Suicide and desert men: the power and protection of *kanyirninpa* (holding)

Brian McCoy

Objective: *Fred Myers described kanyirninpa (holding) as a deeply embedded value for desert Aboriginal people. He explained it as authority with nurturance where older people 'grew up' and protected younger people. Can a cultural understanding of kanyirninpa provide any insight or response to the high rates of suicide among young Aboriginal men today?*

Method: *This paper draws on qualitative health research that was conducted among desert communities in the southeast Kimberley region of Western Australia between 2001 and 2004. The research was primarily with men and explored cultural understandings of the particular male expressions and praxis of kanyirninpa. The research also occurred at a time when the first suicides of young men, who had grown up within this desert region, were taking place.*

Results: *Research showed that the fracture of kanyirninpa over recent generations has seriously affected key social processes and generational relationships within desert society. This wounding has implications for men's health and can provide an understanding as to why young men attempt self-harm and suicide. However, the social expression of kanyirninpa can also sustain important meanings for young men as they grow up. It can protect them from high-risk behaviour and self-harm.*

Conclusions: *While the experience of suicide continues to deeply wound Aboriginal families and communities, desert people's efforts to sustain and express kanyirninpa offers hope. This is a social process and relationship that can help inform health policy and practice in response to self-harm, suicide ideation and behaviour, particularly for young Aboriginal men.*

Key words: *Aboriginal health, Aboriginal men's health, holding, suicide.*

In June 2006 I attended a large bush gathering of Aboriginal men that was held away from their desert community. At this meeting, a number of older and younger men shared what they saw as key health issues affecting them. After some discussion had occurred, one young man stepped forward and spoke about the death of his younger brother. He had committed suicide nearly 3 years before. He shared his feelings of loss and also expressed his concern about other young men. "What caused the death of this young man and what will prevent further deaths in the future?" he asked. This paper is an attempt to respond to that young man's feeling of loss and anxiety and his question about the health of other young Aboriginal men.

In responding to his concern and challenge, I am also responding to other and more recent challenges in our understanding of this relatively recent and tragic phenomenon. John Cutcliffe, in the context of suicide among First-Nation people in Canada, has argued for an interpretative approach to complement quantitative and biomedical methods. He proposed that a more qualitative research approach was needed – an approach that allowed

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the voice of the suicidal First-Nation person to be heard.[1] Colin Tatz, within an Australian context, has argued in *Aboriginal Suicide is Different* that suicide needs to be understood within a distinctive cultural and social context.[2] Despite criticisms of his approach, one that moves away from biomedical and mental health understandings, we might also ask: 'is Aboriginal suicide different?'. Can we also understand suicide within Australia in the light of recent research by Michael Chandler and others who have linked lower suicide rates ('self-continuity') with cultural continuity among Native North Americans?[3–5] Finally, why does it affect young Aboriginal males in particular?

The approach of this paper is to offer one understanding of Aboriginal male behaviour through the particular desert and cultural lens of *kanyirninpa* (*holding*). This perspective will approach suicide within a particular social, historical and cultural context. It will offer an explanation as to how some young men have become particularly at risk for self-harm. Vulnerability through personal isolation is exposed, especially when the person becomes involved in close personal relationships that come under strain, and when relational and social forces intersect and ignite under the influence of drugs. This paper does not attempt to cover the complexity around Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal suicide, its gendered, social, emotional and geographical differences. Rather, it seeks to focus on young Aboriginal men, and in particular desert men, and explore how some of them have become at-risk for suicide.

SUICIDE IN INDIGENOUS POPULATIONS

As Ernest Hunter has described, suicide among Aboriginal communities in Australia has become a serious and public health issue in a little more than two decades.[6–8] In 2004 the proportion of such deaths was nearly three times that found in the non-Aboriginal population.[9] (These figures apply to records taken only in South Australia, Western Australia, New South Wales, Queensland and the Northern Territory.) While suicide has not affected all Aboriginal communities, or all in the same way, it has particularly affected young Aboriginal men. Within the 15–24-year-old age group of men, the Aboriginal age-specific rate of suicide has been more than four times the corresponding age-specific rate for all Australian males.[10]

In Western Australia, a total of 264 Aboriginal people completed suicide between 1986 and 2005. Not only did the rate of male suicides increase over this period of time, but also the rate nearly doubled that of non-Aboriginal males in the state (39.6 vs. 20.2 per 100 000).[11]

What has become evident is that not only have large numbers of Aboriginal men died by suicide, and not only have there been clusters of deaths around similar times and places, but also the average age of those who have died has been much less than other Australian males who have committed suicide.[12] While adolescent suicide has been described as 'uncommon' in the general Australian community,[13] the rate of suicide among Aboriginal males, 15–19 years, is more than three times the rate of other males in the same age group in Western Australia.[14] The difference is greatest for this age group than for any other age group.[14]

Similarly, in North America, Native American communities have also experienced a generally higher rate of suicide than non-Native populations, but with considerable regional and tribal differences.[15]

SUICIDE IN THE AUSTRALIAN DESERT REGION

The context for this paper is set within the Western Desert of the southeast Kimberley. Between August 2002 and September 2003 three young men committed suicide in two communities within the Kutjungka region. While community members knew of other men who had taken their lives (these had been partners for some of the women), this was the first experience of people committing suicide who had grown up as part of the families and communities of the region. These deaths continue to remain sensitive issues within the region. Hence, while their deaths provide the reason for this paper, it will not identify the young men by name or the particular details of each suicidal event.

