Learning ethics from an echidna¹: Embedding Indigenous knowledges at the core of ethical research practice

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Abstract
I am an Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander² (Koori³) researcher and am privileged to work at the Cultural Interface with Koori ontologies, epistemologies and axiologies within a Western academic paradigm. I deeply engage with my Koori ways of seeing and ways of knowing the world and those things sustain me as I navigate working in the Cultural Interface. However, I feel my Koori ontologies, epistemologies and axiologies are not often valued or understood as ways of being, knowing and doing within a Western academic space. This is particularly the case when I share a Yarn⁴ that I learned somewhere in my lifespan and apply it to teaching or research within a Western context. However, many of those Yarns are the foundation of my learning and knowledge, have inspired me and inform and guide my research. This article describes how Yarns learned through my own life have informed my development as a researcher and have guided the ethics, methodology and methods in my research. Throughout the article I will share several Yarns (in a written form) that I used as part of my doctoral research methodology, as I Yarned with Team Members,⁵ about navigating research ethics, about establishing my own research methodology and about how I ensure respectful research practice founded on Indigenous knowledges.

Keywords
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, indigenous research, ethics, methods, methodology, yarning, indigenous methodology, first nations, research ethics

Locating myself in this article
It is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander protocol to position yourself within a relationship or place, and for this article I will write a Yarn to do this. When Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people meet each other the first thing we do is ask questions like ‘Who is your mob (family/community)?’ or ‘Where are you from?’ These questions are the bedrock of cultural identity and of the relationships you build with others. Those questions locate you for others by connecting you to family, community, Country. Those questions build relationships. This Yarn will position me within this article as a Koori woman and a Koori researcher (Fredericks, 2003, 2013; Moreton-Robinson, 2003; Moreton-Robinson, 2004a, 2004b). As a Koori researcher I feel privileged to have been educated both by my Aboriginal cultural education and my Western academic education. My introductory Yarn brings to this article my Koori knowledges and lived experiences in a way that has helped me to reflect both of my ‘ways’ of learning.

My introductory Yarn
I am Michelle Dickson. My family are from Ngarigo lands (in the Snowy Mountains region in New South Wales, Australia) and Darkinjung lands (on the Central Coast of New South Wales, Australia). Sadly, like many of my Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander friends and colleagues, both sides of...
my family suffered the impact of what is now referred to as The Stolen Generation (Wilkie, 1997). Removing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families and communities was made official under various government laws and policies in Australia until 1969. I was born in 1967, so this was still happening in my own lifetime. Generations of children were taken away by governments, welfare and church organisations and either raised in institutions or fostered to non-Indigenous Australian people.

Connecting to culture has been a lifeline in my family and while such a connection is important it has not always been easy. However, it is my own journey that I can speak of here. I was born on Cammeraygal lands (north of the harbour in Sydney, New South Wales, Australia) and for much of my life I have lived and worked on the lands of the Eora nation in Sydney. I have four (grown up) children of my own and I have many nieces and nephews. I am a senior lecturer in the University of Sydney’s Sydney School of Public Health.

I am a Koori woman who has learnt through listening to family stories and Yarns, who has learned through life experiences and through the life experiences of my family members, and for all these positive and negative experiences I am thankful.

As I have introduced myself as a Koori person, so too must I introduce myself in the relationship I have with research. I currently work with non-dominant ways of doing research within an academy which (mostly) places a higher value on Western ways of doing research. As I teach about or do research I draw upon the Western policies and protocols that have been developed to specifically guide ethical research in an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander context (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2012; National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), 2018a, 2018b), and I do so because these are important protocols, developed to provide advice about engaging in ethical research with Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The six core values (spirit and integrity, cultural continuity, equity, reciprocity, respect, and responsibility) that frame Australia’s National Health and Medical Research Council’s (AHMRC) guide for ethical research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and communities (NHMRC, 2018a) specifically resonate for me as a Koori researcher. They seek to uphold respecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander values, ensure ethical best practice research that is relevant to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander priorities and encourage the development of authentic relationships in research. (NHMRC, 2018a: 3)

