight abbreviations are used throughout this thesis:

COAG = Collation of Australian Governments;

CTGS = Close the Gap Strategy;

UoM = University of Melbourne;

NATSISS = National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey;

AATSIHS = Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey;

NATSIHS = National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey;

NATSINPAS = National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nutrition and Physical Activity Survey; and

NATSIHMS = National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Measures Survey.

Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Background

Research worldwide demonstrates that the majority of Indigenous populations experience greater disparities across a range of health social determinants in comparison with non-Indigenous populations (Paradies, 2016; Silburn, Reich, & Anderson, 2016). For example, in the United States, the mortality rate for American Indian and Alaskan Native populations is on average 5.5 years less than the non-Indigenous population (Indian Health Service, 2018); for Native Hawaiians populations, it is an average 3.8 years less than non-Indigenous population (Wu et al., 2017). In New Zealand, the Māori population average life expectancy is 8.4 years less than the non-Indigenous population (Ministry of Health, 2018). In Australia, the average life expectancy for Indigenous Australians is 10 years less than the non-Indigenous population (Australian Institute for Health and Welfare, 2018b). Over three months in 2019 alone, 35 Indigenous Australian suicides occurred (Allam, 2019). These mortality rates reflect the culmination of chronic health and wellbeing issues that correlate with a plethora of education, economic and social characteristics and problems that many Indigenous populations experience over their lifetimes (Silburn et al., 2016; World Health Organisation, 2007).

While the historical and contemporary context differs across Indigenous populations, the genesis of the disparity experienced by many Indigenous populations in contemporary societies stems, at least in part, from colonial ideologies (Paradies, 2016). Essentially, colonial ideologies are the formation of ideas that nations use as a means of conquest, take possession, control and rule over an area and existing peoples (Kennedy, 1996). The origins of colonial ideology in part stem from race science that peaked between the 1700s and 1800s, which legitimised racism, racialised inferiority and racial superiority through physical

anthropology such as anthropometry (measurement and features of body parts) and craniometry (measurements of the skull) (Wolfe, 2016). Race science supported the classification of human populations into physically discrete human races, which supported the notion that superior and inferior races existed, and in doing so substantiated the beliefs of colonial powers to assert their dominion over first nation people from around the world (Winant, 2000; Wolfe, 2016). Toward the end of the 1900s, scientific racism had largely been discredited by the academic community, yet historically it has persistently been used to support or validate racist worldviews and doctrine to maintain the unlawful possession of lands and control over the first nation peoples (Rogers, 2019). For example, in Australia, the legal term Terra Nullius meaning ‘land belonging to no one’ was used by the British to take possession of Australia (Banner, 2005). Whilst Terra Nullius was a genuine doctrine, it was fictitious in its application to Australia, as there were existing communities throughout the land, now known as the original inhabitants of Australia. The British administration ignored the existing evidence as a means to use the doctrine of Terra Nullius and the reason for doing this was under the British belief in their own racial superiority (Wolfe, 2006, 2016).

Colonial ideologies legitimised the dispossession of many Indigenous populations from their lands and culture through legal acts of genocide and the attempts to assimilate the Indigenous populations into the dominant cultural group (Paradies, 2016; Rudolph, 2016; Sheridan & Parezo, 1996). Further, Paradies (2016) suggested that the above mentioned disparities are exacerbated by the continuing dispossession of and disconnection with traditional lands, experiences of racism, inaccurate accounts of their histories, loss of languages, knowledges cultures and transgenerational trauma. He suggests the process of ‘decolonisation’ as a possible solution to minimise the level of disparity that is experienced by Indigenous populations. In the context of Indigenous peoples, decolonisation is a process of centring Indigenous lives in ways of being and doing that are based in Indigenous

knowledges (Curtain University, 2017; Sherwood & Edwards, 2006). Research suggests the contemporary effects of colonisation manifest in the lives of Indigenous populations through low self-esteem, a lack of identity, and low emotional, mental, spiritual, cultural and physical health (Barrington-Leigh, Christopher, & Sloman, 2016; Cooke, Mitrou, Lawrence, Guimond, & Beavon, 2007; Silburn et al., 2016).

Despite attempts from the CANZUS nations' governments over the past several decades to address the disadvantages and problems through the development of inclusive and progressive Indigenous public health policies (Cooke et al., 2007), the health and wellbeing disparities between Indigenous populations and their respective non-Indigenous populations persist (David, 2006; Silburn et al., 2016). In Australia, governments persist with the belief that a combination of policies, programs, and resources will end Indigenous Australian disadvantage. Yet research demonstrates that these approaches are invariably ineffective for many Indigenous Australians (Maddison, 2019; Pholi, Black, & Richards, 2009).

A range of contributing factors exists that stifles the progress of government-sanctioned approaches to end Indigenous Australian disadvantage. First, it has been strongly argued by Pholi et al. (2009) that a major contributor is a lack of reciprocal engagement with Indigenous Australian communities. The failure to end these disparities has been driven in part by the continuation of Western ideologies that define what health and wellbeing should be for Indigenous populations (Ahuriri-Driscoll et al., 2008). Further, a lack of understanding of the needs and aspirations for the health and wellness of the Indigenous communities, thereby being more equipped to collectively work towards viable solutions (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2011). This results in the imposition of policies, programs and health care that do not reflect or respond to Indigenous ideologies about health and wellbeing (Barrington-Leigh et al., 2016; Fogarty, Lovell, Langenberg, & Heron, 2018). For example, the Close the Gap Strategy (CTGS) was launched in 2008; 11 years into the delivery of the

strategy, only three of the seven targets have been met (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2018b). The Australian government agrees that the lack of active participation and control by Indigenous Australians over the first CTGS was a significant contributing factor that has impacted its success (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2018a).

The second factor is deficit-based discourse which can negatively influence both Indigenous Australians' self-perception and value, as well as the public's perceptions about Indigenous Australians. This can result in policies, programs, and metrics that primarily focus on weaknesses and problems, rather than on the prosperity and strengths of Indigenous Australians (Fogarty, Bulloch, McDonnell, & Davis, 2018). Despite the disadvantage experienced by many Indigenous Australians (Australian Institute for Health and Welfare, 2018a), there are also many strengths that lie within individuals who experience high levels of wellbeing in periods throughout their lives. This is what I consider under the term 'flourishing'. However, we know very little about the characteristics, behaviours and beliefs that enable and sustain Indigenous Australians' abilities to experience high levels of wellbeing and flourishing (Dodson, 1994; Fogarty, Lovell, et al., 2018).

1.2 Purpose of the Current Study

The current study focuses on the strengths of Indigenous Australians by learning from those who flourish in life. The study aims to identify the characteristics, beliefs, and behaviours that allow Indigenous Australians to flourish. As part of this study, I will explore how the participants define and understand the terms 'wellbeing' and 'flourishing'. Further, broader than this project is my commitment to shift deficit discourses about Indigenous Australians and suggest that the shift can be supported by elevating the language that is used in reference to Indigenous Australians. For this reason, I place importance on the term 'flourishing', as it is a term that tends to be used for describing social elites. The term is far from the dominant narratives that seek to encapsulate the lived experiences of Indigenous

Australians, but I argue that the term can be effectively applied to shift the discourse around the Indigenous Australian experience.

For the purposes of this study, I define flourishing as an individual who is optimally functioning through the connectivity of their cultural beliefs (Purdie, Dudgeon, & Walker, 2010), behaviours and experiences that enable the individual to be emotionally strong, resilient and live their life with vigour and purpose (Kern, Waters, Adler, & White, 2015). This definition draws from Purdie et al. (2010) research into the interrelatedness of culture, health and wellbeing specific to Indigenous Australians. This understanding intersects with and is drawn from non-Indigenous Australian conceptualisations of what it means to flourish in life, and a conceptualisation that has been developed by researchers in the discipline of positive psychology such as Kern et al. (2015). I discuss the terms ‘wellbeing’ and ‘flourishing’ further in Chapter 3.

Through this project, I address two research questions.

Research Question 1 (RQ1) responds to the assertion that the systematic investigation of how and why Indigenous Australians flourish may provide insights into strategies for improving the lives of Indigenous Australians whose wellbeing is low:

RQ1: What characteristics, beliefs and behaviours are used by a group of Indigenous Australians that enable to them function effectively and live with purpose?

Many Indigenous Australians have a distinct understanding of their culture in relation to their health and wellbeing (Purdie et al., 2010). Existing Australian research suggests that Indigenous Australian enculturation contributes to and protects Indigenous Australian health and wellbeing (Biddle, 2014; Biddle & Swee, 2012).

Research Question 2 (RQ2) will explore the role that enculturation plays in Indigenous Australian wellbeing.

RQ2: To what extent does the practice of the participants' Indigenous Australian culture enhance their wellbeing?

1.3 Thesis Composition

Chapter 2 provides an Australian context for the thesis, which provides an understanding of how Indigenous Australian wellbeing is understood and has been impacted by colonisation. Informing the central arguments in this thesis, an overview of how Indigenous Australian wellbeing is measured and responded to in policy is provided. The overview highlights the need for Australian governments and research institutions to pursue reciprocal strength-based approaches to effectively respond to the continuing disadvantage experienced by Indigenous Australians.

Chapter 3 consists of a literature review in which a selection of four intersecting areas of research which are relevant to my study are reviewed and discussed: Deficit discourses about Indigenous Australians, positive psychology, strength-based Indigenous Australian wellbeing studies and global Indigenous perspectives. The reviewed literature provides further context for the study and points to areas in which the current study may offer insights.

Chapter 4 details the methodological approach used in this study, including the philosophical background and methods used. The current study used an interpretive phenomenological approach that sought to bring to light, reflect upon and describe the deeper meaning of the lived experiences that emerge from the data (Benner, 2008). The phenomenological approach was guided by the discipline of positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), which focuses on the strengths and virtues of people rather than weaknesses and problems, and Indigenous Standpoint Theory (IST) (Nakata, 2007a), which

positions me as an Indigenous researcher to engage deeply, question and give prominence to the daily lived experiences of the Indigenous Australian participants in the current study (Moreton-Robinson, 2000).

Chapter 5 reports the research findings, which have been interpreted through the methodology used for this thesis. A brief summary of each interview is provided, as they relate to the research questions. Through the analysis, eight themes emerged and are reviewed: Conceptualisation of Wellbeing, Flourishing, Responsibility, Obligation and Personal Strengths, Self-Reflection, Identity, Practices to Support Wellbeing and Connections.

Chapter 6 concludes the thesis, where the common themes from this study are discussed further, including how the key themes related to the literature examined as part of this study, followed by a discussion about the validation and limitations of this study, of positive psychology and proposed future research related to outcomes of the study. Finally, a conclusion is made about the three major findings of this study.

Chapter 2 Context

2.1 Introduction

To understand Indigenous Australian wellbeing in a contemporary context, I begin by considering historical aspects of Indigenous Australian culture, spirituality and wellness, which are intricately interlinked within the Indigenous Australian cultural frame of reference; these aspects are then considered in contemporary Indigenous Australians, which are interwoven with the ongoing negative effects that British colonisation has had on Indigenous Australian wellbeing. Guiding principles of Indigenous Australian wellbeing are identified. I then consider the policy drivers and subsequent reporting that Australian governments are pursuing to respond to the disadvantage that is experienced by Indigenous Australians (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2018b), and review data on Indigenous Australian wellbeing. I conclude with a summary of the interconnected issues that were discussed in how they impact the wellbeing of Indigenous Australians.

2.2 Traditional Indigenous Australian Culture and Spirituality

To understand Indigenous Australian wellbeing in the contemporary context within which this study is situated, I begin by considering historical aspects of the Indigenous Australian culture, health, wellness and spirituality. The Indigenous Australian culture cannot and should not be defined in absolute terms, given its iterative nature in an evolving contemporary period of history. However, culture can act as a protective or contributing factor that supports Indigenous Australian wellbeing (Biddle, 2014; Biddle & Swee, 2012), which is one of the exploratory aims of this thesis.

Historically, for many Indigenous Australians, expressions of traditional Indigenous Australian culture and spirituality formed the conceptual basis for Indigenous Australian health and wellness (Purdie et al., 2010). Traditional Indigenous Australian culture and

spirituality are based on a reverent philosophy of connectivity of all things in the natural and spiritual worlds (Grieves, 2009). The environment, fauna and the cosmos are living beings that are understood as individual but interconnected relationships with rights and responsibilities to humans, who in turn have reciprocal rights and responsibilities with these beings. This inter-relatedness between the environment, fauna and the cosmos and humans can be understood as a respected unity that is required for the spiritual balance of the individual, their kin, and community (Arabena, 2008; Grieves, 2008, 2009).

The Indigenous Australian knowledge systems that allowed traditional Indigenous Australians to live in harmony and have their living needs met was within a time of Creation, commonly known by many Indigenous Australians as the Dreaming (Horton, 1994; Hume, 2000). The Dreaming is not stagnantly held in ancient time; rather, Indigenous Australians live their Dreaming in their life cycle and draw on the cultural practices that were established in cultural lore (Arabena, 2008; Grieves, 2008, 2009; Poroch et al., 2009; Stanner, 1979). According to traditional beliefs, creation was a time where powerful ancestral beings formed and created order out of chaos. The ancestral beings shaped the natural and metaphysical world, and they imbued all things with life. They exposed Indigenous Australians to truths, including how to be healthy physically, mentally and spiritually, and then formalised these understandings into lore (Behrendt, 2012; Berndt & Berndt, 1988; Stanner, 1979). This lore governed all aspects of life and forged the varying enduring crux of traditional Indigenous Australian spirituality (Flood & Wylie, 2006; Grieves, 2009; Horton, 1994).

Colonisation enacted the demise of the majority of Indigenous Australian traditional languages and cultural practices (Connor, 2002; Reynolds & Parker, 1987), which negatively impacted upon the health and wellbeing of many Indigenous Australians (Paradies, 2016), as they became members of a racially oppressed group, and many became disconnected from traditional knowledges and methods that were previously used to support and nurture

physical and spiritual health (Purdie et al., 2010). Importantly, the negative impact of colonisation and racism not only impacted upon the ancestors of contemporary Indigenous Australians (Paradies, 2005), but also continues to permeate contemporary Indigenous Australian societies today.

Many Indigenous Australians are now required to express their culture in different ways, as a result of colonisation by the British in 1788 (Berndt & Berndt, 1988). Still, traditional Indigenous Australian culture and spirituality continues to inform the genesis of various iterations of how Indigenous Australian culture is understood by many contemporary Indigenous Australians. Many modern Indigenous Australians have sought to lean back into cultural knowledges to support their peoples' health and wellbeing, even though only fragments of traditional cultural knowledge remain. The remaining fragments continue to anchor the beliefs systems of many Indigenous Australians who want to live in and expand their Indigenous Australian culture and spirituality relative to their contemporary lived experiences (Hume, 2000).

2.3 Contemporary Indigenous Australian Culture and Spirituality

The expression of Indigenous Australian traditional culture and spirituality in contemporary Australia is diverse (Grieves, 2008). A minority of Indigenous Australians continue to express their spirituality through pre-colonised traditional ceremonies, which can be a mixture of dance, song, music and storytelling, initiation, offerings of protection and celebration of creator spirits (Horton, 1994; Hume, 2000; Stockton, 1995). There is limited research as to how the majority of contemporary Indigenous Australians express their Indigenous spirituality if they do so at all. However, Calma (2009), Morelli (2017), Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (2019) and Hume (2000) suggest that many Indigenous Australians express their spirituality through an evolved contemporary culture that is connected to traditional culture, although fragmented as a result of

colonisation. None-the-less, fragments of traditional culture have continued to survive and are transferred to contemporary generations by Indigenous Australian elders (Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care, 2019), historians (Berndt & Berndt, 1988) and anthropologists (Stanner, 1979). In parallel with this knowledge transfer, many contemporary Indigenous Australians are also in the process of reconstructing cultural practices, such as learning traditional languages, dances and art, and also spending more time on their traditional lands (Australian National University, 2018; Boonwurrung Foundation, 2019; Rumbalara Football Netball Club, 2019; Wangal United, 2018).

Bhabha (2004) proposed a third space, called the “realm of beyond” (p.2), which represents an ambiguous contested space where colonised peoples can reject structures and hegemonies and occupy any heterogeneous spaces where they can negotiate their own narratives of existence. Similarly, in an attempt to explain the context of how contemporary Indigenous Australian culture and spirituality exists, Hume (2000) refers to the term ‘interstitial cultural space’. This space provides a contemporary framework for the freedom to mix and harmonise, change, and retain various components of culture encompassing the old and the new. An ‘interstitial cultural space’ allows for the recovery, reimagining and reactivation of an evolving Indigenous Australian culture, which has been required because of the consequential impact of colonisation and the initially forced indoctrination of Indigenous Australians into dominant Westernised Christianity (Mikhailovich & Pavli, 2011; Moses, 2004; Reynolds & Parker, 1987).

Similarly, Hume’s attempt to conceptualise and frame contemporary Indigenous Australian culture and spirituality is broadly commensurate with the lives of the people who participated in the current study; on the basis of how some of the participants reconcile how Indigenous Australian culture and spirituality was understood and exists and is experienced in their own lives.

2.4 Guiding Principles of and Policies for Indigenous Australian Wellbeing

The history of colonisation informs understandings of the forced evolution of Indigenous Australian wellbeing. Indigenous Australian wellbeing cannot easily be defined in absolute terms for at least two major reasons. First, aligned with a psychological perspective, this thesis focuses on subjective wellbeing. By definition, this concept is subjective in nature such that it can only be fully understood from the perspective of the individual (Pawelski, 2016). Even as objective conditions have shifted over the years, the subjective interpretation and experiences of those conditions can differ across individuals, with lasting impacts on numerous meaningful life outcomes (Friedman & Kern, 2014).

Second, the focus on positive aspects of holistic wellbeing, versus focusing only on physical aspects or mental illness, have only recently emerged. Links between Indigenous Australian culture and their health did not emerge in Australia until the 1970s (Gee, 2016). Even when those links were identified, the focus was primarily related to physical health. Mental health and wellbeing have only gained currency in the past two decades (Gee, 2016; Grieves, 2006). Modern conceptualisations of wellbeing have been informed by the intersection of Indigenous Australian culture and spirituality, and the need for governments to respond to low levels of health, social and emotional wellbeing experienced by Indigenous Australians through the provision of policy, programs and services (Purdie et al., 2010), but a greater understanding of conceptions of positive subjective wellbeing for Indigenous Australians is needed.

The late recognition of Indigenous health and wellbeing was underpinned by a lack of cultural understanding by Australian governments and health services providers as to how health and wellbeing are understood by Indigenous Australians (Poroch et al., 2009). In 1989, through a national consultation process with Indigenous Australians, the first definition of Indigenous Australian health emerged. Indigenous Health was defined in terms of the

collective health of the entire community. Further, it was defined as holistic in nature and consisting of the interdependent elements of the physical, cultural, social and emotional wellbeing of self and community, where all elements of health must be doing well if good health is to be present (Social Health Reference Group, 2004). However, Australian governments and services providers continued to contend with inconsistent frameworks to define, inform, develop and measure Indigenous Australian wellbeing, resulting in ongoing confusion and inconsistent programming and care (Carey, 2013).

A level of continuity emerged in 1995 when nine guiding principles were developed through another national consultation process with Indigenous Australians. This process sought to deepen and refine new and existing research on what Indigenous Australian health and wellbeing is, and how the policy and services should be developed to improve the health and wellbeing of Indigenous Australians (Swan & Raphael, 1995):

1. Health is holistic;
2. The right to self-determination;
3. The need for cultural understanding;
4. The impact of historical trauma and loss;
5. Recognition of human rights;
6. The impact of racism and stigma;
7. Recognition of the centrality of kinship;
8. Recognition of cultural diversity; and
9. Recognition of Indigenous Australian strengths.