All three young men had been petrol sniffers at one time, and traces of petrol were found in two at the time of their deaths. Two had experienced quite significant parental absences in their lives, particularly of their fathers. One had stabbed himself in his thigh 4 months before his death. Another had been hospitalized under the Mental Health Act the year before he died. In all three deceased, mixed amounts of the drugs, petrol, marijuana and alcohol were found. While it is not possible to generalize from these deaths, what occurred before and after the time of their deaths merits noting.

In the 3 months prior to the last death, and in the several months that followed, a number of young people, male and female, and mostly involved in petrol sniffing, attempted suicide.[16] While none of these proved successful, they created severe anxiety and concern among family, health and community staff. One of the parents was quoted as saying: "They are like mice. We go and get them back from sniffing and they get out straight away, again".[16] Fortunately, this very intense period of high-risk behaviour has not been repeated since, but it did suggest, for some community staff, a causal link between petrol sniffing and suicide. What it further highlighted, as will be discussed later, was an understanding that petrol sniffing and suicide behaviour expressed the isolation and loneliness being experienced by some young people. As one adult

described petrol sniffers in the region: "They think they are not being loved much by their parents and their relations".[17] Both petrol sniffing and suicide, at least to some family members, revealed clear signs of cultural discontinuity. Younger people remained personally and socially separated from older relations, and these older people felt helpless to watch over, nurture and protect those who were younger.

CULTURAL UNDERSTANDINGS OF *KANYIRNINPA*

Theories to explain suicide tend to emphasize either the psychodynamic processes that work within the individual person, the social context for such behaviour, or both. Risk factors have been identified as immediate (the person's mental state), precipitating circumstances (stress events), or both. In addition, there can be longer term factors that have a cumulative effect from early childhood and through life.[2,18–20]

The research that was done in the Kutjungka region sought to understand the social processes and intergenerational relationships that have been, and continue to be, most important for people's life and health – and, in this case, for men in particular. It sought to understand how such relationships and processes have been severely affected over recent decades, and how they influence men's health today.

When Fred Myers explored the social nature and culture of the Pintupi people of the Western Desert in the 1970s, he described a deeply embedded value, *kanyirninpa*, often translated into English by the word 'holding'.[21] He argued that *kanyirninpa* was a 'dominant symbol' where authority was linked with nurturance, and where older generations assumed the responsibility to care for and look after younger people. *Kanyirninpa* supported an extensive range of social relationships that linked different generations and allowed the social reproduction of desert society to occur. At ceremony time, when young men were being initiated, the presence and power of a gendered form of *kanyirninpa* was most clearly revealed. Important cosmic meanings were mediated through older to younger men. Significant religious, social and personal connections to land, family and ancestral dreaming were reinforced through social and physical activity. It was through these annual ceremonies, as boys became men, that desert society was renewed, but it was also at these times that critical relationships between generations of men were identified, developed and strengthened.

What Myers' research revealed was that the nature of *kanyirninpa* changed when desert boys became men. Women, who had been the primary 'holders' of their children, now handed over their boys for the men to 'hold'. Responsibility fell upon the older men to assume a new and sustaining holding relationship with these younger men. While *kanyirninpa* reinforced desert society with an authority that nurtured and grew up young people, it also provided a critically valued relationship for men across and within generations. At the same time, it also provided a social restraint upon the extremes of individual autonomy and relatedness. The transition of young men, often in their early adolescence years, onto new social pathways to adulthood was fully and publicly endorsed by older people. Such new-found autonomy, now held in tension with the demands of kinship and family relationships, allowed young men to explore being adult within the larger male and social desert context. It also provided a new context of risk.

Colonial, mission and historical forces have worked to influence and re-shape that critically important relationship that desert men have shared over many generations. Pat Dodson, who contributed towards this research, noted that the present generations of older and younger men are experiencing a powerful form of separation, similar to the experience of people finding themselves separated by swollen and fast-moving rivers during the summer wet season.[22] In this metaphor, Dodson described older men as finding themselves on one side of the river, the younger men on the other side. The older men know they have important knowledge to give the younger men; the younger men know that the older group have something important to offer them. However, this large, powerful river continues to separate them and prevent them coming together.