However, also important to me as a Koori researcher is the ethical research practice I have developed through engaging with lived experiences and knowledges of First Nations Peoples, including my own (Smith, 2006). Those lived experiences, knowledges and voices form important counter-narratives to challenge the dominant discourse in academic, or other, spaces (Smith, 2006) and have value and importance to other First Nations Peoples (Smith et al., 2011: 300). While I work at the Cultural Interface (Nakata, 1997), I use the concept of counter narratives in my research as I uphold ethics and develop methodology and methods. In addition to aligning my research to published ethical research guidelines I also focus on Koori ways of thinking, being, knowing and doing and bring those counter narratives into my research through my research ethics, methodologies and methods.

Using Yarning as a research method

As a Koori scholar I have long utilised forms of Yarning (Bessarab and Ng’andu, 2010; Dickson, 2018; Geia et al., 2013; Jennings et al., 2014; Leeson et al., 2016; Nagel et al., 2012; Walker et al., 2014) as a research method and have further developed PhotoYarning (Dickson, 2018), as a new, culturally infused visual research method. As a Koori woman I connect to the cultural traditions of learning through stories, conversations, or Yarns. I grew up listening, Yarning, learning, making meaning from a Yarn even when the meaning might not have always been explicitly named. Throughout my life I have heard and learnt from some Yarns that have helped me to understand some of the challenges I faced as a researcher doing my doctoral research. As I faced questions about ethics, for example, I remembered a Yarn once told to me that taught me about making good choices, doing no harm. I could apply that learning to what I was facing in my research. I could draw on earlier Koori learning as a way of making sense and finding meaning in the research I was doing in an ethical manner.

In my doctoral study the Yarn below, A Yarn about learning from Country, and doing no harm (good ethics), helped me to explain to research Team Members how I navigated parts of the research ‘system’, like obtaining ethical approval from the University ethics committee. They had also asked me how I, as a Koori researcher, find my way in research, interested in how I conduct research in a respectful and meaningful way. A Yarn about learning from Country, and doing no harm (good ethics), draws on some important learnings from early in my life and from learning I experienced as a PhD student. It is a Yarn about connecting with Country, my cultural landscape filled with knowledge, guidelines, support and warnings. It describes how I go to Country (return to my cultural lands) when I need to reframe some thinking, be inspired or guided, or feel the need for a refresh and revitalisation. In this Yarn I found teachings about feeling strong in the choices I was making as a researcher, particularly about doing no harm and maintaining ethical practices:

A Yarn about learning from Country, and doing no harm (good ethics)

The image of an echidna engraved in the aging sandstone around Sydney reminds me of a whole story, a story that replays in my head in a voice that now lives far away, a voice I no longer hear anywhere other than in my head.⁶ That voice told me stories
that made me think, learn, reflect, engage, question, evaluate. That voice used a connection to Country as an important link between a cultural landscape and life lessons. Importantly those stories made sense and were meaningful; because of that they stay with me. As a child the stories made me think carefully about where I walked in the bush, about caring for Country and people. As a child I could talk about how ‘good’ I felt when I was in Country. As an adult I still feel all of those things but those stories and being connected to Country also help me work through issues at work and in research that often feel big and unsolvable. The stories have also helped me as a PhD student; they have helped me to understand and learn about research as I connect to a ‘place’ within my cultural landscape.

The echidna –spines on the outside, able to burrow into earth and leaves to find safety from the outside world. She is able to curl up and use the spines to protect herself. Protection-that’s the echidna. I was told that I need to remember three things when I see an engraving of an echidna on sandstone outcrops all over Sydney (my home now), or when I am back in Country. First, stop and notice it, and think about protection of self. Am I taking care of myself? How do I do that? Why is taking care so important? Stop. Think. Plan. Move on with care.7

Second, tread lightly. Look all around because echidnas can hide really well, so really look hard before you take the next step. Do no harm. Be aware of each step you take.