The principles were intended to guide and inform Indigenous Australian health and wellbeing research and policy development. They were to be understood as human rights, self-determination in intention and holistic in the application. As each is interconnected with the other, disruption to any of the components of interconnected wellness – including the

physical body, mind and emotions, family and kinship, community, culture, land and spirituality – will result in ill health (Swan & Raphael, 1995).

The guiding principles continue to inform the framing of Indigenous Australian wellbeing strategy and policy design across all levels of government (New South Wales Ministry of Health, 2013; Queensland Government, 2018; Victorian Government, 2017). The principles have also expanded the scholarly community's understanding of Indigenous Australian cultural values and perspectives. However, while the principles provide an ideal understanding of Indigenous Australian wellbeing, they are also influenced by a wider level of social, political, historical, and transgenerational traumatic factors (Gee, 2016). The reality of the nine guiding principles being fully translated into policy and programs to effectively improve the wellbeing Indigenous Australians more effectively is yet to be substantially evidenced in the current policy context (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2018b).

Numerous attempts have been made to commit to and develop policies around supporting Indigenous Australian health and wellbeing, with varying levels of success. For instance, in March 2008, The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) made a collective commitment to improve the health and life expectancy for Indigenous Australians in parity with non-Indigenous Australians by the year 2030. This commitment was formalised through the development of the Close the Gap Strategy (CTGS) (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2018b). Over the past ten years, the CTGS has led to the integration of Indigenous Australian health policy ideas, implementation of strategies and frameworks to coordinate programming and maximisation of government investment (Fogarty, Lovell, et al., 2018; Pholi et al., 2009). The National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People's Mental Health and Social and Emotional Wellbeing (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2017b) now acts as Australia's primary policy driver that

provides a specific focus on Indigenous Australian mental health and wellbeing. The Framework contributes to headline targets in the CTGS. The development and reporting against the National Strategic Framework are drawn from various data collection points across both federal and state departments which seeks to support and streamline COAG's collective commitment to meet headline CTG health targets (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2018b).

2.5 Indigenous Australian Wellbeing Data

Australia holds a large repository of data about Indigenous Australian health and wellbeing. The data are collected from various surveys; however, two large national sample surveys exist in Australia that specifically target Indigenous Australians: The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS) and The Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey (AATSIHS). The NATSISS was first collected in 1994, in part as a response to the findings by the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody in 1991 (Yap, 2017). The advantage of using NATSISS is that it is possible to analyse the factors associated with emotional wellbeing for the Indigenous population separately (Biddle, 2011). The AATSIHS collects information that is specific to health. It combines the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey (NATSIHS) with the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nutrition and Physical Activity Survey (NATSINPAS) and the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Measures Survey (NATSIHMS) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2014).

Aggregated data from the surveys and other data sources are used to measure performance against predetermined social determinants that largely circle back to CTG strategies. For example, data from various surveys mentioned here inform the Australian Federal Government's annual Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework Report. This report covers a range of 68 performance measures across three tiers:

health status and outcomes, determinants of health, and health system performance. Section 1.18 of the report specifically reports on the social and emotional wellbeing measures and cover seven fields: psychological distress, social stressors, depression, racism, mental health, social and emotional wellbeing of children and suicide (Australian Government, 2017).

Across these different domains included in these surveys, over the past 10 years, Indigenous Australians were consistently overrepresented in all of the categories (Australian Institute for Health and Welfare, 2008, 2018a; Department of Health and Ageing, 2012; Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2014, 2017). For example, in the most recent 2017 report, Indigenous Australians were 2.5 times more likely to experience high levels of psychological distress than non-Indigenous Australians. More than two-thirds (68%) of Indigenous Australians said they had experienced one or more life stressors in the last 12 months. The most common stressors reported were the death of a family member or close friend, inability to get a job, serious illness and mental illness. Indigenous Australian men were hospitalised for mental health-related conditions at 2.1 times the rate of non-Indigenous males, and Indigenous females at 1.5 times the rate for non-Indigenous females. From 2004-05 to 2014-15, there was a 56% increase in hospitalisations for mental health-related conditions among Indigenous females and a 36% increase for Indigenous males. Rates among non-Indigenous Australians remained static over this period, resulting in a 142% increase in the difference between Indigenous and non-Indigenous rates. From the period of 2011 to 2015, Indigenous males accounted for 71% of suicides of the Indigenous population; for this period the Indigenous suicide rate was twice the rate for non-Indigenous Australians (Australian Institute for Health and Welfare, 2018a).

The statistics above present a disturbingly poor view of Indigenous Australian health and wellbeing. But these statistics also mask the many strengths and positive aspects that also occur. For example, in 2014-2015, the NATSISS included an overall life satisfaction measure

with a scale from 0 'not at all satisfied' to 10 'completely satisfied'. More than half (53%) of Indigenous Australians aged 15 years and over reported an overall life satisfaction rating of 8 or above, with people in remote areas (27%) more likely to indicate being completely satisfied with their lives than people in non-remote areas (14%) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016). In 2014-15, 62% of Indigenous Australians aged 15 years and over reported they identified with a clan or language group, compared to 54% in 2002. Further, in 2014-15, 74% recognised an area as homelands or traditional country, and 63% were involved in cultural events, ceremonies or organisations in the last 12 months, which supported their wellbeing (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2014). Further analysis of the policy and reporting from the past 10 years also provides a more positive, inclusive shift in both policy design and reporting that is underpinned by the whole of government approach. The whole of government approach and commitment is to co-create holistic strength-based, policy and programs which are led by Indigenous Australians.

However, progress to close the disparity gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians continues to be minimal or in regression (Manning, Ambrey & Fleming, 2016). The strength-based stories are largely lost due to the plethora of alarming and underperformance areas that were previously discussed, which propel governments to continue to pursue pathological approaches to understand what is not working for Indigenous Australia, rather than investing into approaches that seek to understand what is working well and building from there.

Why might there be such disconnects between the intent of progressive policy development design and the minimal impact in the lives of Indigenous Australians? Jordan, Bulloch and Buchanan (2010) provide several possible reasons. First, existing government reporting and data management systems fail to account for the complex cultural relationships and the structural conditions within Indigenous Australian communities. Second, current

reporting systems were not designed to capture strengths-based data that sits outside the predetermined headline indicators for national reporting. This, in turn, renders the promising policy to report on and collect strengths-based data to improve the lives of Indigenous Australians more as an aspiration rather an actionable government commitment (Jordan et al., 2010). Third, the current reporting limitations may also contribute to the lack of reporting about Indigenous Australians who are currently doing well in the literature across Indigenous Australian communities, underpinned by the CTGS's primary approach which is to respond to and report on Indigenous Australian disadvantage, not those who have transcended disadvantage.

2.6 Conclusion

For many Indigenous Australians, their health and wellbeing are influenced by a relationship with their Indigenous Australian culture and identity, which are interconnected and holistic in nature and can be inclusive of the health of the entire community. British colonisation has had numerous negative effects on the health and wellbeing of Indigenous Australians and is a contributor to the ongoing disadvantage that is experienced by Indigenous Australians in contemporary Australia. The disadvantage is underpinned by the lack of health and wellbeing policy, programming and service design that are led by and centred around Indigenous Australian's capacity to self-determine. Further, the disadvantage is maintained in structural reporting systems that do not capture or translate strengths-based data. These factors do not operate in isolation from one another, as they often interrelate and can be compounded by other contributing factors that are entrenched in Australia's history, political and social systems.

As a whole, this chapter has built the foundation of both the research aim of this project and has begun to support a central argument in this study: although numerous studies and reviews exist, most focus on disadvantage which can inadvertently compound the

problems of Indigenous Australians rather overcome them (Fogarty, Lovell, et al., 2018). As such, there is a need for more strengths-based research into the lives of Indigenous Australians, through four intersecting fields of literature, which are considered and reviewed in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3 Literature Review

3.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to review relevant literature on deficit discourse, positive psychology, Indigenous Australian strength-based studies and global Indigenous wellbeing studies providing empirical background and context for my study. Through the review, I demonstrate the need for Australian governments and research institutions to increase research into the strengths of Indigenous Australians, complementing existing approaches that aim to reduce the disadvantage that is experienced by Indigenous Australians and in doing so, position my research into the scholarly field.

Chapter 2 provided the context for understanding government policies that seek to improve Indigenous Australian wellbeing. This chapter extends this, first reviewing the discourse of deficit that emerged from the literature and project data. To address the imbalanced discourse, I turn to the field of positive psychology, which was purposefully developed to counter the deficit discourse that dominated psychological research and practice across most of the 20th century (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Positive psychology explicitly focuses on understanding subjective wellbeing and supporting wellbeing through strengths-based approaches. Positive psychology identifies ways that wellbeing has been conceptualised in the field, identifying how this perspective emphasises the benefits of strengths-based approaches for not only decreasing dysfunction, but also in promoting positive individual and collective outcomes. I review positive psychology research specific to Australian Indigenous people who have incorporated the positive psychology perspective, and point to existing studies that are applying a strengths-based approach to Indigenous Australian wellbeing. In addition, I draw on strengths-based research of other Indigenous populations globally. Finally, I point to key points that arose through the review and identify the gap that exists in the research - which continues to centre on the limited research into the

strengths of Indigenous Australians. Together, these studies and discussion provide insights for supporting a strengths-based understanding of Indigenous Australian wellbeing.

3.2 The Deficit-Based Discourse on Indigenous Australian Wellbeing

Despite the positive nature of the principles defining Indigenous health and wellbeing defined in Chapter 2, the discourse surrounding Indigenous Australians continues to predominantly be negative in nature, framing an essentialised Indigenous Australian identity as one of deficit and failure (Fogarty, Bulloch, et al., 2018). Deficit discourse is “defined as disempowering patterns of thought, language and practice that represent people in terms of deficiencies and failures” (Lowitja Institute, 2018, p. 1). It refers to discourse that places responsibility for problems with the affected individuals or communities, overlooking the larger socio-economic structures in which they are embedded (Fogarty, Bulloch, et al., 2018).

As noted in Chapter 1, the deficit positioning of Indigenous Australians arose, at least in part, from the colonising structure that has evolved from Australia’s colonial history beginning with the doctrine of ‘Terra Nullius’, which provided, as previously discussed, the British colonial administration’s legal justification to colonise Australia (Fforde, Bamblett, Lovett, Gorringer & Fogarty, 2013). As a legal process, it diminished any notion of sovereignty of the original inhabitants of Australia, including titles to land (Banner, 2005). This doctrine was not overturned until 1992, thus having an intergenerational impact on the Indigenous Australian population in continuation of their plight to reclaim their sovereignty (Macdonald, 2018) and rights to land (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2015).

From 1788, a constructed Indigenous Australian identity emerged, in part, through false colonised identities imparted by successive Australian governments through legislation and policy (Fforde et al., 2013), which has sought to convert, control and assimilate Indigenous Australians into mainstream culture, rather than respect the traditional culture.

For example, the provision of Aboriginal protection boards from the 1900s to 1960s were government-sanctioned authorities that greatly restricted the lives of Indigenous Australians (Behrendt, 2012). Many were required to live on missions and reserves, where their culture and language were forbidden (Behrendt, 2012; Moran, 2005). In this same period, mass forced removal of Indigenous Australian children from their families began under the Australian governments' assimilation policies. Years later, these children became known as the stolen generation (Finnane & Richards, 2010; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997).

More recently, the Australian Government deployed the 'Northern Territory Intervention' as a response to an allegation of Indigenous Australian child abuse throughout remote areas of Northern Territory (Perche, 2017). The legislation included discriminatory changes to welfare and compulsory health checks for all Aboriginal children. It also included the acquisition of Aboriginal townships, the removal of urban Aboriginal dwellings, banning alcohol and pornography in prescribed Aboriginal communities and increased policing and surveillance within Aboriginal communities (Australian Government, 2007). This resulted in the Australian Government seizing control over many aspects of Indigenous Australians lives – violating Indigenous Australian's basic human rights (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2007). A review 11 years after the intervention indicated that many of the claims that initiated the intervention were not factual and that positive outcomes of intervention were minimal (Maddison, 2019). Further, broader health and social issues worsened (Gibson, 2017).

Similarly, the Australian Government's decision to abolish the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) in 2004 (which was both a national Indigenous representative body and administrator of Indigenous Australian government funding) (Australian Parliament, 2004) further embedded a deficit perspective of Indigenous

Australians within the contemporary Australian social and political spheres. The removal of the ATSIC reinforced the impression amongst the general populace that Indigenous Australians are incapable of managing their affairs.

While overt racism and deficit discourse about Indigenous Australia continues in contemporary public discourse (Gelber & McNamara, 2013; Perera & Pugliese, 1997), it is also formalised by institutional policies which ostensibly serves the interest of Indigenous Australians. For example, the conceptual design of the CTGS approach positions Indigenous Australians in the deficit from its inception, as the measure of Indigenous Australian success is to attain parity with non-Indigenous Australians based on imposed determinants of health and wellbeing (Pholi et al., 2009; Rudolph, 2016). Indigenous Australians are consistently reported as being either under or overrepresented in the statistics in most Australian health and socioeconomic reports. For example, Indigenous Australians represent 3% of the Australian population, yet they constitute 28% of the prison population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018). Beyond explicit messages and practices around deficit and dysfunction, the deficit discourse also manifests in other destructive ways. While recent years have brought attempts to change narratives around Indigenous Australian dysfunction and the acceptance of a more accurate account of Australian history that is inclusive of Indigenous Australians (Rudolph, 2016), accurate accounts of Australian history fail to address deeper held prejudices and expectations that Indigenous Australians simply 'get over the past'. Implicit biases are illuminated at scale nationally on January 26 each year - Australian Day, which is considered Australia's official national day (Wahlquist, 2019; Zappavigna, 2019). Political and social commentators have alluded to this day's divisive effect (Darian-Smith, 2017), which splits the nation into two modes of thought and behaviour - those who recognise the day as it is institutionally defined as celebrating colonisation, versus those who choose to not celebrate, recognising the day as one mourning for imperialist invasion and genocide. The

underlying mandate ‘to get over the past’ without recognising the importance of reconciling the past continues to negatively impact the health and wellbeing of Indigenous Australians (Fogarty, Bulloch, et al., 2018).

The totality of deficit discourse extends beyond ineffective policy and programming, contributing to internalised racism that endorses negative discourse and stereotypes of one’s racial group (Seet, 2019). Indigenous Australians who are exposed to deficit discourse can subconsciously receive and process this information about their people as truth, thus compounding and normalising the lived experience of disadvantage and negatively impacting their wellbeing and self-perpetuating the cycle of disadvantage (Fogarty, Bulloch, et al., 2018; Larson, Gillies, Howard, & Coffin, 2007).

As a whole, the contributing factors that impede the wellbeing of many Indigenous Australians are systemic and entrenched in Australia’s history, political and social systems. As such, there is a need for innovative fields of thought and practice that move beyond explicit and implicit deficit discourses to find strengths-based solutions to the many challenges that Indigenous Australians are seeking to overcome. In particular, I suggest that insights from the relatively recent field of positive psychology can be useful complements to current discourse, practices, and policies related to Indigenous Australian health and wellbeing.

3.3 The Positive Psychology Perspective

Over the past several decades, positive psychology has developed as a specific area of research and practice that focuses on understanding and cultivating strengths in individuals, organisations, and communities (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Positive psychology much like the emphasis on disparity and disadvantage for Indigenous Australians, throughout the 20th century, psychology has primarily focused on mental illness and the dysfunction of people, with very little focus on understanding what it means to live a fulfilling life. Positive

psychology focuses on understanding and supporting wellbeing, thriving, and other positive outcomes (Seligman, 2018). As a discipline, positive psychology aims to be the scientific study of the strengths that enable individuals and communities to thrive (Kern et al., 2019). It is grounded in the belief that many people want to lead meaningful and fulfilling lives, and to nurture and bolster what is positive within themselves (Kern et al., 2019; Vella-Brodrick, 2011).

The field seeks to define and build the wellbeing of the individual and communities, which has resulted in numerous definitions and models of wellbeing (also called ‘flourishing’, ‘thriving’, ‘happiness’, ‘doing well’ ‘social and emotional wellbeing’ and a variety of other terms) (Kern et al., 2019). For instance, Diener (1984) offered one of the earliest conceptions of wellbeing (which he termed as ‘subjective well-being’), defining wellbeing in terms of affective (high positive affect and low negative affect) and cognitive (life satisfaction) dimensions. Ryff’s (1989) meaning of ‘subjective well-being’ focused more on eudemonic aspects, including a sense of purpose, self-acceptance, positive relationships with others, environmental mastery, autonomy, and purpose with life. Michalec, Keyes, and Nalkur (2009) defined flourishing as “a state of positive mental health; to thrive, to prosper and to fare well in endeavours free of mental illness, filled with emotional vitality and function positively in the private and social realm” (p. 391). Seligman (2012) suggested that flourishing comprises five components: Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships and Meaning and Accomplishments (PERMA). Rusk and Waters (2015) suggested a Five Domains of Positive Functioning (DPF-5) model, which includes Attention and Awareness, Comprehension and Coping, Emotions, Goals and Habits, and Virtues and Relationships domains. Huppert and So’s (2013) model identified ten positive features that were at the opposite end of mental illness: Competence, Emotional Stability, Engagement, Meaning, Optimism, Positive Emotion, Positive Relationships, Resilience, Self-esteem and vitality.

Wong (2011) suggested four pillars underlying flourishing: Virtue, Meaning Resilience and Wellbeing.

While these models operationalise and define flourishing differently, there are also numerous similarities across different models (Hone, Aaron, Schofield & Duncan, 2014; Kern et al., 2019). Models generally reach a consensus on three key aspects: flourishing refers to a high level of subjective wellbeing, not simply the absence of dysfunction; wellbeing is a multi-dimensional construct that cannot be adequately measured by a single overall score, and all frameworks aim at understanding how a person is feeling and functioning in different aspects of their life. Some of the models are entirely psychological; others include social and behavioural aspects. Across the various models, at a basic level, flourishing represents a combination of feeling good and functioning effectively (Huppert & So, 2013; McQuaid & Kern, 2018).

Beyond a focus on understanding and defining subjective wellbeing, core to the positive psychology perspective is a focus on strengths - what is good about people or what they can do well and applying these strengths to support positive functioning (Seligman, 2012). Positive psychology approaches aim to proactively support health and wellness, rather than reactively treat dysfunction and pathology. A variety of strengths-based inventories, interventions, theories and frameworks have been developed to help people better understand, utilise, and build what is already good and right within them, to become their best selves and to help others do the same (McQuaid & Kern, 2018).

3.4 Applications of Positive Psychology with Indigenous Australians

Positive psychology arose in part as a response to the over-emphasis on dysfunction within psychology and focuses specifically on strengths-based approaches to supporting wellbeing. Over the past four decades, the inherent strengths of Indigenous Australians have sustained and bolstered them in their pursuit for self-determination, land rights, and

sovereignty (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2015; Reconciliation Australia, 2017; Victorian Government, 2018). Indigenous Australian's pre- and post-colonial history provide qualitative evidence that offers insight into the strength and resilience of Indigenous Australians (Behrendt, 2012; Berndt & Berndt, 1988; Perkins, 1975). However, as Gooda (2009) notes, even as it should be intuitive that we should be using strengths-based approaches when addressing Indigenous Australian disadvantage, approaches to disadvantage repeatedly pursue a pathological approach. I suggest that positive psychology presents an opportunity to contribute to bridging this gap by focusing on the strengths of Indigenous Australians that help them to flourish, as opposed to focusing on the problems and weaknesses that lead to dysfunction.