In a similar vein, a group of young men in their early 20s painted their experience of growing up in the desert. Their work was titled, *Crossways*.[23] In this painting, they described their social pathway that lay between their community on one side and the cemetery on the other. Stark comparisons between life and death were portrayed. As they travelled this 'pathway' they came to a roundabout where they could choose to go left or right. The left path was one that most young men have used in their recent past as they have explored their teenage lives. Music, petrol sniffing, alcohol, football, relationships with young women and prison have formed important elements of that experience. This was a pathway involving high risk and danger. They knew of young men who had been injured and died on that road. In time, they hoped, they would move back to the roundabout and take the other path, where they would be able to settle down with a wife and have children. However, the question they asked was: where are the men who will help us and accompany us from this path of risk and danger to the alternative path? Who will 'hold' us?

THE LACK OF 'HOLDING'

Whatever the colonial history and mission experience of desert people, *kanyirninpa* continues to provide an important social process that supports young men becoming adults. Research showed that men continue

to value its gendered expression. Different signs of its contemporary expression were seen in a range of male behaviour that included Australian Rules football, petrol sniffing and prison. At the same time, research also showed that where it was missing from a person's life experience, it exposed very particular personal and social vulnerabilities. This is not to reify the 'holding' relationship or attempt to quantify it. Nor is it to privilege it over the relationship young women share with their older female relations. However, it is to suggest that where this relationship has not been provided by adults, and where that relationship has not been sustained between older and younger men, some young men can become vulnerable to self-harm, particularly when they experience feeling alone, isolated or separated.

Petrol sniffing can place young people at further risk because its context takes them outside the support of social and family relationships. While sniffing can offer them the opportunity to share new peer relationships, in order to sniff they need to move outside a wide range of family, kinship and social networks. As this happens, adults can be heard to say, "they're missing something in their lives".[24] They interpret sniffing as a consequence of, and response to, a young person's lack of a 'holding' relationship. They contrast the lack of authority and responsibility of older people to care for and protect those who are younger, against the autonomy and irresponsibility of those who are younger.

Petrol sniffing can lead to self-harm and suicide, because sniffing behaviour increases the possibilities and dangers of an intense separation from key others. As it threatens community harmony and the perception of close family relatedness across generations, it also challenges the possibilities and effectiveness of *kanyirninpa*. As it seeks to offer young people a new pathway of autonomy, it can place them at great risk of self-harm if their isolation becomes self-evident. If a relationship crisis develops, the experience of feeling isolated only increases. The consumption of drugs at such a time further adds to that feeling of aloneness and the possibility of self-harm. As Hunter has noted: "Like the bottle, the alcohol-exalted self is acutely fragile, and unstable. Its shattered shards are painful and perilous – and cut deep".[25] Suicide can become for some young men, not the ultimate control over their body, but the personal embodiment of a social and deeply experienced painful disconnection from all others.

The personal transformation for young men into adulthood does not occur as seamlessly, or as easily, as it did in the past. In part, this is due to the absence of older men who are needed to provide that essential relationship that helps young men to bridge adolescence into adulthood. It is also due to the lack of ceremonies, social and recreational events where men move and act together across kin, communities and generations. In addition, a significant number of the older men have prematurely died or are in prison, drinking in town, or living away from their young sons or male relations.

CONCLUSIONS

The desert value of *kanyirninpa*, especially as it is expressed across generations of men, offers one form of protection against that relational and social isolation often noted at the time of self-harm. As a social process, *kanyirninpa* protects young men because it is reflected in multiple and supporting relationships across and within generations. This can be particularly valuable for those who spend their teenage years, and sometimes beyond, exploring a high-risk pathway of autonomy. As the painting *Crossways* revealed, young desert men can enter upon a highly perilous and dangerous pathway at a very young age. This is a social pathway set within a particular cultural context for understanding the self-harm that can occur among young Aboriginal men. This is not to deny other explanations of suicide, nor other factors involved in the desert experience, but to offer a social, gendered and culturally based approach that explains how some young men can come to great risk for self-harm.

What the social process of *kanyirninpa* reveals, as does also the research performed by Chandler[3–4] with Native North Americans, is an important link between self-continuity and cultural continuity. While Chandler identified six social and measurable factors around individual and social continuity (land claims, self-government, education, police and fire protection services, health services and cultural facilities), the gendered and generational relationship expressed as *kanyirninpa* remains to be as clearly measurable.

However, what remains an important health issue for young desert men is the need to identify the very particular and different ways in which this generational relationship between older and younger men has and can be experienced. It is also important to identify what has been critical to the wounding of that relationship. What was revealed in the desert research was that young men continue to seek that relationship in historically recent, and sometimes creative, contemporary ways. Sport, such as football, offers one such social context as it brings men together, young and old, within a socially enjoyable, energetic and public space.

At the same time, the image of the fast-running swollen river, as offered by Pat Dodson, suggests both the difficulty and danger in attempting to bring together men who, for some years, have experienced being separated from others. However, to continue with his metaphor of the summer rivers, and as many northern and remote communities have found, crossing such rivers is not impossible. New bridges have been constructed, alternative roads and crossings have

been found, and sometimes people have simply taken the initiative and swum across. One temptation is to wait for the rivers to go down. However, as with the question posed by the young man at last year's bush meeting, simply waiting for suicide rates among Aboriginal communities to subside is not a luxury we can presently afford.

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