Third, remember that, in many places, engravings of echidnas signal that a Women’s Place is close by. Observe that sign. Look around your environment. Boys and men also need to notice that sign, know how to read it and act responsibly. Not every man or boy will know how to read that sign, so it is important to share that information in a meaningful way. Disseminate knowledge wisely and in ways that will be understood. For women and girls, the same sign means a very different thing—it means ‘walk on’, ‘feel cared for’, ‘feel nurtured’, ‘be empowered by the knowledge of the place’. Oldest women walk first, treading the path for the younger who can learn where to step as they follow. Follow protocols. Same sign, different meanings. Know context and communicate with meaning.8

And then, if an echidna guides you into a space that also shows you engraved footprints, well, smile, as you are walking towards a sacred space. Women have long walked that track before you, in another time. Follow those footprints; learn from where their path takes you. And with every step know that there is learning, and support and wisdom. But you must keep your heart and mind open—while your steps might look like they are heading in the same direction as the steps that were taken before you, there is always a difference.

In Country I heard the voice and the story and understood that the story also helped me understand some of the challenges I was facing as a PhD student particularly about my methods and methodology. Learning and knowledge, like the engraved steps, are different for us all. Some things provide a process, a means to an end (like the footsteps that lead to a sacred place) but how we walk those steps is entirely up to us. Make good choices about the way you step forward (choose your methods wisely), and about how you walk towards the sacred space (your methodology). And be sure of why you are taking those steps and be strong in your choice of direction.

Just as the echidna is set in stone to look after special places, those special places will also teach and look after you. Those stories, the voice and those places that helped me feel strong and make good choices as a child and young woman now also helped me feel strong in my choice of methodology and of research methods. (Dickson, 2018)

Yarns, like the one above, help me juggle the personal and professional, help me to learn and understand research, support me as I build relationships with other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through research. Yarns are the glue that help me cement research together; as a Koori woman, they guide my ethical research practice and align that practice with my engagement with the Western ethical research guidelines familiar to my academic profession. That Yarn, A Yarn about learning from Country, and doing no harm (good ethics), describes the AHMRC’s six core values perfectly, spirit and integrity, cultural continuity, equity, reciprocity, respect, and responsibility (NHMRC, 2018a) and uses Koori knowledge about an echidna to describe and teach the concept ethical research practice.

I also learnt about doing respectful research through another Yarn, shared by a family member who was reminding me of an important cultural practice:

A Yarn about respectful and responsible practice in research

‘Tell me, Michelle, what do you look for when you walk in the bush?’ I replied, saying that sometimes I was just looking for a peaceful place to visit but other times I was looking for wisdom or some guidance from the place.

‘Yes, good. Either way you want something, right? So what do you do when you walk up to that place – y’know, before you walk right in?’ I replied, describing the process I had been taught—make some quiet noises, then make a few louder noises to warn of my arrival. Pick up a stone or two and gently toss them in the path before me.

‘Yes, you ask for a welcome into that space. You are the visitor and you are asking for the privilege of spending time, learning something. And how do you leave? What do you do?’ I replied, telling how I always paused and remembered where that knowledge or peace had come from, embedding in my mind and thoughts and future actions the origins of that moment of peace or bit of knowledge I had gained.

‘And when you speak of the peace you found, or the thing you learnt in that space? When you tell others? How do you do that?’ I replied—I always praise that place first, and the people who have been there before me and created the peace and knowledge that I found there. I speak of their peace and their knowledge that they shared with me.

And with that, my relative just nodded and smiled. (Dickson, 2018)
I shared this Yarn with Team Members as we were talking about our individual experiences of research as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples; we spoke about the good, the bad and the ugly of research. Team Members asked me how I came to ‘do’ research the way I was doing it. The above Yarn provided me with an opportunity to explain how I learnt about respectful practice in research by being reminded of importance cultural practices that were built upon working with respect, integrity and responsibility. Once again, values that also appear in Western guidelines for ethical research (NHMRC, 2018a).

Key features of my research methodology are reciprocity and relationship building; an example of this is using the term Team Members, rather than research participants and designing a methodology that included Team Members throughout the research lifespan, not just at the point of data collection (Dickson, 2018). While the inclusion of Team Members throughout my doctoral research did present some initial challenges for the ethics committees, their role throughout remained pivotal and essential to ensure my own ethical and cultural engagement with research.