Notably, some studies have begun to apply the positive psychology perspective to Indigenous Australians, although research in this area is still nascent. For example, Craven et al. (2016) proposed a Reciprocal Research Partnership Framework of Indigenous Thriving Futures model, which combines Indigenous Australian worldviews of the interconnectedness of all things with positive psychology principles. The Framework comprises three pathways to support communities to thrive, using the acronym EMU: (1) **Exemplars**: identify and capitalise on what is working; (2) **Measurement**: employ both qualitative and quantitative Indigenous and Western research to assess drivers for thriving; and (3) **Utilisation**: Work in partnership with Indigenous Australians to augment thriving. The characteristics of the Framework are also grounded in themes of Respect, Responsibility and Reciprocity, which are operationalised through four interdisciplinary programs: (1) Educational Thriving, (2) Psychological Thriving, (3) Physical Thriving, and (4) Family and Community Thriving.

Another example is the Kilcullen, Swinbourne and Cadet-James (2016) study, where they identified Indigenous Australian cross-cultural attitudes and virtues that supported mental health and wellbeing within a positive psychology-informed conceptual framework.

Four themes emerged: coping skills, social support, knowledge with connectedness being a dominant protective factor. Additionally, The Australian Centre for Indigenous Thriving began a study in 2018 that focused on the psychosocial determinants of successful Indigenous professionals, but the results are yet to be released (Australian Catholic University, 2018).

3.5 Current Indigenous Australian Health and Wellbeing Studies

In addition to Indigenous Australian studies associated with positive psychology progressive Indigenous Australian wellbeing, strengths-based studies are beginning to gain traction in Australia. Two recent studies point to the importance of connecting with and participating in one's traditional culture. One study found that the use and reactivation of Indigenous Australian languages enhanced the wellbeing of Indigenous Australians (Sivak et al., 2019). In a second study, Indigenous Australians who were immersed in high positive affirmation of their ethnic-racial identity (ERI), were less likely to experience long-term detrimental effects from racism (Macedo et al., 2019). Conversely, Indigenous Australians with lower ERI affirmation had poorer wellbeing outcomes and were more adversely affected by racism (Macedo et al., 2019).

Currently, three large-scale studies are underway that are seeking to contribute to research into Indigenous Australian wellbeing. First, the University of Sydney is leading the development and validation of an Indigenous quality of life and wellbeing index (Research Data Australia, 2017). The results are yet to be released, but the project aims to understand how Indigenous Australians define their wellbeing, and how wellbeing should be measured. Further, the study aims to develop a range of culturally appropriate indicators to measure wellbeing over a life course to improve the health of Indigenous Australian youth.

Second, Gubhaju et al. (2019) are leading a longitudinal Indigenous Australia youth wellbeing study. The study seeks to use both health data and the narratives from the participants' lives to provide a more accurate account of their health and wellbeing.

Third, Jones et al. (2018) are leading the largest longitudinal health and wellbeing study in Australia. The study aims to understand how Indigenous Australian culture improves the health and wellbeing of Indigenous Australians, and further measure the participants' wellbeing over their lifetime, or every two years until resourcing runs out. As at October 2019, 7,526 Indigenous Australian had responded to the survey. Notably, despite the high rates of disadvantage that are often emphasised by deficit discourse, participants reported relatively high rates of self-assessed health and wellbeing. For example, 60% felt happy all or most of the time, 70% reported high life satisfaction, 79% reported feeling in control of their life, and 65% reported having good to excellent health. Further, one in four currently live on country and 44% visit and spend time on country, and 32% of the participants spoke some of their Indigenous languages. The second release of results is due early in 2020.

These approaches and studies suggest that the lived experiences of many Indigenous Australians extend beyond experiences of disadvantage and dysfunction factors. My thesis builds upon and extends these studies and the EMU Framework by focusing on understanding the characteristics, values and beliefs of Indigenous Australians who are flourishing through the combination of both Indigenous and Western research methodologies (Wilson, 2001), as described in detail in Chapter 4. I also further explore the role that connection to culture plays in supporting wellbeing.

3.6 Additional Insights from Indigenous Populations around the World

Beyond building upon studies within Australia that have begun to incorporate positive psychology principles, insights of other Indigenous populations around the world also can inform how Indigenous people flourish and how disadvantage discourses can be shifted. In 2012, it was estimated that 300 million Indigenous people were living across the world in 90 different countries (Silburn et al., 2016). There is diversity across Indigenous populations that span their historical and contemporary cultures, beliefs and practices (Berndt & Berndt, 1988;

Sheridan & Parezo, 1996; Stafford & Stafford, 1997). However, two common themes occur across populations. First, Indigenous populations have a deep sense of culture, and a way of being that is formalised by deep connections to, and relationship with their natural environments that have been developed over thousands of years (Silburn et al., 2016). Second, Indigenous populations have experienced the devastating impact of colonisation and other forms of dispossession that have negatively impacted their health and wellbeing – resulting with Indigenous populations that tend to fare much worse in their health and social circumstances, compared to their respective broader population (Axelsson, Kukutai, & Kippen, 2016; Doyle, 2011; Silburn et al., 2016; World Health Organisation, 2007).

While Indigenous populations number over 300 million, most of the research into the health and wellbeing of Indigenous peoples, especially focusing on wellbeing, primarily has occurred in Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the United States (CANZUS) (Cooke et al., 2007; Paradies, 2016). Ford and Rowse (2013) term these countries as CANZUS nations, based on their British colonial foundations and on this basis comparable subsequent legal, political struggles and collective pursuit for self-determination and rights to land. Within this context, they also share similar constraints and challenges, with imposed Western definitions of what wellbeing is, and how it should be measured, both in comparison with the non-Indigenous population and also within the Indigenous population itself (Barrington-Leigh et al., 2016; Kukutai, 2017; A. Smith, 2016; Wade et al., 2015).

Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers are responding to these challenges directly by conceptualising and designing surveys, scales and measures that are grounded in Indigenous peoples' understanding of what it means to be well (Houkamau & Sibley, 2010; Omma, Holmgren, & Jacobsson, 2011; Stumblingbear-Riddle & Romans, 2012). For example, Lardon, Wolsko, Trickett, Henry and Hopkins (2016) developed The Yup'ik Wellness Survey, a 24-item measure of Yup'ik wellness-related activities. A total of 493

Yup'ik people from seven different rural communities in Western Alaska participated in the development of the Survey. Using Indigenous based internally verified measures, an iterative process was used to ensure Yup'ik domain meanings were not lost in translation in the design and evaluation of the survey. This resulted in a culturally nuanced and validated survey to measure and understand why and how their people are well. The study found that individuals who had greater communal mastery skills, defined as the extent to which individuals see themselves as able to be effective in achieving their goals and coping with life challenges by virtue of their being connected to others experienced higher levels of wellbeing. Similar findings were also found in Hobfoll, Jackson, Hobfoll, Pierce & Young (2002) study of 103 Native American women residing on Indian Reservations in Montana. They concluded that the participants who have communal mastery skills scored higher on the wellness measure and reported greater happiness and coping skills than those who did not have communal mastery skills. Further, those with greater communal mastery skills were more likely to be active, accepting, and growth-oriented, and less likely to use drugs and alcohol.

Evidence from the international literature also suggests that the social and emotional wellbeing of First Nations peoples is enhanced when they are connected and participate in their traditional culture (Colquhoun & Dockery, 2012; Dockery, 2010). For example, a consistent finding in several studies (Biswas-Diener, Vittersø, & Diener, 2005; Melissa, Nancy, Whitesell, & Barlow, 2017; Napoli, 2002; Omma et al., 2011; Selwyn, 2007) found that enculturation serves both as a protective factor and a primary contributor that enables and or supports Indigenous people to be well and flourish. International studies consistently indicate a positive correlation with enculturation and Indigenous peoples' health and wellbeing, thus pointing to the need to reposition, understand and value Indigenous enculturation as a trajectory and grounding point to improve Indigenous populations to flourish more in life.

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter began by identifying the deficit discourse that explicitly and implicitly dominates practices and policies related to Indigenous Australian health and wellbeing. Positive psychology as a discipline points the scholarly community to an approach to address the deficit discourse of psychology and emphasises the importance of strengths in supporting human flourishing. Studies have begun to apply positive psychology within Indigenous Australian studies, and positive psychology is being discussed in current national strengths-based Indigenous Australian wellbeing studies. Finally, insights from global Indigenous strengths-based studies were considered, demonstrating commonalities between Indigenous populations around the world, the challenges they face, and the approaches they are taking to find solutions to the challenges they are seeking to overcome. While International and Australian literature demonstrate substantial research into the ill health and problems of Indigenous populations, much less is known about their strengths and their means to be well and flourish in life. My research will contribute to this limited field of research by examining the strengths of Indigenous Australians who are flourishing. As such, in the next chapter, I outline the methodological framework that informed the approach undertaken in the study.

Chapter 4 Methodological Framework

4.1 Theoretical Framework

This thesis used an interpretive phenomenological theoretical approach to guide its methodology and methods to conduct the research. Interpretive phenomenology is the study of lived experiences (Adams & Van Manen, 2008), and aims to describe and interpret the lived experience of human beings to make meaning of the ways in which a phenomenon is experienced, shaped and informed by both our cognitive and non-cognitive senses and our understandings of self and the world in which we live (Errasti-Ibarrondo, Jordán, Díez-Del-Corral, & Arantzamendi, 2018; Groenewald, 2004; Van Manen, 2016a). Phenomenological research allows the reflective lived experience of research participants to be examined deeply to offer insight and meaning between what is unique to the individual, what meanings are shared by a group and potentially universal meanings that transcend the collective experiences of a group of research participants (Adams & Van Manen, 2008; Van Manen, 2016a). Specific to the current study, I aimed to identify collective patterns describing Indigenous Australian experiences related to flourishing, strengths, and cultural identification.

Van Manen (2016b) and Groenewald (2004) suggest that the nature of a phenomenological theoretical framework not only provides insights into the conscious perceptions of human beings but also can provide a framework to understand the unconscious meanings underlying those perceptions. An interpretive phenomenological approach was used to examine the data for this research project, which requires the researcher to immerse themselves in the lived experience in which they are examining. The current study focused on describing the experiences of Indigenous Australians who have flourished in their lives. Improved understanding of Indigenous Australians who have flourished in life provides scholars with an enhanced understanding of the strength-based characteristics, beliefs and

behaviours that may be able to be replicated in the design of policy and programs to improve the wellbeing of other Indigenous Australians.

An essential part of this process is for the researcher to try and withhold predetermined notions or beliefs about the lived experiences that are under examination, a process called ‘bracketing’ (Benner, 2008). However, the interpretive phenomenological approach also recognises that the researcher will inevitably draw on their lived experiences to some degree to understand, reflect and analyse the data that emerges, and thus must continually examine and question his or her interpretations and explicitly acknowledge potential biases that could impact upon interpretations of the data (Van Manen, 2016a). As an Indigenous Australian researcher with lived experiences who is examining the lived experiences of Indigenous Australians, my interpretations are impacted in part by Indigenous Standpoint Theory (IST) (Foley, 2003) and a positive psychology perspective (Seligman, 2018), as described further below. Aligned with an interpretative phenomenological approach, I aimed to maintain transparency about the decisions and methods in undertaking the research and use my pre-existing knowledge of Indigenous Australian culture as a reference point to engage with Indigenous Australians and investigate the data that was provided by the research participants. I incorporated reflexivity throughout the process, which involves engaging in self-awareness and self-criticism as an intrinsic feature of the research process to mitigate the influence of any presuppositions on the collection, meaning and analysis of the data (Agee, 2011).

The theoretical approach did not consider Indigenous knowledge and perspectives on the basis that the academy has historically excluded Indigenous knowledge and perspectives which was underpinned by the academy’s European scientific research origins, which defined what is, and is not considered legitimate knowledge (Moreton-Robinson, 2000). Aligned with the context described in Chapters 2 and 3, the academy continues to have vestiges of colonial

beginnings, which can delegitimise Indigenous knowledges and lived experiences of Indigenous peoples based on an academy that has historically excluded Indigenous knowledges and methodologies in their own right (Foley, 2003; Morgensen, 2012; L. T. Smith, 2012). For instance, Māori scholars from New Zealand have chosen not to adopt a Māori version of Rigney's (1999) 'Indigenist' research methodology, opting instead to adopt a culturally-based approach to research known as Kaupapa Māori (Māori based research), which includes theory and methods that were developed by Māori scholars and researchers particularly for Māori use, resulting in research that has been transformative for Māori (G. H. Smith, Smith, L.T. , 2019; L. T. Smith, 2005).

Aligned with IST, as an Indigenous Australian researcher, I bring my Indigenous Australian (shared) cultural values, experiences and knowledge to inform the approaches to the research project, including my engagement with the research participants and subsequent interpretations of the research (Foley, 2003; Nakata, 2007b). While the study attempts to make sense of the experiences of Indigenous Australians, the viewpoint that I bring does not represent all Indigenous Australians. In parallel with Kaupapa Māori, IST is not engaged on the basis of uncontested subjective discourse to substantiate Indigenous research. Rather, IST seeks to substantiate Indigenous knowledges and privilege Indigenous voices and experiences and achieving this task both in theory and in empirical research (Nakata, 2007b; Rigney, 1999; L. T. Smith, 2005). Employing IST enabled me as the primary researcher to engage and understand the phenomena from a culturally respectful manner and more deeply connect and correlate spoken and unspoken nuances between the individual and collective narratives of the research participants when it emerged from the data. The use of IST also brings a particular perspective and potential biases that could impact upon the approach and interpretation of the data collected, however, risks such as biases are minimised by the method of reflexivity as previously discussed.

IST has been used in conjunction with positive psychology in the design, engagement, analyses and interpretation of the results from this study. Positive psychology has been used in the study to focus on Indigenous Australians who are flourishing in their lives, rather than those who were struggling or dysfunctional. In particular, I used a positive psychology perspective to elevate my psychological frame of mind in my approach to the interviews and data analysis. Further, the questions focused on strengths and enablers rather than barriers and inhibitors. Analyses focused on strengths rather than weaknesses.

With this theoretical framing in mind, the study aimed to address the two important primary research questions: (1) What characteristics, beliefs and behaviours are used by a group of Indigenous Australians that enable them to function effectively and live with purpose? and (2) To what extent does the practice of the participants' Indigenous Australian culture enhance their wellbeing?

4.2 Method

In this section, I detail the methods, including recruitment procedure, questions that were addressed, participants, coding and analysis of interview data.

4.2.1 Recruitment Procedure

The current study employed a convenience sample (Etikan, Musa & Alkassim, 2016) to recruit participants with the relative ease of access and close geographical location of the research participants. The target group for this study were Indigenous Australians employed at an Indigenous Australian tertiary education institution in Victoria, Australia. The participants were selected for two reasons. First, I assumed that Indigenous Australian staff working at a tertiary institution had lived experiences that they can draw from that have enabled them to flourish in periods throughout their lives, allowing them to reach prominent positions. Indigenous staff at Australian tertiary education institutions have attained a tertiary level education at a minimum and have achieved recognised professional success. Second,

Australian tertiary education institutions are required by the Australian Government to make public their Indigenous Australian employee numbers - including classification levels and employment type (academic or non-academic), which provided a known supply of potential participants to target for the study.

The study was first promoted to Indigenous Australian staff at the University of Melbourne by sending email invitations to participate in or promote the study to their colleagues (see Appendix A). To provide a broader sample, the study was then promoted to Indigenous Australian staff listed on public websites at other tertiary institutions within the broader Melbourne area, including Deakin University, RMIT University, Monash University, Victoria University and Latrobe University.

Indigenous Australian staff who were interested in participating in the study responded to the invite via email. I then sent an email response, which included the plain language statement (Appendix B) and a link to an online survey (Appendix C). The online survey asked the potential participants to provide their basic employment and contact details and complete a short wellbeing scale. I then contacted a subset of respondents to be interviewed, coordinating the interview at a mutually agreeable time (described in section 4.2.5).

4.2.2 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To be eligible, participants had to be employed at an Australian tertiary education institution in either a fixed-term or continuing position, and identify as an Indigenous Australian as defined by the Australian government (Australian Parliament, 2003):

1. Being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent;
2. Identifying as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person and
3. Being accepted as such by the community in which they live, or formerly lived.

Non-Indigenous Australian staff were excluded, due to the focus of the study on the strengths of Indigenous Australians as a distinct cultural group. Indigenous Australian staff who previously directly reported to me were also excluded from this study, to prevent potential conflicts of interest or coercion.

4.2.3 Participants

A total of 16 Indigenous Australian staff (12 females, 4 males) completed the online survey. All 16 potential participants identified as Aboriginal Australians. Nine were professional staff, and seven were academic staff. Classification levels included academic levels A, B, and C, (academic positions of tutor/ research associate; lecturer; senior lecturer) and non-academic levels 4, 7, and 10 (non-academic) levels range from the junior level 1 to the most senior level 10, with one unreported. Participants were primarily between age 26 and 45, with one of the participants aged 65 or older.

Of the 16 survey respondents, 15 indicated a willingness to be interviewed; however, 11 staff (8 females, 4 males) subsequently participated in an interview. Selection of the final interview participants was based on indicated willingness to be interviewed and their availability to commit to an interview in a reasonable timeframe. Ages of the interviewees ranged from 26 to 65+. All the participants identified as an Aboriginal Australian. Four of the participants identified as belonging to the Yorta Yorta nation, one belonged to the Yorta Yorta and Dja Dja Wurrung nations, one belonged to the Wiradjuri nation, one belonged to the Yuin nation, one belonged to the Gungarri nation, one belonged to the Barkindji people, and two belonged to the Palawa nation. Regarding contract type, 3 of the participants were employed on a fixed-term contract, and 8 were employed on a continuing contract at their respective institutions. Four of the participants were employed as non-academic staff, and seven were employed as academic staff.

4.2.4 Online Survey

Participation began with a brief online survey (see Appendix C). The survey asked several demographic questions (gender, employment type and classification level, age group, and identification as Indigenous Australia). In addition, participants responded to a modified version of the Flourishing Scale (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2019), which comprises seven questions assessing aspects of their wellbeing (e.g., “I lead a purposeful and meaningful life”, “People respect me”) and 2 questions about their Indigenous Australian culture that I developed for the study (“I am strong in my Indigenous culture”; “My Indigenous Australian culture protects and bolsters me in life”). Possible scores ranged from 1 (lowest) to 10 (highest).

4.2.5 Interview Procedure

Most participants were subsequently interviewed in person or by phone, using a semi-structured protocol. Participants were able to choose their preference in terms of location for the interview. Three of the interviews were completed in the state of Victoria, in a regional township 160 kilometres north of Melbourne. Four interviews were completed in Melbourne. Four interviews were completed by telephone. All but one of the in-person interviews were in private meeting rooms, and the other was located in an open gathering area, based on the preferences of the interviewee. All the meeting spaces offered a quiet and comfortable location to conduct the interviews. Participants who were interviewed over the telephone advised me they were in a quiet private location to undertake the interview. A copy of the typed transcripts was provided to all the interviewees to check for accuracy, and a summary of the findings on the thesis will be provided to the participants upon completion of the thesis.

The interviews involved in-depth interviewing, which differentiates from other forms of interviewing on the basis that the information is usually personal and deep with the

participants sharing their lived experiences, values of their lives and cultural knowledge (Johnson, 2001). The in-depth interviewing method is similar to the yarning method (Bessarab, 2010), which is drawn from Indigenous storytelling (Geia, Hayes & Usher, 2013) and therefore a familiar and comfortable process for many Indigenous Australians to enable the collection of thick data. Bessarab (2010) explains that “Yarning in a semi-structured interview is an informal and relaxed discussion through which both the researcher and participant journey together visit places and topics of interest relevant to the research study” (p. 38).

As an interpretive phenomenological study, I aimed to allow data to emerge naturally, rather than lead participants by the questions or act on presuppositions about topics that arose (Adams & Van Manen, 2008). To achieve this, I developed a set of semi-structured questions that were open-ended and clearly worded (McNamara, 2009), but still direct enough to result in data that would address the two primary questions for this study (see Appendix D for the guiding interview questions).

Interviews occurred between the 7th and the 14th of June 2019 and ranged in length from 24 minutes to 61 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded, and then they were externally transcribed by a transcription service who have in place and abide by transcription privacy and security protocol. I then listened to each interview recording whilst reading the typed transcription line by line to ensure accuracy. I then matched the interviews to the demographic and wellbeing data from the online surveys which correlated with a finding in this study that the participants are flourishing in their lives, albeit to varying degrees.

During data collection, digital audio recordings and transcriptions of the interviews were saved on a secure University server. Hard copy notes, memos and signed participation consent forms were stored in a locked cabinet in a separate file. Finally, the written

transcripts were deidentified, and digital audio recordings were permanently destroyed, and all of the participants were assigned with a participant number.

4.2.6 Interview Process

Each interview began with participants introducing themselves. Participants immediately noted their Indigenous Australian ancestral connection and their tribal nation, and several of the participants used the term “country” throughout their interviews to refer to the geographical location from which their ancestors originate and therefore to where they belong. This connection to country existed prior to the colonisation of Australia, where the Indigenous Australian population were disbursed into over five hundred different nations; and each nation had their own beliefs, traditions and customs that governed their lives (Australian Government, 2019).

Before the actual audio recording began, four of the participants appeared to be anxious and slightly nervous about the actual interview, evidenced by closed body language (e.g., leaning back from the table, arms folded, nervous smiles, and at times rapid, deep breaths and fast speed of speech). One participant verbally indicated feeling nervous about the interview. Another participant checked in with me twice to confirm that the interview was still going ahead and asked for a copy of the interview questions in advance to prepare for the interview. As none of the other participants were provided with the questions, I refrained from providing the questions for consistency across participants. I attempted to mitigate the anxiety by establishing a good rapport with the interviewee, asking general questions about their lives, and sharing things about my own life. I also incorporated humour and laughter and assured all the research participants that there were no right or wrong answers to my questions, but rather that they were having a conversation about their culture and strengths regarding their wellbeing as they understood and experienced it. In each case, I was able to

establish a good rapport, and the interviews were able to proceed with the participant feeling more at ease.

Once the participant was more at ease, evidenced by more relaxed physical state and calmness of breath, I began the audio recording. Whilst all the participants became more at ease as the interview progressed, some of the participants asked several times if they gave the correct answer to the questions I asked (both in face to face interviews and telephone interviews). Other participants looked unsure about their responses, evidenced by raising their eyes brows and looking towards the ceiling or scrunching up their noses after they had given a response. As an Indigenous Australian with Indigenous Australian lived experience, I suggest that these behaviours reflected the participants needing the validation of their responses as being of substance to the current study. Upon reflection, I position these behaviours in the phenomena of Indigenous Australian conceptualisation of shame. The meaning of shame extends beyond its English definition and can be a cause of embarrassment in certain situations (Leitner & Malcolm, 2008). In regard to the current study, Indigenous Australian shame was manifested by talking positively of oneself and talking with authority that some of the participants may think they do not have.

I perceived subtle and non-subtle undertones of shame before and throughout some of the interviews, which became more apparent with the additional probing that was required to get some participants to lean into their responses about their personal strengths. For example, one participant stated: “See this is me talking about myself and praising yourself, and I’m not good at that”. To respectfully move through the conceptualisation Indigenous Australian shame, I consistently affirmed the participant’s responses through verbal comments and nonverbal cues such as nodding my head and using encouraging hand gestures. The process appeared to create a sense of trust between the participant and myself, which enabled some of

the participants to enter into deeper reflective conversation, guided by the semi-structured interview questions.

4.2.7 Data Coding and Analyses

Hycner (1999) developed an analytic process, comprising five steps, for coding and analysing qualitative data within a phenomenological study. A modified version of these guidelines informed the analytic process used in the current study.

Bracketing. The first step involves bracketing; bracketing refers to a process that requires that the researcher, as much as possible, suspends their ideas, beliefs and presuppositions about the phenomena throughout the research process (Given, 2008). Bracketing aims to allow the research to reveal its self in the most accurate lived form, and therefore not conditioned or tainted by a researcher's pre-existing meanings and interpretations of the lives of the individual that they are entering into (Hycner, 1999). Still, it is unrealistic to 'bracket' the researcher out of the research, as the study of phenomenology is at its essence is subjective (Hycner, 1999; Van Manen, 1990). Hence, I inevitably drew on existing knowledge and experiences to understand, analyse and bring the data together. As described above, from IST, as an Indigenous Australian with lived experiences, it was important that I use my cultural knowledge and experiences to respectfully engage, understand and privilege Indigenous Australian voices in the current study.

Listen to the interview for a sense of the whole. The second step involves generally listening to the interviews, aiming for obtaining a general overview of the information collected. Hycner (1999) suggests that when we engage in this process, it provides a deeper understanding of the interviews and provides context for the emerging units of meaning and themes. I initially listened to each interview two times. Then, after transcription, I listened to each interview two more times to ensure the accuracy of the

interview transcripts. As I listened, I made written notes of my general impressions, along with noting expressions, pauses and intonations from the audio recordings.

Delineating units of meanings and thematic grouping. The third step involves clarifying and interrogating the interview data to develop units of meaning, which are then clustered into thematic groupings. General units of meanings emerge by examining the literal text from the interviews, para-linguistics and non-verbal data which express unique, coherent meaning – regardless of the research question (Hycner, 1999). Then, general units of meaning are examined in relation to the research questions, categorised into related units, and then clustered into central themes bringing together multiple units of meaning. Both Hycner (1999) and Groenewald (2004) advise erring on the side of caution when making general units of meaning redundant, and of carefully recording reasons why a unit is removed, as it may need to be added back in as the iterative process of coding and processing the data unfolds.

To enable this process, the transcripts were loaded into NVivo Software (version 12). NVivo was used to sort and categorise and search for word enquiries only. General units of meaning that were irrelevant to the research questions were not examined further. Then, relevant clusters of meaning were grouped together, resulting in central themes.

Summarising interviews. The fourth step involves summarising the interview data to provide a fuller sense of the lived experiences of the participants in relation to the research question and thus structured conceptually around their understanding of Indigenous Australian culture, wellbeing, personal characteristics and wellbeing practices. For each participant, I developed a summary of their experiences, clustered by units of meaning and key themes that emerged related to the two research questions, with the narrative text providing a fuller sense of what the themes meant to the participants.

Identifying common themes. The final step involves identifying common themes across interviews, resulting in a written composite summary that not only captures the key themes but the context or horizon from which the themes emerged to provide the clearest representation of the world as experienced by the research participants (Hycner, 1999).

4.2.8 Ethical Considerations

This research project was carried out in accordance with and under the guidance of the National Health and Medical Research Council's Ethical conduct in research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and Communities (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2018), and the Ethical Research in Australian Indigenous Studies Policy (The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2012) developed by Australia Institution for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies. The study was undertaken by me, under the close supervision of a responsible researcher and secondary supervisor, in addition to an advisory committee, the members of the research team have each read the University's Code of Conduct for Research and the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research.

The Australian tertiary education institution which employed the staff who participated in this study was the student researcher's previous employer; therefore, staff who reported to the student researcher were excluded from this project, to avoid potential coercion or perceived conflicts of interests. However, an ethical dilemma did occur in this project in that I did have a previous professional relationship with most of the participants, except for one of the participants who was not employed at the UoM. Further, one of the participants was aware that Indigenous Australian flourishing was an area of interest of mine before the interview took place. To mitigate this ethical dilemma, I reiterated to all the participants that I have engaged them as a research participant in my role as a student researcher only. Further, I

followed the theoretical approach and procedures outlined in this chapter to capture and interpret the lived experiences of the participants as they shared and understood them.

4.3 Conclusion

In this chapter, I introduced and justified the components of the methodical underpinning of the approaches used in the current study, the procedures used, as well as ethical considerations that were made for this study. In the next chapter, the results of the research are provided.

Chapter 5 Research Results

This chapter describes the results of the online survey with 16 individuals and the themes that emerged from the lived experiences of a subset of 11 Indigenous Australians in relation to their culture, personal characteristics and practices that support their wellbeing. I begin with a description of participant wellbeing, based on the online survey data. Then I briefly summarise individual interviews, exploring how participants conceptualised and understood wellbeing and flourishing, and identify units of meaning and themes that emerged for each individual, contextualised by the participant words, relevant to the two research questions. For example, “What characteristics, beliefs and behaviours are used by a group of Indigenous Australians that enable to them function effectively and with purpose?”, and “To what extent does the practice of Indigenous Australians’ culture enhance the wellbeing of Indigenous Australians?” Finally, I identify common themes that emerged from across some of the participant’s experiences.

5.1 Participant Wellbeing

Through the online survey, 16 participants responded to seven questions querying aspects of their wellbeing and two cultural identification questions on a 10-point scale (higher scores indicate greater wellbeing). Descriptive statistics for each item are summarised in Table 5.1. Participants generally scored in the upper half of the scale, with the lowest mean score of 7.47. The results suggest the majority of participants have a high level of wellbeing according to a Western flourishing scale and feel positively connected to their Indigenous Australian culture. Participants strongly felt that they contribute to the wellbeing of others and are competent in their activities. On average, participants rated the item “people respect me” slightly lower than other items.

Table 5.1. Descriptors across the wellbeing items from the online survey ($N = 16$).

Item	Mean	SD	Min	Max
I lead a purposeful and meaningful life.	7.80	1.38	5.00	10.00
My social relationships are supportive and rewarding.	7.73	1.69	4.00	10.00
I actively contribute to the happiness and well-being of others.	8.00	1.26	5.00	10.00
I am competent and capable in the activities that are important to me.	8.00	1.46	5.00	10.00
I live a good life.	7.67	1.81	5.00	10.00
I am optimistic about my future.	7.60	1.50	6.00	10.00
People respect me.	7.47	1.71	4.00	10.00
I am strong in my Indigenous Australian culture.	7.67	1.45	5.00	10.00
My Indigenous Australian culture protects and bolsters me in life.	7.87	1.82	4.00	10.00

5.2 Individual Participant Interview Summaries

For the 11 participants who were interviewed, I developed a summary of their experiences, in which I clustered comments by units of meaning and key themes that emerged in relation to the two research questions. A total of 81 units of meanings emerged from the data, which could be grouped into three broad categories, aligned with the research questions and purpose of the thesis. Table 5.2 summarises conceptions of wellbeing/ flourishing, enabling characteristics, beliefs, and behaviours that contribute to wellbeing, and the impact of Indigenous Australian culture on wellbeing. This is followed by a more detailed description of the participants' lived experiences in relation to the research questions, separately for each interviewee.

Table 5.2. Summary of themes related to the research questions that emerged from individual participants.

	Conceptualisations of wellbeing/ flourishing	Enabling characteristics, beliefs, & behaviours	Impact of Indigenous Australian culture
P1	<p>The participant related wellbeing as a state of being where she had good mental health, and when stress in her life was kept to a minimum.</p> <p>She relates flourishing to having abilities and skills that assist her to progress and achieve goals in her life.</p>	<p>The participant’s prevalent characteristics include compassion, caring for others, self, self-advocacy, work ethic, strong drive and commitment.</p> <p>She maintains her wellbeing by being aware of her own mental health needs and seeking clinical medical intervention when required. Further, her wellbeing is also supported by spending time with her family and socialising with friends and taking care of her physical health.</p>	<p>The participant’s Indigenous Australian culture and identity enhances her wellbeing on the basis that her Indigenous Australian culture provides her with a sense of pride in her identity, further her culture connects her with her ancestors and provides her with a sense of safety and belonging.</p> <p>The Indigenous Australian community that she identifies with are people of great strength; they provide support to her as well the broader Indigenous Australian community in times of hardship. For example, supporting families through the grieving process before, during and after a death in the community.</p>
P2	<p>The participant related wellbeing to the interconnection of the mind and the body, when both aspects of health are doing well, he is doing well, and he can function effectively.</p> <p>He relates flourishing to excelling in his academic studies which increases his ability to progress and achieve goals in his life.</p>	<p>The participant’s prevalent characteristics include reliability, loyalty, punctuality, work ethic, and being consistent.</p> <p>He engages in daily structured routines to support his wellbeing to be effective in his personal life as well as meeting his community responsibilities. Further, his wellbeing is also supported by spending time with the Indigenous Australian he identifies with and by also spending time country.</p>	<p>The participant’s wellbeing is centred on his Indigenous Australian culture. It is through his Indigenous Australian culture that he understands and interacts with the world. His Indigenous Australian culture is central to the core of his being; it provides him with a sense of freedom to be whomever he chooses to be. This is nurtured through his elders and the broader Indigenous Australian community.</p>
P3	<p>The participant related wellbeing and flourishing together as interconnected concepts that centre on Indigenous Australian culture and identity. Further, she relates to wellbeing in terms of the wellness of the collective, rather than of the individual.</p>	<p>The participant’s prevalent characteristics include compassion, caring for others, commitment and being solution focused.</p> <p>She supports her wellbeing by accessing clinical counselling services as required. She practices meditation, self-reflection and physical exercise. However, she primarily believes that her health and wellbeing is maintained by the relationships and</p>	<p>The participant’s wellbeing is centred on her traditional Indigenous Australian cultural beliefs. It is through her Indigenous Australian culture she understands and interacts with the world around her.</p>

	Conceptualisations of wellbeing/ flourishing	Enabling characteristics, beliefs, & behaviours	Impact of Indigenous Australian culture
		connections that she has with her Indigenous Australian family and their cultural belief systems.	
P4	<p>The participant relates wellbeing to having stability and a sense of physical and emotional safety in her life.</p> <p>She relates flourishing to achieving goals beyond the normal limits of her life.</p>	<p>The participant’s prevalent characteristics include organisational skills, resilience, and seeing the best in other people.</p> <p>She supports and maintains her wellbeing through the process of reading, getting enough sleep and making traditional Indigenous Australian art.</p>	<p>The participant’s practice of making traditional Indigenous Australian art improves her wellbeing as it “grounds” her to her Indigenous Australian identity. Her Indigenous Australian culture means a lot to her as she has spent a long period of time in her life reconnecting with her culture. Reconnecting is the operative word as she believes the connection to her culture has always been present on some level of consciousness.</p>
P5	<p>The participant relates wellbeing to the health of her entire Indigenous Australian cultural community that she identifies with. Further, wellbeing comprises of interconnected elements that equate to full health. These elements include the mind, heart and spirit. If one of these elements of health is not doing well, it will have a negative effect on another aspect of wellbeing.</p> <p>The participant related to flourishing as a state of being where all of her Indigenous Australian community that she identifies with is collectively progressing and achieving goals together.</p>	<p>The participant’s prevalent characteristics include persistence, resilience, respect integrity and a strong belief in justice and using her voice to be an advocate for Indigenous Australians.</p> <p>Her wellbeing is supported and maintained by the participant socialising with her peers, spending time on country (including waters) and connecting with family whilst incorporating meditation and reflection to replenish her wellbeing.</p>	<p>The participant’s Indigenous Australian culture is central to her wellbeing as it not only informs her identity but validates and gives her life purpose.</p>
P6	<p>The participant relates wellbeing as being comprised of interconnected elements that equate to health. This includes the mind, body, spirit and relationship with her Indigenous Australian community that she identifies with as well as her country. If one of the elements are not doing well, it will have a negative flow on effect in another aspect of her wellbeing.</p>	<p>The participant’s prevalent characteristics include being open to opportunities in life, self-reflection and patience.</p> <p>She supports and maintains her wellbeing by spending time with other Indigenous Australians and spending time on her country.</p>	<p>The participant’s Indigenous Australian culture is central to her identity. Her Indigenous Australian culture enables her to be her authentic self, both personally and professionally.</p> <p>Her Indigenous Australian culture bolsters her ability to respond to the challenges that are imposed on her as Indigenous Australians by dominant Western culture.</p>

	Conceptualisations of wellbeing/ flourishing	Enabling characteristics, beliefs, & behaviours	Impact of Indigenous Australian culture
	She relates flourishing to a state of being when Indigenous Australians ignore the “knowledge boundaries” that have been imposed by the colonisers of Australia.		
P7	<p>The participant relates her wellbeing to the non-fixed position of her being. Her wellbeing moves back and forth across a continuum that is affected by a range of elements such as physical, social and emotional health, family and connections to country. The elements that are doing well can have a positive effect on some of the elements that are not doing so well.</p> <p>The participant relates to flourishing as a state of being where she is immersed in her Indigenous Australian culture and family.</p>	The participant’s prevalent characteristics include relationship building, empathy, reflection about others and self-reflection. She maintains her wellbeing by spending time with the broader Indigenous Australian community, her family and spending time on country, which is carried out in conjunction with standard practices of maintaining her health such as getting enough exercise and sleep and accessing good nutrition.	The participant’s Indigenous Australian culture provides her with pride and strength. This strength is based on her understanding that her experiences are grounded with the collective experiences of other Indigenous Australians. Further, these experiences link her with her past, the present and her future.
P8	<p>The participant relates wellbeing to the prevention and management practices supporting her mental health.</p> <p>She relates to flourishing as a state of being where she is pursuing her happiness by understanding what she is passionate about.</p>	<p>The participant’s prevalent characteristics include persistence, faith, and being open and honest with others.</p> <p>She listens to motivational speakers, reads self-help and inspirational literature, meditates and practices prayer.</p>	The participant’s Indigenous Australian culture is central to her identity and her family, which she belongs to. Further, it is through her culture that she feels a deep connection to the ocean that extends out from her country - a place of reflection and peace where she can draw strength.
P9	<p>The participant relates wellbeing to freedom and being able to make decisions in his own life without fear of consequence regardless of the consequences – both perceived or real.</p> <p>He relates to flourishing as being joyful and being able to sit in silence but to also connect deeply with others. Further, he does not think that Indigenous Australians need to attain flourishing in their lives; rather, they need to reflect and understand that they are already flourishing in their lives.</p>	<p>The participant’s prevalent characteristics include an ability to learn and draw on the personal qualities of others to make them his own, pragmatism, not taking life, or himself too seriously and having a sense of humour.</p> <p>He maintains his wellbeing by spending time with his Indigenous Australian family, sitting in silence and seeking laughter in his life.</p>	The participant’s Indigenous Australian culture is about connection and consistency in his life. Further, his Indigenous Australian culture is what he uses to frame and bring meaning to his life.