In fact, I faced a number of challenges as I gained human ethics research committee (HREC) approval for my PhD research, including the committee’s concerns over how I proposed to (conversationally and formally) Yarn with potential Team Members to explain the research so that they could choose to opt in (or not). I argued that Yarning with them was respectful practice and argued that it also followed existing Western academic protocols of providing contact details for interested parties to use to seek further information; I was calling this process Yarning. Another concern was over my proposal that Team Members could opt for anonymity or not, respecting that they might be sharing cultural information that they wished to be aligned and connected with at a personal (not de-identified) level, as per cultural protocol. The doctoral HREC approval process was neither smooth nor short but it provided me with rich lessons. I reflected on that process and recorded reflections in my research journal (Dickson, 2017).

At the core of my doctoral methodology were reciprocity, relationship building and nurturing; and all require effort, time and commitment. Yarning, both as a cultural practice and a research method, allowed me to connect with people, build relationships in the research, and practice important and valued reciprocity. I used a Yarn to explain to research Team Members why Yarning itself was so integral to my research methodology:

**A Yarn about the importance of taking time; relationships are important (even in research!)**

My grandmothers spoke more than my grandfathers, not that they always had more to say, they just said things using words, using Yarns. Those Yarns helped me define and understand my own identity and place in life.

One of my grandmothers Yarned about teaching her kids to play hide and seek when certain officials appeared knocking at her door, just in case they were at risk of removal. I only understood that because I had listened and Yarned with her about what came before. From those Yarns I learnt much about what was meaningful to her. She chose to hide what was most important to her, her children, and did so because of her experiences of the removal of the paler skinned children in her family and community. Listening to her Yarns about wanting to protect her pale-skinned Aboriginal children helped me to understand her deep sense of identity and listening to her reasons helped me understand what she thought and why. I didn’t know it at the time but that Yarning was formative, it was teaching me excellent skills in listening, asking questions and critical reflection. All of these things helped form and support my research methodology.

So, at the core of my research you will most often find the sharing of a Yarn or two, or as many as possible! Despite having been educated in a Western scientific research paradigm that encouraged a researcher to position themselves in an objective place within their research, I value the element of sharing in my research. Despite what I was taught in Quantitative Research 101 many years ago about objectivity I realised that what was valuable to me in my growth as a researcher was the trust and value I place on subjectivity. I have learnt that what some call subjective, I call engagement and involvement – both key values in any good research relationship.

I sat in many lectures that aimed to teach me how to be objective as a student researcher. And I understood what they were teaching me, and why. It just didn’t sit well with me, didn’t match the way I viewed the world. I struggled through many a clinical prac, failed several research designs and trial studies and constantly had questions about why we needed to stay one step away from the research we were doing. I struggled, big time. I allowed myself to stay in that struggle zone for the best part of three years. Research fascinated me and I wanted to have it in my future in some shape, so I kept trying very hard to learn a way of thinking and being and doing that was not mine.

The words of my grandmother give me a complete sense of what I value in my own research- sharing time with people and really listening to what they have to say. Those words even helped me to come to understand my preference for qualitative research methods, over quantitative methodologies. For a period in time I worked in a department that highly valued quantitative research, and positioned anything quantitative as existing on a blurry fringe. I faced much pressure to focus on quantitative research, to the point that I felt I might not progress in my academic career if I did not embrace quantitative research methods. I felt like an imposter.

Don’t get me wrong, I had done my time on research that used quantitative methods but I felt a deep sense of something missing in that research-it was the fact that I didn’t have a chance to ‘sit and have a cuppa’ and share stories. I really was not turned on by the results; I wanted research relationships with people, not numbers.
I have always experienced a deep sense of involvement with my work in the health sector, my teaching, my community. At the core of all of these things were people-building relationships. Through honouring relationships with people, and engaging deeply in Yarning with those people, I have learnt how to appreciate difference and similarity. I have learnt that a group of people might experience the same event but it might have different meaning and impact for each member in group. Imagine what I would have missed if I did not sit and Yarn and listen-no objective survey could have ever helped me to achieve the level of understanding I now have of my Grandma’s life, her thoughts and her lived experiences. My early learning and valuing of relationship building positioned me well to be able to make decisions about ‘how’ I engage in research.