	Conceptualisations of wellbeing/ flourishing	Enabling characteristics, beliefs, & behaviours	Impact of Indigenous Australian culture
P10	<p>The participant relates wellbeing to a process of creating headspace to connect him to his true inner self, which is facilitated through a process of reconnecting with Indigenous Australian stories, art and country.</p> <p>He relates flourishing to having a safe environment that enables him to function at his highest level.</p>	<p>The participant's prevalent characteristics include self-awareness, understanding yourself and your place in the world.</p> <p>He supports and maintains his wellbeing by spending time on country, being creative and sharing Indigenous Australian stories.</p>	<p>The participant's Indigenous Australian culture and the traditional practices of it are central to his identity and how he understands and interacts with the world; without his culture, he would not know who he is.</p>
P11	<p>The participant relates to wellbeing, as being relational, is not grounded by temporal boundaries. Further, the development of relationships can differ depending on the lack of or positive and negative experiences involved in the development of these relationships in the first place.</p> <p>She relates flourishing to a state of being that is about living with expectation, continuity and having a positive outlook.</p>	<p>The participant's prevalent characteristics include determination, resilience, respect, and living up to the expectations placed on her.</p> <p>She supports and maintains her wellbeing through meditation, exercise, socialising with friends spending time with her family and on country.</p>	<p>The participant's Indigenous Australian culture enhances her wellbeing as it forms part of her identity and core purpose in life.</p>

5.2.1 Participant 1

Participant 1 described wellbeing as a state of being where stress was limited in her life, and she was able to function effectively in her life, stating:

You know not feeling stressed, being able to come in and perform something and been able to walk away, pretty much leaving it behind at the end of the day and not having to worry about it.

She differentiated wellbeing and flourishing by explaining that flourishing is about attaining a level of mastery in certain aspects of her life.

The participant explained that her physical health is critical to her overall wellbeing. She recently gave up smoking after smoking for 30 years to extend her life so she could be around for her children and grandchildren. She self-assesses her level of wellbeing regularly, and when she feels she is nearing low points, she speaks to her family members, and when her wellbeing continues to fall, she seeks medical advice. She considers antidepressant medication only as a last option. She knows that she needs to be aware of her wellbeing levels as to not reach such a low level that she is not functioning effectively. To flourish in life, she encourages Indigenous Australian youth to stay in school for as long as they can. Further, if schooling does not work for them, they should work and do their best to follow their passions. She also believes that Indigenous Australian youth should stay or get connected and participate in their local Indigenous Australian communities.

She explained that her most prevalent personal characteristics were compassion, kindness and understanding, which she carried into her adult life from her schooling years. It appeared that these characteristics, when not balanced with other personal characteristics such as self-value, resulted in low periods of wellbeing in her life. The participant's life has been fraught with extremes of hardship (primarily from spousal relationships) which invoked characteristics such as personal strength, persistence, self-value and work ethic. She anchored

these personal characteristics that are essential to her wellbeing within the term of “not letting people walk over you”. She also noted the importance of socialising and stepping back from the things in life that cause her stress.

The participant believed that her personal characteristics were not necessarily strengths that she learnt from specific people in her family or the broader Indigenous Australian community, but rather they were cultivated from her deeper sense of self and value for her life that she had to reclaim in her own authority, stating that:

It’s looking at everyone else around you, like the fact that mum still to this day never worked, she might of worked as a teenager, my aunty to this day never worked, do I want to be that person that sits at home and goes to sleep and that can’t be bothered doing anything?

The participant was extremely proud of being an Indigenous Australian and reflected on how she would love to visit her ancestors and understand their traditional way of life. She believed that her Indigeneity improves her wellbeing because of the pride it instils in her. Further, she explained that her Indigenous Australian community comes together in times of hardship to help and support one another. She drew a comparison between an Indigenous Australian and non-Indigenous funeral she recently attended, stating:

My grandmother my father’s mother she was white, there was, I think like twenty people at her funeral, you know, and then you look at my grandmother my mother’s mother there was like 300 people there at her funeral, just the way the Aboriginal community comes together when needed.

Indeed, many Indigenous Australian funerals are attended by large numbers of Indigenous Australians, high attendance can extend beyond paying respect for deceased, but can also relate to Indigenous Australian cultural ceremonies also known as ‘sorry business’ in many Indigenous Australian communities (Glaskin, 2008).

5.2.2 Participant 2

Participant 2 recognises the importance of developing and maintaining his own wellbeing to enable him to be of greater service and support to others, which includes his partner, his child, his students and the broader Indigenous Australian community. He understands wellbeing as a balanced state of being where he is in balance both in his body and mind, and this makes him emotionally and socially available to support his work colleagues. As he is explaining this concept, he placed his right hand on his chest as it expanded and exhaled to denote control and rhythm of being, stating:

Wellbeing...its mentally I'm ok I can breathe; I know it sounds funny...but the head feels like it can breathe and I'm good to be around for my work colleagues, I can sense if they are in trouble and they can ask me for help or to do something.

The participant understands wellbeing as a means to function and be effective in life. He initially unpacked his understanding by referring to his students' experiences, explaining that when they are well they turn up on time, they are prepared and commit to the work, when they are experiencing low levels of wellbeing it has the reverse effect on their participation and educational experience more broadly. The participant understands the term flourishing as academic attainment and or excelling your studies, reflecting on both his students and his current postgraduate study program.

As he spoke more about his personal life, it appeared that the perspective from which he understood the function of wellbeing in relation to his students was the same positionality that he used to self-reflect and manage his own wellbeing. This was achieved by using coping mechanisms that centred around four of his prevalent personal characteristics which included consistency, punctuality, organisation and loyalty. The participant's prevalent personal characteristics have been developed and refined over time and have been informed by role models in his life, including two senior staff members to whom he reports. Their belief and

reliance on him have bolstered his sense of value and purpose that at times, has been both challenging but rewarding. He states:

Peter¹ is the same, where there are other teachers...I'm not employed to teach this year, but if he can't get one of the other staff, or they're not here he will ask me to teach that class, he's got confidence in me to deliver when it's not part of my responsibility to do that. I guess that's why I can feel when I'm valued. I'm respected and capable of doing that.

The participant spent an extended period discussing the routines and structures that he has put in place and has learned to abide by to ensure he is effective in his life. He invests heavily into his morning routines to support his wellbeing, as he believes the outcome of the morning sets the trajectory of the type of experience he will have for the rest of the day, but more importantly how his level of wellbeing will affect his family and his work in the broader Indigenous Australian community. He states:

I know I'm going to have a good day sticking to my structures that I need to succeed, and I know if I don't there's every chance it couldn't, and then that's like playing Russian roulette as to whether or not you're going to have a good day, as you would know, working in the community many other things are more important, so you having a bad day just doesn't affect you it has a ripple effect.

As he began to talk about his Indigenous Australian identity and culture, his affirming tone of speech enhanced, he pulled himself closer to the table, which denoted a stronger sense of authority about what he was discussing. He explains that his Indigenous Australian identity and culture is the "fabric of him", it is the way in which he understands and interacts with the world around him. He explains:

¹ To protect privacy, pseudonyms are used when referring to participants or others that they mentioned.

Where I say it's everything is because I don't understand, or I can't comprehend what it's like to be a non-Aboriginal person because I've never had the opportunity to do it. I have a lot of non-Indigenous mates they talk about things, and it just doesn't click for me. I don't get it. I guess I can't give you any more than that because all I've ever know is how I was raised and what I can remember.

The participant understands his Indigenous Australian culture as being informed by holistic learnings from his elders. Through his elders he learnt what is right and wrong and the connectivity of all things on country, including the connection between Indigenous Australians from across the country. The participant does not see his culture as limiting his life rather that it frees him to live whatever life he chooses, free because the Indigenous Australian community supports him; further, because he can access his culture anywhere.

5.2.3 Participant 3

Participant 3 understands wellbeing and flourishing as interconnected terms that should be centred around Indigenous Australian identity and culture - a way of being that is not materialistic and not based on the needs of the individual, rather on needs of the collective. She believes that Indigenous Australian people's culture and ways of being are in conflict with their natural state of flourishing when the term is dominated and understood by Western determinants of what it means to be happy. She paused verbal dialogue for a few seconds; her eyes gazed over my right shoulder to where the sun was coming through the window behind my back and reflected on how she struggles to maintain her wellbeing living a long distance from her family. She continues to reflect on the impact that living away from her family may be having on her son and his relationship with his Indigenous Australian culture. She continues to explain that whilst education and employment are important requirements to live a good life; they should come secondary to her Indigenous Australian

cultural learnings, connections to country and communities - which is a primary source of strength that gives her balance, peace and happiness she states:

It's difficult to find a balance. Sometimes I think we aren't meant to live a life like this...a capitalist society where the money is more important than relationships. Also, I think for us as Aboriginal people, living in a world that doesn't value us as people and our sense of identity, constantly trying to translate between two interfaces that don't align. Constantly being criticised, frowned upon and not understood. Seeing people, you love struggle is really hard.

To flourish in life, the participant believes Indigenous Australians must stop believing in the disadvantaged narrative about their people which has been influenced by consecutive Australian governments. Further, that if Indigenous Australians accept the disadvantage narrative, it will continue to divide and cause conflict across Indigenous Australian communities; rather, Indigenous Australians must unite and work together.

The participant draws her strength from her family and her broader Indigenous Australian community. She advises that it was her mother who provided her with the prevalent personal characteristics of compassion and caring for others, as her mother was the longest living sibling in her generation and took care of a lot of people in her family. She spoke in detail about the safe and loving environment her mother made for her growing up. She also contributes this quality as being nurtured by being brought up in a small country town where people genuinely cared for one another. She believes the larger population that one lives in, the more disconnected from others they become. It was her two sisters who taught her the value and rewards of education and employment – but her core sense of self resonates with the teachings from her mother and grandfather.

The participant maintains her wellbeing through social engagement with close friends and work colleagues. When required, she accesses practical tools such as meditation

applications on her mobile, the use of candles and oils for relaxation and taking long walks. In periods throughout her life, she has used counselling services – but reiterates that it is her connection to the Indigenous Australian community and her country that fundamentally makes her well.

She describes her Indigenous Australian identity and culture as the “essence of her”. She feels privileged that she grew up with her grandfather on her mother’s side of the family, as he was taught his traditional culture, including their language, traditions and stories that connected them to sacred sites throughout their country. She suggests that this strong link to traditional culture may be the reason why she has a different understanding, value and greater sense of fear of losing her culture compared to other Indigenous Australians who may not have these deep connections which are no fault of their own, rather from the ongoing colonisation process of Indigenous Australians.

The participant continued to express her concerns for her son’s wellbeing on the premise that he is not being raised in his traditional Indigenous Australian community. Further, she stated that his wellbeing may be affected by disadvantage deficit narratives about Indigenous Australians which can impact the health and wellbeing of Indigenous Australians. To the contrary, she believes that Indigenous Australians are the most privileged people in the world, she states:

There’s so much beauty in our culture and the way we loved and looked after the land and loved and looked after each other, and I think that’s part of what makes us well, loved, and looked after, we even looked after the animals.

5.2.4 Participant 4

Participant 4 understands wellbeing as a state of being where everything (as much as possible) is stable and secure in her life on the premise of the highs and lows of the lived human experience. She understands flourishing as a state of thriving in a situation or period

in her life, a state of being where “you’re able to go beyond just survival and do other things.” For Indigenous Australians to flourish in their lives, she believes that Indigenous Australians must be kind but stay true to themselves. Further, they must become adept in both the Western and Indigenous Australian cultural worlds.

Her prevalent personal characteristics include her organisational skills, her ability to be resilient and have the virtue of seeing the best in others, she states: “One of the things that I try to do, and it comes fairly naturally is to always assume that people mean well and give them the benefit of the doubt”.

She maintains her wellbeing through reading, and she explains that reading can transcend her to other places, and she also sleeps when she feels her wellbeing is low.

Her Indigenous Australian culture means a lot to her, even though she has experienced disappointment and distress in not having her Indigenous Australian culture handed down directly to her from her elders. She is more established now and feels connected to her Indigenous Australian culture through the practice of traditional art and weaving. In recalling her past, she believes that she has always lived an Indigenous Australian life as she has never been materialistic and explains she never brought into the capitalist ideology of the individual pursuing financial success at all cost to accrue as much wealth as possible. She concludes her reflection about her Indigenous Australian culture by stating: “I feel like I have always had that much more sense of family and place in the world...from trees, mountains, the bush and rivers...in that point of view.”

5.2.5 Participant 5

Participant 5 believes that individual and community wellbeing are interdependent of one another; she states: “Well, I actually think that they’re one and the same. When your community is sick, individuals are sick, and when individuals are sick, then it generally makes your community not so well either”.

She understands that wellbeing comprises three primary elements which include the spirit, heart and mind, and when these three elements of wellbeing are strong, then she is physically strong. She had not heard the term flourishing associated with Indigenous Australian wellbeing before. However, she relates the term as meaning that Indigenous Australian families and the broader Indigenous Australian community are achieving goals. For Indigenous Australians to flourish in their lives, she believes that they need to be confident in who they are, and ensure they surround themselves with people who support them. Further, they need to learn about their deeper sense of self and be positive in all that they do as this will return to them in one way or another.

The participant's prevalent personal quality is persistence, which she describes as "being stubborn", which is underpinned by her resilience and core values which are respect and integrity. She states: "I won't give up because...I won't give up...especially if the reasons why you're not doing so great was some external people or places, if you give up, then you're basically letting the bad guys win".

The participant maintains her wellbeing by surrounding herself with like-minded people who can support and encourage her in difficult times in life. She practices self-care, and she draws strength by visiting her home community and country where she sits on country to meditate, reflect and rebuild her strength. The participant feels a strong connection with the water and its calming effect which enhances balance in her life. She can feel when her wellbeing is getting low and knows that she needs to return to her country for healing and her general health, on the premise that her personal and professional life suffers when she does not listen to the call of her country.

The participant took three deep breaths, pausing before she explored what her Indigenous Australian culture means to her denoting its importance. She explains that it means everything to her, as she was very close to losing it. Her culture not only informs her

identity, but it also validates her and gives her purpose in much of what she does in life. She states:

Literally, it's everything. It's such a massive part of who I am, and what I do, and everything that I...when we are having talks about policies, and racism, and health when I'm trying to engage with other services, everything that comes out of my mouth in that practice has my culture on it.

5.2.6 Participant 6

Participant 6 understands wellbeing as a way of being where the mind, body, spirit, community and country are connected and are collectively strong. If one aspect of wellbeing is not strong and in alignment with all the components of her wellbeing, it will have a negative on flow effect into the other areas in her life. She states that flourishing is about: “actually becoming who you are”. For Indigenous Australians to flourish more in their life, she believes Indigenous Australians must: “ignore the knowledge boundaries of the colonisers”. Further, she encourages Indigenous Australians to not separate their Indigenous Australian identity and ways of being and doing from their professional positions; she explains there is strength in their identity and separation from this identity will ultimately lead to their ill-health.

Her most prevalent personal characteristics include her ability to be open to other people and opportunities that present themselves to her and also her ability to be reflective and patient, a personal quality known as “garaba”, which is a Yorta Yorta word that means to wait a little – as a means to receive advice and gain clarity of thought from her ancestors.

Engaging with and spending time with other Indigenous Australians, as well as spending time on her country is essential to her health and wellbeing. She explains that working with people who have dominant non-Indigenous ways of thinking can be taxing on her wellbeing. She explains that when she does not take the time to connect to country then

people “won’t recognise me”, as she tends to withdraw into herself which triggers a sense of urgency that she needs to be on country and be with Indigenous Australian people from her community. She believes that her identity is not separate from her Indigenous Australian culture; rather, it enables her to be herself both personally and professionally – it enables her to stand and push back on dominant Western culture. She explains that her Indigenous Australian culture is the “resource of being who I am”.

She paused for a few seconds in the interview as she was seeking to articulate how her Indigenous Australian culture impacts her wellbeing. She responded by confirming the pride that she has in her culture, but predominantly she spoke about the potential benefits that Indigenous Australian culture could have on the wellbeing of non-Indigenous Australians; however, this potentiality is not realised because of the deficit discourse about Indigenous Australians. She states:

I think they [non-Indigenous Australians] just think about us, you know, in the deficit model. But to think that we have something to bring...like I have a big conversation with people about the importance of grounding and how even science is now saying that to walk on country with bare feet can reduce your stress levels. But this is a long-term, continuing way of being for my ancestors. You know, there’s a lot of pride as we move into the wellbeing sector, especially for social work, there’s a lot of pride with what we bring.

5.2.7 Participant 7

Participant 7 draws on her lived experience to conceptualise what wellbeing means to her. She explains: “in terms of my worldview of wellbeing, it’s an idealistic whole of life, expression, sense of purpose and fulfilment”. She understands wellbeing as a continuum, and her wellbeing traverses that continuum. It is influenced by a range of contributing factors, which include her physical health, social and emotional health, family, community and

connection to country. She believes that flourishing in even one area of her life has the capacity to have a ripple on effect to improve other areas of her wellbeing that she may not be doing so well in. Further, she encourages Indigenous Australians to surround themselves with other Indigenous Australians (even if they are not their own people) in order for them to flourish in their lives.

Her prevalent personal characteristics include relationship building, empathy and self-reflection. She believes her values have been developed through her lived experiences which were required for to her to cope and progress in life.

Her lived experience extends from and is framed in her Indigenous Australian culture. Her Indigenous Australian culture provides her with pride and strength that grounds her individual experience with the collective experience of other Indigenous Australians she states:

It's just who we are, we have these unique linked experiences, one could consider, or an individual lived experience, but when surrounded with Aboriginal people, you have a sense of strength and culture pride, collective understanding of purpose and shared experiences a sense of belonging to a bigger picture.

The participant believes that Indigenous Australian culture not only improves the health of the individual but also the health of the entire Indigenous Australian community.

She maintains her wellbeing by continuing to be connected to her family, Indigenous Australian community and spending time on country in conjunction with the behaviours that she refers to as “standard” such as getting enough sleep, exercise and eating correctly.

5.2.8 Participant 8

Wellbeing is of critical importance to Participant 8. She states:

Everything, honestly, I think it's something that everybody should be educated on, because everybody has their own wellbeing they have to look out for, and then

there's stress that comes with it like, anxiety, depression, happiness. I think it's important that people check in every so often with themselves and with those around them, to ensure everyone's doing ok, to find coping strategies...I talk to my partner, and he listens, and I know I have that support with him, but yeah, it's really of importance to me...definitely.

For other Indigenous Australians to flourish in life, she encourages Indigenous Australians to find what makes them happy and what they are passionate about and pursue these aspirations with ambition.

Her prevalent personal characteristics are persistence, faith and being direct with people. She has developed these strengths through a process of deep reflection and giving prominence to the “fighter” in her rather than the “enemy” in her mind that has created negative thought patterns that made her feel unwell.

She has immersed herself in empowerment and self-help literature and listened to sessions from motivational speakers. She has grounded these learnings into a sense of self through meditation and prayer. She explains that she grew up with strong cross-cultural values and religion, and thus, the merging of the new self-help knowledge with meditation and prayer came naturally to her. The catalyst for her transition into these practices started with daily positive affirmations. Her daily practice of meditation, prayer and listening to uplifting music also enabled her to understand and hold her value which resulted in removing people from her life that did not make her feel well. It also bolstered her ability to be direct and honest with people and care less about what people think about her. Maintaining her wellbeing is also important to her as she tends to see what is wrong with the world; however, she does see the beauty in the land, and of humanity when people help each other out in times of struggle.

The participant's Indigenous Australian culture means a lot to her; it forms her identity, and it is her family. She does not feel as connected to her Indigenous Australian culture living in Victoria but makes considerable effort to connect with her local Indigenous Australian community, however, it is not the same as being on her own country and connecting with her ocean. She is a saltwater person; the beach where she originates from is a place of reflection and balance, she states:

I grew up there the beach is very powerful for me, I used to go to the beach every single day, after school, on weekends, if I was feeling down I would walk to the beach, it was very good I guess, just a place I could go and sit for a couple of hours just to hear the ocean and smell the saltwater and time to think about things, it was like an escape...the beach.

5.2.9 Participant 9

Participant 9 centres his wellbeing in the notion of "freedom", a freedom that enables him to make choices that offer him the right to make decisions that affect his life – regardless if they are good or bad decisions, he reflects that he usually learns a lot more from his mistakes than what's working well. He centres his understanding of wellbeing based on the experiences of control that were imposed on his family from his previous generations; he states: "free from the barriers that have traditionally impacted on my family, particularly my father and grandmother's generations. Freedom from the policies that are framed to keep Aboriginal people down."

He believes that the term flourishing is important to his people, not only to nourish their own wellbeing but to sit in reflection and appreciate that the prosperity that many Indigenous Australians experience today is a result of other Indigenous Australians who have made a lifelong commitment to serving their people. He understands flourishing as joy and being able to sit in silence but still deeply connect with others; he recalls some of the happiest

times in his life where he sat in silence with other Indigenous Australian men and feeling connected and grounded to something much larger than himself. He spoke in depth about the concept and importance of using and believing in what the term flourishing represents for Indigenous Australians; He states:

I don't know like there is such a strength in who are we and how we connect, even when we don't like each other. There's still this sort of foundation stone of culture as connection, and permission to be...permission to at least imagine flourishing because if...you know, even the mob who raise their eyebrows and roll their eyes when you talk about flourishing if they didn't believe in a different future if they didn't believe in what you and I would call a flourishing future then we all would've given up a long time ago.

The participant believes Indigenous Australians are already flourishing and encourages other Indigenous Australians to acknowledge this truth and pursue their life from this belief.

The participant's most prevalent personal characteristic is the desire to lead a life of service for others through pragmatism; however, he explains that he "borrowed" and "mimics" various personal characteristics from his family members, who he believes are people of great strength and wisdom. He explains that his personal characteristics change over time, depending on the situation and needs of others who are in his life.

The participant has a natural tendency that makes him prone to sadness and a lack of self-belief, so to compensate he draws on his inherent sense of humour and looks for laughter from others and has learnt to not take himself too seriously. He states: "The work we do is serious, and that's serious enough. The challenges we've got are serious; I don't understand why people make it harder by making it harder. I just think it's hard enough." He believes that his core values have stayed the same over time, but as he ages, he tends to narrow his focus on only a few values, but all of his values remain in the periphery of his life.

His wellbeing is maintained by spending as much time as he can with family and seeking laughter from others and finding time to sit in silence and reflect about life.

His Indigenous Australian culture is about connection. He states: “I think it’s the most consistent part of my place in the world.” As he has aged, his Indigenous Australian culture has become more prevalent in his life both in how he lives his daily life and his ability to “reach” into his culture for deeper meaning in his life, in a way that he was not able to do in his younger years.

5.2.10 Participant 10

Participant 10 understands wellbeing as a means to find the headspace to connect with his true inner self, which is reconnecting with stories. Of great importance to him is to spend time on country. He states:

Even if it is just going up to Barmah Forest and jumping in the river. That was, that was a huge thing that something very, very cleansing about being able to wash all that off you and come out anew again. Even my family were noticing all of a sudden; I’d come back as a very different person.

His wellbeing is a personal practice that helps him positively impact self, place and the people around him. The participant had to significantly invest in his personal practice of wellness in 2019, given the senior role that he undertook in 2018 and the negative impact that this had on his wellbeing. He explains: “I have to make sure that I’m doing those things that are feeding me creatively and spiritually”. He believes that looking after his own wellbeing is not only important for his own health and wellbeing, but also the health of other people around him by limiting the transference of fatigue and exhaustion onto others.

Over the years he has amassed a large collection of Indigenous Australian Art and Indigenous knowledges, he believes that the Art and Indigenous knowledges contain the energy to support the wellbeing and health of some Indigenous Australians. He claims he

holds the authority of these stories as they are being nurtured by him. However, they also present a heavy burden at times and understands that it is of critical importance that he does not become the “gatekeeper” as this impacts his wellbeing, the more that he shares these knowledges with others the better he feels.

He understands flourishing as being in a safe place or an environment that enables you to flourish in whatever you choose to do. He encourages Indigenous Australians who would like to flourish more in life to be true to themselves and be open to themselves. Further that they are Indigenous Australians regardless of their journey into their Indigeneity, which is a continual learning process for all Indigenous Australians.

The participant’s prevalent personal characteristics include his ability to be self-aware, he understands this as a powerful way of being, to understand yourself and place in the world. He believes that this quality was drawn from his family who was “very strong and self-aware people”. He explains that his personal characteristics are guided but not constricted by a value system that was provided to him from his family, he believes his values must and should change during his life, for perspective and to respond to life to the best of your abilities.

He explains that his Indigenous Australian culture is all-consuming; it is “inescapable”. He embraces his culture as “black privilege” in that he was raised knowing where his country is and what authority this gave him to manifest the life that he wanted for himself. He also respectfully acknowledges his fifth-generation German ancestry; however, it is Indigenous Australian ancestry that connects him to place and country regardless if it is his traditional country or county that he is visiting. The participant believes that his Indigenous Australian culture is the core from which he draws his wellbeing. Further, he believes that knowing your culture fundamentally improves your wellbeing he states:

There's something incredibly grounding about being able to do something that you know your grandmothers; your grandfathers have done for thousands and thousands of years; thousands of generations. To be able to connect with that is really, really powerful. I think it's quite good for the ego too because it brings you back and makes you realise that you're actually a little bit smaller in the grand scheme of all these things. But I kind of like that, I like being a grain of sand on a beach.

5.2.11 Participant 11

Participant 11 understands wellbeing as relational, which is not necessarily grounded in human relationships. She states:

They can be relationships with our culture, relationships with our ancestors or our descendants. So, I think this idea of wellbeing sort of transcends temporal boundaries, sort of history, present, past, future. I think it's kind of something that is...it's grounded in our experiences of the day.

Further, she explains that based on the premise that wellbeing is not entirely based in temporal relationships the measure and strength of wellbeing is underpinned by the development of the relationships in the context of identity that informs if a person's wellbeing is based on: "whether we feel they're whole, whether we feel they're developing, or whether they're a bit of a deficit".

For Indigenous Australians to flourish, she encourages them to live with expectation, continuity and a positive outlook. Further, she encourages Indigenous Australians to step outside their comfort zone and connect with other people that they would not otherwise connect with.

She explains that many Indigenous Australians struggle to fully live in the present because of the trauma of the past. Whilst it is important to acknowledge and process the

trauma, she also explains that it is also critically important for Indigenous Australians to be living in the present and be expecting a happy future. She explores the complexity of the lived experience of many Indigenous Australians, which can be full of paradoxes – for many Indigenous Australians their identity, their connection to family and community are sources of pride and strength, and yet many Indigenous Australians communities provide experiences of family violence and ongoing transgenerational trauma. She explains there are no easy answers to the complexity that Indigenous Australians face especially when “Everything about our lived experience is framed by our past”, which is why she reiterates the importance of healing but moving forward.

The participant’s prevalent personal characteristics include determination, stubbornness, integrity and respecting the expectations that other people have placed on her, not to burden her but because they believe in her and want her to lead a fulfilling and happy life. She believes her values have remained reasonably constant in her life, but her ability to live up to them “ebbs and flows”. Still, she believes that they have strengthened over time and with her maturity.

She maintains her wellbeing through various practices. These practices include meditation, physical activity, connecting with friends, family, spending time on country, and spending quality time with her children.

The participant was not fully aware that she was different from other Australians until she was in high school and recalled the 1988 bicentennial when Indigenous Australians were excluded from the conversation at school. It was at that point she started to question her Indigenous Australian culture, which deepened over her life. She supports her children to connect and understand their culture through language programs and spending as much time as they can on the traditional country. Indigenous Australian culture enhances her wellbeing

because it informs her identity, which has taken some time to reconcile; however, she does not see her Indigeneity as being her whole identity; she states:

It's not wholly Aboriginal, because I see my identity made up of a whole lot of components as a woman, as a mother, as a daughter of an Indian migrant, and what that history brings to me, to my identity. But just...I guess clarifying it; it's sort of fractured identity. All of that creates one identity, really. It fuses.

5.3 Common Themes

Beyond the individual interviews, commonalities appeared across multiple interviews. Analysis and integration of the interviews revealed eight common themes: Conceptions of Wellbeing, Flourishing, Responsibility and Obligation, Personal Strengths, Self-reflection, Identity, Practices to Support Wellbeing and Connections.

5.3.1 Conceptions of Wellbeing

The first common theme that arose was conceptions around wellbeing. While the depth of discussion and specific conceptualisation of what wellbeing meant to each of the participants differed, two categories of wellbeing meanings emerged. The first category understood wellbeing as feeling and functioning well, such that participants could function well and not experience high levels of stress or suffering from mental illness. For instance, P1 noted that wellbeing involves: "feeling right in your mind...you know not feeling stressed." P4 noted that wellbeing: "means your life is going ok, every aspect of it as much as possible so you're not sick, you've got a home, you have some income." P8 emphasised the importance of wellbeing: "I think it's something that everybody should be educated on, because everybody has their own wellbeing they have to look out for, and then there's stress that comes with it like, anxiety, depression, happiness."

The second category that emerged reflected wellbeing as a holistic construct, in which wellbeing is comprised of connected elements that encompass the mind, body, spirit,

relationships to culture and country, further the collective health and wellbeing of the entire community, not just the individual. For instance, P6 stated:

I think just the word wellbeing is when you have happiness and maybe peace, but then also health. So, it's like your body, mind and spirit. So, it does include the body as well. But then also wellbeing would probably also include family.

Similarly, P11 noted that “wellbeing is grounded in relationships...they can be relationships with our culture, relationships with our ancestors or our descendants”.

P10 noted the importance of being themselves and connecting with country: “I think it's hard, wellbeing for me I think means finding that headspace to be me again, and to step back out. I'm increasingly doing that through reconnecting with stories and country, especially with country.” Some of the participants expressed that if these elements are not in alignment or one of the elements is failing; it will have a negative on-flow effect onto other elements that comprise the totality of their wellbeing. Still, P7 noted that if one the elements of her wellbeing are functioning effectively, it has the capacity to bolster and improve other elements in her wellbeing that are not doing well.

5.3.2 Flourishing

The second common theme that arose was flourishing. The collective understanding of what flourishing meant to the participants was similar across most participants; with only two of the participants expressing a divergent understanding of what it meant to flourish. Most of the participants understood flourishing as separate from their natural state of being; they understood it in terms of thriving, being productive, progressing forward and achieving goals. P5 noted: “if you're flourishing then we would be achieving the goals that we set for ourselves”. Similarly, P4 noted: “To me, it would mean thriving on a current situation, so you're able to go above and beyond just survival and do some other things”. P1 explained: “Flourishing is like moving forward”. P10 also noted: “When I think of the word flourish, I

suppose I think of being productive; whatever the output might be”. The collective expressions of what flourishing meant to participants was a way of being that was separate from their sense of normal lived experiences of wellbeing, which required of them additional effort and mastery of skills and behaviours to attain a state of flourishing in their lives.

P10 and P7 differentiated their understanding of flourishing from the collective, in that they expressed the belief that flourishing is not a separate state of being that had to be attained; rather that many Indigenous Australians were already flourishing in their lives. P10 stated: “you’re already flourishing; find a way to acknowledge the flourishing you’ve got”. Similarly, P7 explains: “Flourishing is like a deeper sense of fulfilment in multiple aspects of life”. P7 continued to express the view that many Indigenous Australians could be doing much better in their life than what they think; it is about positionality as to how one interprets their experiences at particular points throughout their lives.

P7, P11 and P9 draw to a similar conclusion as to why the majority of participants felt that Indigenous Australians had to attain flourishing, rather than it already exists in their lives, which was that they might be focusing on the negative impact of colonisation, deficit discourse, disadvantage and experiences of trauma which may limit their ability to accept or understand the flourishing that already exists in their lives. This phenomenon is discussed further in Chapter 6.

5.3.3 Responsibility and Obligation

The third common theme that arose focused on the sense of responsibility and obligation. Nine prevalent personal characteristics were profiled by some of the participants, which pointed to responsibility and obligations to their families and the broader Indigenous Australian community: consistency, punctuality, organisation, loyalty, reliability, service, integrity, drive and routines. Many of the participants drew on these characteristics to support their ability to be effective in their lives. For instance, P3 states: “I guess I am a doer. Some

people will say they're going to do this, and they don't, I hope I am reliable, and if I'm going to do something, I do it". Similarly, P2 noted: "Perseverance, as I'm a bit of a perfectionist, when I have a task at hand I push and push...you know till I get the result that I'm happy with".

It became apparent that the characteristics outlined above had more depth and meaning associated with them that extends further beyond a 'work ethic', which was the context that many of the participants used to explore their prevalent personal characteristics. Rather, they reflect an essence of a group of Indigenous Australians who have an interconnected sense of responsibility and cultural obligation to their families, communities and ancestors of which they draw on these characteristics to be of greatest service to their people. For example, P9 stated:

I grew up watching all of my grandparents and my parents, and aunts and uncles work incredibly hard and, you know, we had nothing, but they gave us everything. A sense of service is very strong, I think. And so, even on those days where you know, you just want to curl up, and it's all too hard, I think the characteristic of needing to serve to feel valuable has helped me a lot. And, yeah, it's hard.

5.3.4 Personal Strengths

The fourth common theme that arose was around personal strengths. This appeared through five prevalent personal characteristics that were profiled from some of the participant's experiences: strength, resilience, perseverance, drive and commitment. For instance, P1 noted: "Strength is a big one because people always are drawn to me for strength and say you are so strong, and even though I didn't show it, I can show strength when need be." P4 noted: "It's just the belief in the back of my mind, every time something goes wrong I have just the belief that it will come good, several times I have probably almost not been able to see that". P5 stated that: "That I'm stubborn. So, I draw on that. I won't give up because I

won't give up, especially if the reasons why you're not doing so great was some external people or places, if you give up then you're basically letting the bad guys win. And I cannot abide by that, that is...I won't."

Some of the participants expressed that their personal strengths are actualised through their lived experiences, such as their ability to finish a task regardless of the pressure placed on them even if the pressure comes from the community or in the workplace. Some of the participants also shared a common belief that their Indigenous Australians families were a source from which they drew their strength to be well, which is discussed further in Chapter 6.

5.3.5 Self-Reflection

The fifth common theme that arose was self-reflection. This arose from seven prevalent personal characteristics that emerged from a range the participant's experiences: reflection, age (wisdom), listening, compassion, empathy, laughter and voice. For instance, P7 noted:

Yeah, reflection is my other one...I think with deep reflection there's more opportunity to learn and become more informed in the way you will approach something in the future that continues an ongoing and an adaptive type of process probably engages heart mind and body.

P10 expressed the view that: "I think that ability to listen and to learn is probably something that has informed me better, being willing to change my opinion about things". The essence of these characteristics also enables some of the participants to deeply self-reflect and self-assess their own wellbeing needs and the impact that they may be having on others.

The process of self-reflection supports the wellbeing of some of the participants to feel well, laugh and release a multitude of stressful pressure points in their lives. For instance, P9 stated: "I feel like laughter is such a core part of how blackfellas cope, and I just feel like

it's a big part of my life." This statement was also expressed in the way in which the interviews were conducted to varying degrees where laughter was captured throughout many of the interviews.

The process of self-reflection enables some of the participants to respond to the needs and plight of others more deeply and therefore, more effectively. For instance, P3 stated:

I think I draw on what my mother has given me and she's...we were brought up always caring about other people and making decisions for other people based on how it makes other people feel, and that's what I have always tried to help somebody in need.

P5 noted: "I need to be a voice. I need to be an advocate. Not an activist per se, but definitely an advocate for and stand up for those things that I believe in. I believe in a body of equity, and I believe in my culture."

5.3.6 Identity

The sixth common theme that arose was identity. All the participants expressed pride, purpose and a sense of conviction in their Indigenous Australian ancestry and culture. Further, collectively, the participants expressed the predominately positive effect that their Indigenous Australians culture and identity has in their lives. However, the depth and level of conviction varied depending at what point the participant was at with their lived experience. As discussed in Chapter 3, Bhabha (2004) suggests a new space called the 'realm of beyond', which represents an ambiguous contested space where colonised people can negotiate their own narratives of existence. Within this context, I suggest that the participants appear to be traversing the proposed continuum and in doing so are reconciling their identities and what their Indigenous Australian cultures means to them in the hybridity of contemporary post-colonial Australia.

It became apparent that many of the participants' Indigenous Australian identity was formed in a culture that they cannot walk in out and out of, rather it is central to their being and intersects through all extensions of their life. For instance, P10 stated:

It's, it is that crux of all things to the point where I don't know what else there would be. If I found out that I was adopted tomorrow, I don't know what I'd do. I honestly, so much of identity has been structured around that and the community connections that are made.

Similarly, P3 stated: "The essence of who I am".

The interviews began to profile a collective positive understanding of what Indigenous Australian culture and identity means to the participants through various reinforcing statements from the participants. For instance, P9 stated:

I feel like, you know, culture is my sort of wellspring of flourishing. It's a place where all the good stuff is and comes from. If I think about it, it's the one thing I've had consistently by my side without change over the course of my life.

Similarly, P5 stated:

Everything. It means so much more to me. I was so close to losing it. I'm lucky that I have it, and that I have family members now that share that information. I know my culture I identify as Barkindji now. And without that, I don't know who I'd be.

P5 expressed the view that:

I think it enables me to continue as a professional. And all those things that you've been asking, you know, how do I have my well-being, how do I have my value, all of those ones you've asked me have all come from my identity and enabled me to keep doing this work.

5.3.7 Practices to Support Wellbeing

The seventh common theme that arose focused on practices supporting wellbeing, which included traditional culture, spending time on country, engaging with community and meditation practices.

Some of the participants expressed that the basic fundamentals to support their wellbeing were underpinned by exercise, good nutrition and sufficient sleep. For instance, P7 stated: “Obviously I can look after myself in terms of what I am eating and drinking, how much sleep I’m getting and if I am exercising”. However, whilst important, the fundamentals for some of the participants were positioned as the precursor to the deeper practices and behaviours that support and enhance their wellbeing.

The first pattern that emerged was the practice of Indigenous Australian culture, which is experienced through the process of learning about Indigenous Australian culture from their elders and incorporating cultural practices into their daily lives. For instance, P3 noted: “We grew up with our grandfather, my mum’s dad, and his stories and experiences. He spoke the full traditional Aboriginal language and knew all the old traditions”. Similarly, P10 stated in reference to retelling Indigenous stories and making traditional clothes artefacts:

There’s something incredibly grounding about being able to do something that you know your grandmothers; your grandfathers have done for thousands and thousands of years; thousands of generations. To be able to connect with that is really, really powerful.

P4 expressed: “but learning...things like weaving, and art which I just love painting and things like that...I feel it has connected me much more in a lot of ways”.