I am thankful for that learning. (Dickson, 2018)

Conclusion

Yarning about echidnas taught me about research ethics

Indigenous knowledges are passed down through cultural practices that validate those knowledges (Sherwood, 2010). In my research, I use Yarning as an Indigenous research method as it validates, reafirms and renews (Smallcombe et al., 2007) my Koori knowledge. As a Koori woman and researcher I have lived experiences and knowledge. Following the work of other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers, for example (Fredericks, 2003; Martin and Mirraboopa, 2003; Moreton-Robinson, 2004a, 2004b; Sherwood, 2010), I bring that knowledge and lived experience to the research context through the Yarns I share in my research, and in this article. Yarns about walking carefully in the Australian bush, Yarns about taking time to listen and Yarns about how an echidna protects herself all have given me ethical guidance and research knowledge, and encouraged me to engage and build important research relationships through reciprocity.

Proudly, I have learnt about research ethics and good research practice both through the Yarns shared over my lifetime and through current Western guidelines for ethical research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities. I believe paying attention to both ethical guidelines makes me a good Koori researcher. Kahakalau (2004: 19–20) reminds me of how it is important, as I research and work in the Cultural Interface, to produce research that is ‘accountable to our indigenous community’ and also accountable to Western academia and appreciated as ‘sophisticated and scholarly to convince academia that they are of equal scope and breadth as established Western ways of research’.

Learning ethics from an echidna is not something reserved just for me, or just for other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Indigenous knowledges, like the Yarn about ethics and the echidna, are very present and available to our wider research community, they just need to be listened to, and valued, as a source of Indigenous knowledge.

My Yarns do not appear in current Western guidelines for ethical conduct of research, but they align with the core values highlighted in those guiding documents, and in themselves, are examples of ethical guidelines for research.

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Notes

1. An echidna is a monotreme, an egg-laying mammal found in Australia. The echidna also has cultural significance to the author.
2. Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are the original inhabitants and custodians of the land now known as Australia.
3. As an Aboriginal woman from New South Wales I call myself Koori.
4. For many Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples Yarning is part of everyday life. It is a verbal way to share information, ideas and knowledge. The term Yarning might be used to describe a casual conversation or it might be used to describe a more formal process of knowledge exchange. Yarning, in many forms, plays a central role in this article and will later be explained in more detail. The Yarns shared in this article reflect my personal lived experiences and knowledges and are not intended to be representative of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
5. Team Members is the term I use represents the true engagement between me (‘researcher’) and Team Members (‘research participants’)
6. I refer to voice of an Elder who is no longer living on earth. As a child the voice was often that of my grandmother, who taught me many life lessons, reminding me that there were always messages to hear and lessons to learn through listening and noticing. As an adult I also learnt from an Elder who knew much about the sandstone engravings around the outcrops of rocks across Sydney, New South Wales, Australia. He shared his wisdom about the echidna teachings as did his wife, who taught me the more gender-based information about the echidna and my own cultural learning. That knowledge was shared woman to woman and cannot be shared in a public way.
7. This echidna knowledge is specific to my own cultural context as it is connected to a way of teaching and learning about taking time, self-care, deep thinking and planning and strategy.
learnt that the echidna, for me, is a cultural signpost; when I see an echidna (or an engraving of one on sandstone outcrops) I am reminded of the teachings: ‘Stop. Think. Plan. Move on with care’, just like an echidna.

8. This is appropriate knowledge to share publicly. For me, culturally, the echidna teachings reach into a deeper level of personal learning that I was privileged to learn, from woman to woman. However, the public echidna teachings, learnt through my own cultural spaces, are well positioned to remind us all of some important lessons for research and research ethics, as described in this Yarn.

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