Second, the practice of spending on time in the country was of prevalence to most of the participants. The practice of spending time on country refers to a process of the participants returning to their ancestral tribal lands where they recalibrate and centre

themselves by communing with their ancestors through a process of connecting deeply with their lands, waters, flora and fauna and the people in their communities. For instance, P6 stated: “Spending time outside and on country. I can’t just be in here...or something will happen to me; people won’t recognise me”. Similarly, P10 explained:

I found that I was getting in my own way, and I had to kind of reset. I got out, I got out to country, and I just had to get in the car and move. Fortunately, being close to Yorta Yorta and Dja Dja Wurrung country, I’m not more than a two-hour drive away from being back on country.

Similarly, P2 noted:

I guess the best way you can make an example is that your soul feels a lot more entrenched when your around it and as you would know when you’re feeling shit sometimes your able to go to an opening and get the gum leaves and throw over you, you literally feel brand new.

Participants who practise their Indigenous culture through engagement with their respective Indigenous Australian community express that sometimes they need to create time to either travel back to their country or engage in their local community, for instance, P6 noted:

It’s not part of my daily life to be able to have these conversations with other Aboriginal people. You have to seek it out and bring it into your life; otherwise you just kind of feel like you’re just going to dry out and not be okay.

Similarly, P5 noted that:

So, for that for me, it’s about holding that, and connecting with country as much as I can...I think for me, it’s a little bit hard because it’s like this...it’s present every day for the kids, but the pivotal moment is that when we go home once a year.

The essence of the practice Indigenous Australians engaging with their Indigenous Australian communities gives the participants pride and a sense of conviction about their culture. For instance, P1 stated: “I love being part of this community, and I love been recognised as Aboriginal.” The participants’ collective pride is grounded in their knowledge of where their country is, who their people are, and the Indigenous Australians communities they belong to. Even though more than half of the participants do not live on their traditional country, they do their best to return to country when they can. Regardless of this, they carry their culture and their stories with them wherever they go, as noted by P5: “Because my country is like a ten-hour drive from where I am, I have photos of it in my office.”.

Third, some of the participants incorporated practices of meditation and reflection to support and maintain their wellbeing, for instance, P3 noted:

I try to meditate, there are times like...when I have felt so stressed that nothing can calm me down...I have a mediation playlist where I’ll duck into a dark room, and I light some candles and listen and just try to calm my mind down.

Similarly, P8 explained:

When I meditate I am so relaxed to the point where I just want to pass out and sleep, so that has a big effect on me, I also like face masks and things like that, crazy things just laying down and listening to music, I listen to a lot of like worship music, that’s my number one go-to, it makes me feel like everything’s going to be ok, that for me is the things that I do.

P5 noted: “I go down to the river here, and I guess I kind of meditate, and I breathe. I concentrate on my breathing. I look at trees.”

5.3.8 Connections

The final common theme that arose was the importance of connectivity to their families, culture, land, waters and communities. This connection was expressed as a known

sense, and a way of being that is much larger than self, an essence that they can draw on which connects many of them to their past, present and into their future. For instance, P10 noted: “There’s something incredibly grounding about being able to do something that you know your grandmothers; your grandfathers have done for thousands and thousands of years”.

P1 explained that she draws her inner strength from her relationship with her Indigenous Australian family, she notes that: “I think with me family, family is one of my strengths, we all draw on each other - family connection.” P3 expressed her deep concern about the need to protect the connection Indigenous Australian cultures communities from the ongoing assimilation Indigenous Australians: “We really need to sustain our people and our culture and our community connections”.

P7 encapsulated the collective essence of what the term connection meant to many of the participants, she states:

It’s just who we are, we have these unique linked experiences, one could consider, or an individual lived experience - but when surrounded with Aboriginal people, you have a sense of strength and culture pride, collective understanding of purpose and shared experiences. A sense of belonging to a bigger picture, our ancestors, how hearing and learning of stories, making new sense of these story’s on an ongoing bases, constantly reflecting back to make meaning, been around other Aboriginal people and ongoing listening to informed stories that you’ve not been able to make sense of before in the past, it feels clear that for many, many years it’s been an oral kind of history, and we are listening and anticipating that we will continue to make sense, we are individually on a journey of cultural initiation, and that will be different for everybody at different times, that gives me

a strong sense of being connected to my family and my community and the many communities to which I belong.

5.4 Conclusion

This chapter described how participants responded to a set of existing wellbeing items, described the key themes that arose within each interview, and identified themes that arose across the interviews. These include Conceptions of Wellbeing, Flourishing, Responsibility and Obligation, Personal Strengths, Identity, Self-Reflection, Practices supporting wellbeing and Connections. In the next chapter, I discuss the findings, consider the implications and applications of the findings, identify areas of validation and limitations, recommend areas of future research and provide concluding remarks.

Chapter 6 Discussion and Conclusions

6.1 Introduction

Many Indigenous Australians are flourishing in their lives despite the disproportionately high rates of disadvantage that they experience in comparison with the non-Indigenous Australian population (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2018b). Despite a growing focus on Indigenous Australian health and wellbeing, this is often centred in a deficit discourse, which continually points to dysfunction. In response to the dominant deficit discourse about Indigenous Australians, this thesis sought to contribute to research about Indigenous Australian strengths. At a broad level, the study aimed to better understand Indigenous Australian strengths by focusing on those who have achieved periods of flourishing within the contemporary Australian context. The current study explored how Indigenous Australians working within tertiary education institutions conceptualise wellbeing and flourishing, the characteristics, beliefs and behaviours that enable them to function effectively, and the extent to which the practice of their Indigenous Australian culture impacts upon their wellbeing.

To address the research questions, I used an interpretative phenomenology approach (Benner, 2008), informed by IST (Nakata, 2007a) and a positive psychology perspective (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Using this approach, 11 interviews were conducted and analysed, resulting in eight common themes that emerged from the data as a result of individual and shared understandings, meanings and experiences that intersected the collective lived experiences of the sample group. In this chapter, the common themes from this study are discussed further, considering how the findings complement and extend existing literature. This is followed by a discussion about the validations and also limitations of the study and potential future directions for research. Bringing the findings and existing discourse together, I propose the need to develop a theory of Indigenous Australian

flourishing and point to key aspects that might contribute to such a theory. I end with a final conclusion, which focuses on three major findings of this study.

6.2 A Strengths-Based Approach to Indigenous Australian Wellbeing

There is a plethora of studies into the ill health and wellbeing of Indigenous populations from around the world. However, much less is known about their strengths and what is working well. Further, few studies take an interpretive phenomenological approach to describe and understand the lived experiences of Indigenous populations that are flourishing. Addressing these limitations, this study explored the experiences and perspectives of 11 Indigenous Australians working at tertiary institutions.

The individual interviews provided numerous insights into different individuals' perspectives and experiences, pointing to the unique experiences of subjective wellbeing that different individuals have. For instance, one participant focused particularly on their mental health, whereas another participant focused on their spiritual and cultural health. Despite the differences, numerous commonalities occurred across multiple responses. Here, I further consider these themes, considering how they fit within and complement existing literature, both with Indigenous Australian samples and with non-Indigenous samples in Australia and abroad.

6.2.1 Conceptualisations of Wellbeing

Two categories of what wellbeing meant to the participants emerged from the data: need satisfaction and holism. First, participants pointed to good mental health and having their basic living needs being met. Second, participants understood wellbeing as holistic in its conceptualisation and application in their lives, which is similar where their wellbeing comprised of various elements that were interdependent of one another and necessary for them to obtain optimal wellbeing. This conceptualisation is also like holism in psychology. Within psychology, holism refers to a theory where researchers may take an approach to

consider how different factors relate and work together and impact a person as a whole rather than looking at individual factors in isolation (Raibley, 2015).

These two categories are congruent with how wellbeing is understood and measured globally (Michalec et al., 2009; OECD, 2013). Numerous scholars connected to the field of positive psychology assert that wellbeing is a multi-dimension construct which can be influenced by a range of contributing factors (e.g. Friedman and Kern (2014), Hone et al. (2014) and Keyes (2002)). For example, in defining flourishing Keyes (2005) proposed three different dimensions of flourishing (physical, mental, and social). Diener and Biswas-Diener's (2009) definition included eight different dimensions that together define flourishing. Seligman's (2011) PERMA model points to five domains of flourishing, which comprise of multiple factors that influence wellbeing, such positive emotion, positive relationships, and achieving accomplishments in life.

Further, the focus on holism is consistent with existing research of other Indigenous populations' conceptualisations of health and wellbeing from around the world (McHardy & O'Sullivan, 2004; Selwyn, 2007), and with existing literature about how Indigenous Australian wellbeing is understood by researchers and Australian governments (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2017; Grieves, 2009). The findings are consistent with the nine guiding principles that guide Australian policies (Swan & Raphael, 1995), as principle number one notes that health is holistic. As discussed in section 2.4 within the context of Indigenous Australia, holistic health and wellbeing extend beyond the wellbeing of the individual, consisting of optimal health and wellbeing of the entire Indigenous community in which the individual lives. Further, as discussed by Gee (2016), Indigenous wellbeing extends to the interconnected and collective health and wellbeing of the physical body, mind, emotions, culture, land and spirituality for the entire community.

Definitions around Indigenous Australian health and wellbeing were initially developed 30 years ago, with revisions occurring six years later (Social Health Reference Group, 2004). These early definitions have continued to inform policies and practices for Indigenous Australian people. For the design and delivery of culturally appropriate research and programs for current and emerging Indigenous Australians, it will be important to continue to revisit their conceptualisations of wellbeing, being careful to not inappropriately impose Westernised conceptions.

Most participants believed that if one aspect of their wellbeing is not doing well, it will have a negative flow on effect into other aspects of their wellbeing. Still, there were exceptions. One participant believed that if one of the elements of wellbeing is well, it has the capacity to have positive flow on effect to other elements that are not doing well, which has the capacity to support the collective flourishing of all of the elements that support the wellbeing of an individual. Studies with Western samples find that different domains of wellbeing can mutually influence one another (Friedman & Kern, 2014), supporting the idea that one area of a poor functioning domain can flow into other areas of life. Yet other studies find that healthy ageing occurs as people can compensate more heavily in particular domains when other domains are not doing well (Baltes & Baltes, 1990).

6.2.2 Flourishing

Interviews further explored how the participants conceptualised flourishing, which I define as an individual who is optimally functioning through the connectivity of their cultural beliefs behaviours and experiences that enable the individual to be emotionally strong, resilient and live their life with vigour and purpose. Some participants reflected the ongoing negative impact of deficit discourses, which continue to inform how some of the participants interpreted flourishing in their own lives. These results are consistent with the findings from existing literature into the impact that deficit discourse and experiences of disadvantage have

on the health and wellbeing of Indigenous Australians (Fforde et al., 2013; Fogarty, Bulloch, et al., 2018; Fogarty, Lovell, et al., 2018).

For several of the participants, flourishing was understood as something that they had attained, which went beyond their “normal” state of being to a state of flourishing. Through their shared lived experiences, they expressed they were able to flourish in periods throughout their lives by being supported by family and friends and being engaged in their respective communities which gave them purpose. This understanding has congruence with how flourishing is being conceptualised and operationalised within the field of positive psychology. For example, Seligman's (2018) PERMA model resonates strongly both with the flourishing understanding that is presented from the participants; and also aligns to a philosophy in positive psychology which seek to supports individuals to flourish by going beyond normal levels of functioning (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Von Culin, Tsukayama & Duckworth, 2014).

Little is known about what it means to go beyond normal functioning to truly thrive in life for Indigenous Australians. The various models of flourishing proposed by scholars within the positive psychology literature (e.g., Diener et al., 2009; Huppert & So, 2013; Keyes, 2002; Seligman, 2011), offer a starting point. However, these theoretical models come from privileged scholars. Through the reported experiences of Indigenous Australians who have experienced periods of flourishing in their lives, the current study provides insights for developing a better understanding of what flourishing means within the context of Indigenous Australian experiences. Currently, there are no studies that seek to understand how the term ‘flourishing’ is understood in the context of Indigenous Australian wellbeing. As such, the study contributes to a limited understanding of this term in relation to Indigenous Australian wellbeing.

6.2.3 Responsibility, Obligation and Personal Strengths

The personal characteristics and behaviours that formed the themes of Responsibility and Obligation and Personal Strengths was established where several of the participants were conscientious in their approach to life. This finding positively frames themes of responsibility and obligation within the lives of participants on the basis that studies find that individuals who have a sense of responsibility and obligation towards others are more likely to experience positive life outcomes, including positive physical and mental health, good social relationships, better occupation outcomes, and reduced risk of premature mortality (Friedman & Kern, 2014).

The themes of Responsibility and Obligation and Personal Strengths also pointed to three different world views' that intersect to impact upon participants' experiences and perceptions: The Western worldview, the Indigenous Australian worldview, and the intersecting Western and Indigenous Australian worldview.

While specific definitions might vary, in general, a Western worldview tends to be more focused on science and is structured on compartmentalised knowledge to understand the larger picture, which can underpin beliefs in possession, ownership and control of knowledge (Treaties, 2019). In contrast, an Indigenous worldview tends to focus on a holistic understanding of the whole that emerged from millennia's of their existence and experiences which underpin an interrelated way of being that is connected to knowledge and resources in relation to custodianship rather than ownership (Graham, 2008). Whilst the essentialist term 'Indigenous worldview' is a highly contested term as an absolute worldview on the basis that hybridity occurs within colonised cultures (Nakata, 2007a), multiple Indigenous worldviews' exist across contemporary Indigenous populations (Royal, 2002; Stocker, Collard & Rooney, 2016).

In the context of this study, the Western worldview emerged where the participants drew on Western conceptualisations and definitions of personal characteristics such as work ethic, drive and commitment, organisational skills, reliability, integrity and routines as a necessity to function and be effective in their personal lives, and also to be of the greatest service to their broader Indigenous Australian communities. I differentiate these characteristics as Western conceptualisations of characteristics on the premise of how research participants expressed, understood and applied the above-mentioned characteristics, which largely translate to their definition in the English language. Further, the personal characteristics relate to highly structured linear expressions and experiences that contextually appear to be at odds with Indigenous Australian culture and identity, which formed an Indigenous Australian worldview for many of the participants.

The Indigenous Australian worldview of the participants was not expressed in absolute, nor linear terms; but rather was expressed and understood as a series of intersecting and overlaying loops, which began to frame and contextualise an Indigenous Australian worldview for the sample group. Their Indigenous Australian worldview appeared to be relational and centred on kinship, family and community connections, the telling of stories and practice of art, dance and making of traditional artefacts. This worldview is congruent with Nakata's (2007a) assertion that many Indigenous Australians now hold a worldview that is not primarily centred in a "traditional context" whereby the worldview is centred on cultural knowledge about the land and environment, rather is centred and understood through "memory making" by the storytelling, art and performance and relating to kin (p.3).

The interpreted Indigenous Australian worldview from the participants created a sense of balance, harmony and circular flow in the lives of the research participants, which was captured through the transcriptions. Further, even more profoundly in the interviews I noted and observed some of the participants, whose behaviours physically, emotionally and

intellectually changed as they transitioned into this Indigenous Australians worldview. This occurred whilst they were reflecting on their Indigenous Australian culture and what it meant to them.

The data suggest that some of the participants' Indigenous Australian culture and way of being do not have significant currency with the majority of non-Indigenous culture, business and political systems that the participants are required to engage in. Thus, over a lifetime, some of the participants make ardent decisions to nurture, protect and live in their inner Indigenous worldview and express this where they can. Further, some of the participants indicated in their interviews that they retreated to this worldview, which I interpreted as a means, for some of the participants, to recalibrate their wellbeing through a process to continually align themselves to what they perceive as Indigenous Australian truths to avail and contend with the intersecting pressures of what it means to function and be effective in the Western world.

6.2.4 Self-Reflection and Identity

Multiple participants spoke of the importance of self-reflection and a sense of identity, which further speak to the challenge of navigating the Western and Indigenous Australian worldviews. The personal characteristic of self-reflection enabled them to self-reflect about their own lives, the lives of others to understand themselves more deeply. Even though the processes to engage the self-reflection characteristic was expressed differently by the participants, such as cognitive intellectualising or spiritual processing through meditation and prayer, the ability and the desire of the participants to self-reflect suggests that they are exploring and confirming the meaning in their own lives. Further, this meaning relates to and supports them to have purpose and function effectively, but also remain aligned to living in the values of their Indigenous Australian worldview.

Drawing from the interview data, to live in the Indigenous Australian worldview requires many of the participants in the study to centre and extend themselves into the world from their Indigenous Australian identity. While it is apparent from the data captured in this study that Indigenous Australian identity and culture is a source of pride and strength for the participants, it can also be a source of contention that comes at a social and emotional cost to the participants. The levels of cost appear to differ for each of the participants, depending on where the participants currently sit on my proposed Indigenous Australian indigeneity continuum.

In considering a sense of identity, I suggest a continuum may exist, which has three primary anchoring points. The first (start) is a reconnection to Indigenous Australian culture, the second (middle) is living the culture and evolving parts of Indigenous Australian culture that have been fractured, and the third (end) is the living of largely unfractured Indigenous Australian culture. I suggest that the proposed continuum could exist within the previously discussed 'interstitial space' explored by Hume (2000) and the 'realm of the beyond' Bhabha (2004) where many contemporary Indigenous Australians are seeking to ground, reimagine and reconcile their Indigenous culture and identity in the wake of modern post-colonial Australia to support and enhance their wellbeing.

Regardless of the point that an Indigenous Australian is at on the continuum, there are inescapable spiritual, social, emotional or economic costs to the participant, which relate to their lived experiences at the various points along the continuum. For example, participants at the 'start' of the continuum, in which they are in the early stages of the reconnection process into their culture, can experience difficulty, as family members may have been part of the stolen generation, or their Indigenous Australian ancestry may have been withheld or denied to them from their family to either avoid the shame of negative experiences of the past, or

reduce the burden of limited opportunities they may experience due to race, or to protect children from forced removal.

Others could be considered at the middle of the continuum, where they were born into their Indigenous Australian culture and immediately understood their connection to country and links to community, but were required to also start a journey to reactivate the wholeness of their culture and knowledge systems as some parts were forcibly taken from the previous generation/s. Others pointed to be far along the continuum, being fully immersed in their largely unbroken culture and continue to live their traditional Indigenous Australian culture. However, they are required to lead a life of resistance to protect their culture and stop the ongoing colonisation of it. Further to this and extending from the middle to the end of the continuum, these participants are more likely to have experienced the extremes of disadvantage and racism that is commonly associated with Indigenous Australians who have years of lived experience from being raised in their culture and associated with Indigenous Australian identity.

A positive finding from this study in relation to Indigenous Australian culture and identity is that regardless of the participants' entry point into, and where they currently sit on, the continuum, all of the participants expressed a view that they always felt that there was some form of existential connection to their Indigenous Australian culture. Further, regardless of the challenging experiences that can be associated with Indigenous Australian identity, all of the participants conceptually expressed the belief that the further they moved along the continuum (by investing more time and practice into their culture) the more flourishing they experienced in their lives. Fundamentally the participants' collective experience of Indigenous Australian flourishing is underpinned by their shared belief that their Indigenous Australian culture makes them feel more connected to others, and have a

deeper sense of connection to something much larger than themselves through a stronger immersion in their Indigenous Australian culture.

6.2.5 Practices that Support Wellbeing

Participants discussed various practices that they perform to support their own wellbeing. Some of the practices that were discussed to support flourishing were directly derived from traditional practices from Indigenous Australian culture, which is based on the relational connectivity of all things. Practices such as making traditional art and clothing, the telling of stories and spending time on country. Other practices were not traditional practices, rather they comprise of a suite of Western practices, for example listening, reading self-help, positive self-talk, motivational material, and meditation exercises.

The practice of meditation and positive thinking to reduce psychological stresses to support the wellbeing for some of the participants in the current study is congruent with the plethora of international research into contemplative interventions that currently exists (Grossman, Niemann, Schmidt & Walach, 2004; Keng, Smoski, & Robins 2011; Zoogman, Goldberg, Hoyt & Miller, 2015). Ivtzan and Lomas (2016) assert that contemplative mindfulness interventions have been empirically proven to reduce disorder symptoms such as chronic pain, psychosis, and depression, which was also evidenced in the Keng et al. (2011) comprehensive review of correlated empirical studies into effects of mindfulness on psychological health which suggest that overall, mindfulness is positively associated with a variety of indicators to improve psychological health and wellbeing.

Participants also pointed to the importance of spending time on country and engaging with the community as being important to their wellbeing. Similarly, Biddle and Swee (2012) found a positive relationship between the cultural practices required to support the sustainability of land and culture and Indigenous Australian wellbeing. Biddle (2014) suggested that one of the most compelling reasons as to why Indigenous Australians living in

remote areas may have higher levels of wellbeing than Indigenous Australians living in non-remote areas, is that those who are in living remote areas are more likely to have retained, or are learning an Indigenous Australian language/s. Further, they are more likely to be practising other Indigenous cultural activities, such as hunting and gathering, which can enhance and support their wellbeing. Additionally, the Lohar, Butera and Kennedy's (2014) study highlighted some of the strengths of Indigenous Australian culture in terms of raising children; this study also suggests that traditional Indigenous Australian cultural practices enhance the overall wellbeing of Indigenous children to help them grow into active contributors in their community.

The positive effect of enculturation to enhance and support wellbeing appears in several international Indigenous studies, suggesting that positive enculturation serves both as a protective factor and significant contributor to support high functioning Indigenous populations. For example, the Bals, Turi, Skre and Kvernmos (2011) study concluded that enculturation factors such as participation in cultural practices and through the use of Sami language were probable protective factors that minimised mental health problems for a sample group of 516 Sami youth from Arctic Norway. Similarly, the LaFromboise, Hoyt, Oliver and Whitbecks (2006) study concluded that enculturation - which was measured by the participation in traditional activities, identifying with Native American Indian culture and being involved with traditional spirituality - was the strongest predictor for resilience for 212 Native American adolescents in the Upper Midwest. Comparably, Stumblingbear-Riddle and Romans (2012) completed a similar study focusing on Native American adolescents from urban America and found that enculturation was the second strongest predictor for resilience with social support being the first.

While the context and demographics are different for the participants in this study, there was congruence with the theme in terms of the Australian literature, international

literature, and the current study which is that the Indigenous enculturation can be a positive contributor that enhances and improves the wellbeing of Indigenous populations.

6.2.6 Connection to Others

A final common theme that extended across of the participants' responses was that they drew personal strength through the connectivity to their families, language, culture, land, waters and communities. The core of this primary connection was articulated by some of the participants by the standing relationship they had with their family, community, ancestors and connection to their country. For many of the participants, the conceptualisation of Indigenous Australian flourishing hinged on a belief in the connectivity and balance of all things in life, which has its own generative life force and was a requirement to enable flourishing.

Fundamentally this enhanced and/or protected the health and wellbeing of the participants.

These findings were consistent with the Kilcullen et al. (2016) study, which pointed to connectedness to country, family and kinship, cultural knowledge, and strength of social networks as having a distinct contribution to the health and wellbeing. Findings were also consistent with the Sivak et al. (2019) study, where through the reactivation and use of traditional languages they identified an increase in the positive connections that 16 Indigenous Australian participants had with culture and families, which significantly enhanced their wellbeing. Additionally, the findings in this theme were congruent with findings from the Macedo et al. (2019) study, which included 400 Indigenous Australian school students, and found that positive ethnic, racial identity emersion, not only mitigated low levels of wellbeing as a result of experienced racism but was also an important strategy that supported resilience in Indigenous Australian children.

6.3 Validation, Limitations, and Generalisability of the Study

The validation of findings in this research project specifically related to the lived experiences of Indigenous Australians only as a distinct cultural group who share similar cultural beliefs, experiences of colonisation, and subsequent disadvantage. On this basis, non-Indigenous Australians have been excluded from this study.

All participants identified as Aboriginal Australians with lived experiences which provided insight into what Indigenous culture, identity and wellbeing meant to them. Further, they discussed their personal characteristics and practices that supported their ability to function and be effective in their lives. The lived experiences of the participants were captured in audio-recorded interviews, then typed transcriptions were made. Field observations and reflections of which individual interview descriptions were also made and thematical conclusions were drawn as closely as possible to textural descriptions provided by the participants which reinforce the interpretive phenomenological theoretical approach (Benner, 2008) that was used to undertake this study.

Whilst I conceptually engaged the use of IST (Nakata, 2007a) to design, engage with research participants more deeply and analyse the meanings in the data, in parallel I also engaged in the process of reflexivity (Agee, 2011) as I wrote and refined the findings to ensure that my presuppositions did not distort my interpretations of the lived experiences shared by the participants.

Despite these validations, the study also had several limitations. First, as is typical in qualitative studies, the sample size was small, comprising of only the lived experiences of 11 participants. Findings may not be representational of the larger Indigenous Australian population, which is approximately 725,000 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017). Second, participants represented a certain demographic. They were employed within higher education institutions, which are relatively sparse and privileged positions that are not representative of

the broader Indigenous Australian population in terms of employment. For example, in 2017, it was reported that only 1,331 Indigenous Australians were employed by an Australian University (Universities Australia, 2019). Third, in the data collection process, some interviews were in person, whereas others were conducted over the telephone. This limited my ability to conduct all of the interviews in a consistent phenomenological method, which recommends that the researcher should examine and reflect over the interview as a whole, which includes body movements and facial expressions in understanding the deeper meaning of the interview process (Usher, 2014).

6.4 Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the literature that I reviewed and the findings of this study, I recommend the need for increased studies into the strengths of Indigenous Australians. I suggest that future strengths-based studies should incorporate more holistic frameworks in their design. Further, that future frameworks should also consider the negative historical, legal, and political constructs that impact the health and wellbeing of Indigenous Australians.

The findings also make a modest contribution to the field of positive psychology by contributing to the discipline's sparse qualitative research into the strengths of Indigenous Australians. It can deepen the positive psychology field's understanding of how flourishing is understood by Indigenous Australians on the basis that current conceptualisations and models to operationalise flourishing are western-centric (Kern et al., 2019), which tend to centre positive psychology around the individual and not account for the complex social relationships which people live, which may extend to complex relationships with the natural and spiritual world, as is the case for many Indigenous populations from the world (Silburn et al., 2016). As positive psychology expands across the world into different cultures, philosophically the field should continue to evolve as a means to not impose western-centric

philosophical interpretations of what it means to flourish on culturally diverse populations, which may inadvertently cause harm (Kern et al., 2019).

The findings from this research contribute to the sparse research into the nature of Indigenous Australians flourishing and the collection of future progressive strengths-based studies such as the *Our Cultures Count, the Mayi Kuwayu Study* (Jones et al., 2018), and *The Development and validation of an Indigenous Quality of life and Wellbeing Index Study* (Research Data Australia, 2017). Both studies collectively seek to understand how Indigenous Australians conceptualise their wellbeing and develop culturally appropriate indicators to both measure, track, and inform future Indigenous health and wellbeing over a life course. The continuation of this work is of critical importance.

6.5 Moving Towards a Theory of Indigenous Australian Flourishing

A salient truth that intersected the lived experience of the participants in this study was that their Indigenous Australian culture provided them with a sense of freedom, safety, hope, dreaming and collective connectivity to an essence that was much larger than self. Further, a way of being was contained but not limited in the Indigenous Australian culture and identity and the various interpretations of what this means - where all things appeared to be possible from the lived experience of the Indigenous Australian worldview that was previously discussed.

Whilst Indigenous Australians are not a homogenous population; they do share similar epistemologies that brought an Indigenous Australian consciousness into existence, which are generally framed in the stories of creation and the subsequent lore to govern themselves and their resources. I suggest that as a result of colonisation there may be even more congruence across the spectrum of Indigenous Australian knowledges on the basis that much of what is known about traditional Indigenous Australian knowledge was interpreted and reproduced in the text and worldview of the Western colonisers. As a result of

colonisation and dispossession, many Indigenous Australians have been forced to draw from the same text and incorporate these understanding into their evolving cultural knowledge systems. Further, Indigenous Australians also share similar experiences of dispossession and oppression through the process of colonisation, and within the oppression collectively many Indigenous Australians have experienced similar levels of disadvantage, however, within this fraught conundrum it has also continued to forge and connect Indigenous Australians resisting identity for more than 231 years. Therefore, I suggest that a collective Indigenous Australian worldview could be theorised into existence and could be used as a mode of transformation for Indigenous Australians.

On this basis, I suggest that an important future direction is the development of an Indigenous Australian Flourishing Theory, which seeks to shift in Indigenous Australian consciousness that is underpinned by the connectivity of Indigenous Australians to their past, present and future which has the capacity to break through and exceed the temporal boundaries that have been imposed on Indigenous Australians. These boundaries extend to historical, legal, political, racial and social constructs (as discussed in Chapter 2) that have placed a low ceiling of expectation and limiting control over the capacity of Indigenous Australians to flourish in their lives.

Based on the literature examined from this study, and my lived experience as an Aboriginal Australian, I suggest that there has been an imposition of a bleak horizon of prosperity that has been forced onto Indigenous Australians from 1788, and it continues to be the same horizon that many Indigenous Australians unknowingly look up to, and back at when seeking to articulate a flourishing life, not only for themselves but also their communities. I suggest that Indigenous Australians must invoke and create their own worldview and in doing so bring forth their own horizon and decide at what point on the horizon they come from, are willing to sit and decide what prosperity chooses to abound here.

The need for such a theory is not about Indigenous Australians creating a worldview that isolates them from the rest of the world, as they very much form part of contemporary Australia. Instead, it bolsters their ability to deeply understand and engage the world under their own terms and conditions, further in ways of thinking and being that have not been created, imposed and controlled by the dominant power bases that exist in Australia.

6.6 Conclusion

Three major conclusions emerged from this study. First, there is a shared understanding of how Indigenous Australian wellbeing is conceptualised and engaged in building the capacity of the participants to flourish in life. These conceptualisations pointed to having core aspects in place to function well, as well as a holistic conceptualisation of what wellbeing and flourishing are. There was generally a collective belief that for flourishing to occur in the participants' lives, it requires the inclusivity of good physical and mental health, underpinned by the collective health and vitality of individual elements such as the mind, body, spirit and country, the totality of all resulting in the strongest state of flourishing in the lives of the participants.

Second, participants access an inventory of known non-Indigenous and Indigenous Australian personal characteristics to support their wellbeing. However, the subsequent beliefs and behaviours to enable them to function and be effective in their lives can be considered as uniquely Indigenous Australian on the premise the personal characteristics are actualised through an Indigenous Australian standpoint based on their own lived experience. Conversely, the engagement of some personal characteristics either created tension or were at conflict with the essence of their cultural beliefs and identity for some of the participants. For example, many of the participants explained that their culture and identity supported a state of being where they were in balance with their ancestors, family, community and country, which was relational and underpinned connectivity. A philosophical way of being that

appeared to be in opposition to a state of being when framed with prevalent personal qualities, (such work ethic, structured routines, drive and commitment, reliability - all which were required to attain power, and amass material things) required some of the participants to disconnect themselves from their cultural beliefs to varying degrees which negatively impacted their overall wellbeing.

Third, the practice of Indigenous Australian culture is central to the health and wellbeing of the participants. While the participants expressed their culture in different ways, they all deeply connected with a relational essence to a world that was much larger than themselves, a source from which they could draw strength, a way of being and doing that fundamentally shaped the way in which they both understood their place, and how they engaged in the world.

The collective lived experiences shared by the participants in the current study illuminated a group of Indigenous Australians, who presented themselves as a sovereign people, not because of legal doctrine or other forms of recognition, but rather on the premise of their belief in their Indigenous Australian culture where all things are possible for them and the future generations of Indigenous Australians to flourish. Their sovereignty stems from acts of daily struggle and successes in fighting for the betterment of their families and their people more broadly. Further, sovereignty also sits in the daily commitment of many of the participants to replenish and heal their fractured culture, ardently and without hesitation, in the belief that their Indigenous Australian culture and identity is a source that will continually sustain them to hold fast to a future horizon that shines the light of prosperity for all of their people.

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Appendix A Recruitment Email

Dear Staff member,

An Examination of Indigenous Australians Strengths at A Higher Education Institution

I am emailing you in my capacity as a graduate research student to invite you to participate in my research project that aims to understand the strengths of Indigenous Australians that enable them to feel good and function effectively (flourishing).

The study is open to all Indigenous Australians who are employed at the University of Melbourne. I would like to invite you to a single one-hour interview to explore your experiences and strengths that have enabled you to flourish in periods throughout your life.

The information provided in the interviews will be used to assist me in understanding the strengths, characteristics and virtues of Indigenous Australians as a means to inform future strength-based Indigenous social and emotional wellbeing policies and programs.

If you have an interest in contributing to the advancement of other Indigenous Australians wellbeing through the sharing of your experiences please carefully read the attached Plain Language Statement, and then complete short online contact and flourishing scale (INSERT LINK TO FORM). I will be notified that you have completed the form and will follow-up with to discuss a time to meet and conduct the interview.

If you have any questions about the study, then please contact me.

Thank you for your consideration,

Charles O'Leary

University of Melbourne Graduate Research Student

M: 0434679314

E: cboelary@studnet.unimelb.edu.au

Appendix B Plain Language Statement

An examination of Indigenous Australians Strengths in a Higher Education Institution

Thank you for considering participating in this research project. Below, we provide details on the purpose and process of the study, what you will be asked to do, potential risks and benefits, and contact information for additional details. Please take the time to read this information carefully. Please contact us at the numbers or email addresses below to clarify anything you don't understand or want to know more about. Your participation is voluntary.

What is this research about?

To understand what characteristics, behaviours, and beliefs are used by Indigenous Australians to enhance their wellbeing, and secondly to understand to what extent does the practise of Indigenous Australians culture enhance Indigenous Australian wellbeing?

What will I be asked to do?

Should you agree to participate, you will be required to complete a short survey, which asks a few demographic questions and several questions about your wellbeing across several domains. Then, you will be invited to attend an up to 60-minute interview to talk about your personal experiences, strengths and beliefs that have supported you in life. Your interview will be recorded on audio and transcribed for data analysis. After the interview, you will have the opportunity to review a typed version of the interview, and you are welcome to delete any parts that you do not want to be included.

What are the possible benefits?

There are no direct compensations or benefits of participating, but by participating in this project, you will be able to share your strength-based experiences that have helped you in life, helping to strengthen future Indigenous Australian social and emotional wellbeing policies and strategies in the future.

What are the possible risks?

Some participants could experience some discomfort as they recount some experiences that may relate to identity and 'lack' of wellbeing. You are welcome to skip any questions or end the interview if it becomes uncomfortable or causes any distress. You can determine if you wish to continue after a short break or on another occasion. You are free to leave the study if you are distressed and counselling support is available to you should you require it.

Do I have to take part?

No. Participation is completely voluntary. You are able to withdraw at any time.

Will I hear about the results of this project?

If you would like, we will provide you with a summary of the findings or a copy of the completed thesis.

What will happen to information about me?

The interview will be transcribed, all identifying information will be removed, and then your responses will be combined with others. We will identify themes that appear in the responses. Data will be stored electronically; computer files will be password protected and stored on a secure server in one drive. Files connecting participants names and codes will be stored separately from the data.

At the completion of the project, a summary of the key findings or, if you prefer, a copy of the thesis will be available to you.

The findings from this project may be used to inform a future framework to develop an Indigenous Australian grounded wellbeing theory.

The research data will be kept for a minimum of five years after the last publication arising from the data, according to University of Melbourne policy.

Are there any potential conflicts of interest?

Charles was previously employed by the University of Melbourne as a senior Indigenous Australian staff member. While Charles has now resigned, people who reported directly to Charles are excluded from the research.

Where can I get further information?

If you would like more information about the project, please contact the researcher's supervisors: Professor Elizabeth McKinley (03) 8344 3386 or Associate Professor Peggy Kern (03) 8344 3402

Who can I contact if I have any concerns about the project?

This research project has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of The University of Melbourne. If you have any concerns or complaints about the conduct of this research project, which you do not wish to discuss with the research team, you should contact the Manager, Human Research Ethics, Research Ethics and Integrity, University of Melbourne, VIC 3010. Tel: +61 3 8344 2073 or Email: HumanEthic-complaints@unimelb.edu.au All complaints will be treated confidentially.

In any correspondence please provide the name of the research team or the name and ethics ID number of the research project.

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Appendix C Online Survey

Name:

Contact number:

Contact email:

Preferred method of contact (email) or telephone:

HEW or Academic Level:

Length of employment at UoM:

Identify as Indigenous Australian YES or NO

FLOURISHING SCALE:

Below are 10 statements with which you may agree or disagree. Take a moment and read each of the following statements. Indicate the extent to which each statement describes you from a scale of 1-10. There are no right or wrong responses – we simply want to know how you feel.

0 = not like me

5= moderately like me

10= completely like me

- _____ I lead a purposeful and meaningful life
- _____ My social relationships are supportive and rewarding
- _____ I actively contribute to the happiness and well-being of others
- _____ I am competent and capable in the activities that are important to me
- _____ I am a good person and live a good life
- _____ I am optimistic about my future
- _____ People respect me
- _____ I am strong in my Indigenous Australian culture
- _____ My Indigenous Australian culture protects and bolsters me life

Appendix D Semi-Structured Interview questions

(Primary questions, with additional questions based on responses)

Interview Questions

The below questions will guide the in-depth semi-structured in-depth interviews:

1. What does wellbeing or flourishing mean to you?
2. What personal qualities/characteristics do you draw on to overcome adversity in your life?
3. What routines do you engage in that helps you maintain a sense of wellbeing in your life?
4. What does your Indigenous Australian culture mean to you?
5. How does your Indigenous Australian Indigeneity impact upon your wellbeing?
6. If you had one piece of advice to help other Indigenous Australians to flourish more in life, what would that be?

Appendix E Consent Form

Melbourne Graduate School of Education

Project: An Examination of Indigenous Australians Strengths at A Higher Education Institution

Please carefully read the following statements and sign below to indicate whether or not you agree to be a part of the study.

1. I consent to participate in this project, the details of which have been explained to me, and I have been provided with a written plain language statement to keep.
2. I understand that the purpose of this research is to investigate the strengths of Indigenous Australians who experience high levels of subjective wellbeing.
3. I understand that my participation in this project is for research purposes only.
4. I acknowledge that the possible effects of participating in this research project have been explained to my satisfaction.
5. In this project I will be available for an interview of up to 60 minutes.
6. I understand that my interview will be audio recorded. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from this project anytime without explanation or prejudice and to withdraw any unprocessed data that I have provided.
7. I understand that the data from this research will be securely stored at the University of Melbourne for a minimum of 5 years in accordance with the University's data storage policy.
8. I understand that data may be used for future research related to Indigenous Australian wellbeing studies.
9. I have been informed that the confidentiality of the information I provide will be safeguarded subject to any legal requirements; my data will be password protected and accessible only by the named researchers.
10. I understand that after I agree to this consent form, it will be retained by the researcher.

Yes, I agree to be a part of this study.

Yes, I would like a copy of my interview transcript.

Yes, I would like a report of the findings from this research.

Name: Signature: Date: