Indigenous Country as a context for mental and physical health: Yarning with the Nukunu Community

Daria Trzepacz
Bernard Guerin
Jared Thomas
University of South Australia

It is often mentioned that Australian Indigenous people[1] have a strong attachment to their Country that leads to better health outcomes, but it is unclear how these are concretely linked. Nukunu leaders and community members aged between 30-60 years (six men, four women), were asked in focus groups and interviews about their attachment to Country. The main themes that emerged suggested that: Their country brings Nukunu an identity and sense of belonging; that it was a place with nurturing qualities; people felt unhappy and unfulfilled away from their land; people returned to country to recover from illness; and activities conducted on country such as natural resource management provided Nukunu with group cohesiveness and empowerment. The implications of findings suggest Nukunu people should return to Country when experiencing any illness, as it has clear benefits to psychosocial wellbeing. Some suggested pathways from being on Country to better physical and mental health are presented. Further research should investigate how Indigenous attachment to Country can be better incorporated into mental health practices.

It has long been reported anecdotally that there are strong and positive relationships between Indigenous people and their Country (Bishop, Vicary, Mitchell, & Pearson, 2012; Dwyer, 2012). This is now reflected in a small number of research studies across diverse disciplines, but there is not a great deal of systematically collected material. Further, much of what is known is collected in a specific context with a specific Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander group, but the findings are then generalised across all contexts and groups, but other communities are yet to be tested. The aim of this research was to informally talk with one specific group to (a) gain some more concrete ideas of what Country means, and the contexts by which Country is associated with better health outcomes, and (b) gauge the diversity rather than automatically assume generality.

The connections that have been found to Country vary according to the literature searched, and references for these are detailed below. There are many general comments spread through the anthropological literatures, although they tend to be incidental to the focus on social relationships and community organisation. Some psychology studies discuss mental health aspects, and there are an increasing number of papers on the physical health aspects of being on Country or caring for Country. There are also many statements in the literature regarding the importance of Country to identity. Finally, throughout this paper, we also make reference to what we will refer to as "creative texts" - novels, biographies, poems - that make mention of the importance of Country. While these latter sources are not necessarily systematic in the examination of the concept, they are a useful addition in understanding the specific features of why Country is so important.

Mental Health and Well-Being

There is research linking Country to social well-being and mental health, for example, evidence for the social and mental health benefits of attachment to Country (Bishop et al., 2012; Ganesharajah & Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2009; Guerin & Guerin, 2012; Guerin, Guerin, Tedmanson & Clark, 2011), as well as the consequences to mental health of being removed from Country. Vicary and Bishop (2005; also Bishop et al., 2012), for example, found that Indigenous people who spent large amounts of time away from their Country reported experiencing episodes of depression, perhaps

due to a loss of this spiritual link between themselves, their Country and community. Upon becoming ill, Indigenous elders recommended that they return to their Country to make a spiritual reconnection with the land that was believed to improve their health. They suggested that being unable to return to Country to alleviate these feelings resulted in a deterioration of their mental health.

Pretty, Bishop, Fisher and Sonn (2007) suggested that children of the Stolen Generations experienced more mental health problems than those whose parents had not been removed (see also Fromene & Guerin, 2014a, b). They attributed this to the support and belonging provided by traditional community and kinship structures on land, which may be important in forming a secure identity. Clearly, while this is suggestive, it would be difficult to separate out the many effects involved: Being removed from family; being put into alterative living arrangements that could be damaging; and being removed from Country *per se*. Separation from Country is only one aspect of what occurred for those of the Stolen Generation.

Creative texts also suggest that attachment to Country might only become apparent when Indigenous people lose their Country or are away from their land. For instance, in Rose's (2002) research, Indigenous women suggested that their attachment to land is only apparent when their country is threatened or lost. Rose suggested that many people suffer when places of significance on their land are damaged or destroyed, and they compare being away from their Country to heartbreak. This also suggests that those who have lived on Country uninterrupted for many generations might not talk or think as much about attachment to Country because it is embedded in their everyday lives and taken for granted.

Finally, there is also literature which discusses how mental health treatment can incorporate Indigenous conceptions of Country when Indigenous people seek help. Most of these studies suggest that it is important for clinicians to view mental illness in a holistic manner (Guerin & Guerin, 2014), in which mental health can be understood within the context of Indigenous culture—their community, spirituality, land, and Law (Bishop et al., 2012; O'Brien & Jackson, 2007; Tse, Lloyd, Petchkpvsky, & Manaia, 2005; Vicary & Andrews, 2000, 2001). These studies suggest that to prevent or treat mental illness it is important for Indigenous people to reconnect to their culture, Country and spirituality (Mackean, 2009). For instance, Gabb and McDermott (2007) suggested that clinicians need to be aware of the experiences Indigenous people have had that contribute to their trauma, such as colonisation, dispossession, Stolen Generations, transgenerational trauma, racism and discrimination. They stress the importance of a reconnection with the land, culture and community, which can aid in treatment of mental illness and may help to prevent its occurrence.

Health and Caring for Country

Other research suggests that it is important to fulfil obligations to land in order to maintain physical health (Dwyer, 2012). This might work through many factors such as emotion change, physical exercise on Country, etc. Westerman (2004) suggested that Indigenous people may become ill because they have done something wrong culturally or are being 'paid back' for wrongdoing, which indicates that Indigenous spirituality is linked to the fulfilment of obligations to their family, land and culture. Garnett and Sithole (2007) found that the management of land was an important aspect of traditional owners' identity and health—they spoke of feeling sad at being unable to carry out duties to their land.

A number of studies point to the psychosocial benefits of directly caring for Country or Natural Resource Management (NRM). For example, Burgess, Johnston, Bowman and Whitehead (2005) reviewed biomedical research and suggested that activities such as landscape burning, subsistence hunting, Indigenous ranger programs and cultural practices conducted on Country gave young Indigenous men an opportunity to develop independence. This also provided those participating with an opportunity to develop social cohesion, which contributed to group collective esteem

and efficacy. Kingsley, Townsend, Phillips and Aldous (2009) also found that people participating in these types of activities were able to develop greater respect for themselves because they were surrounded by culture, leading to an improvement in self-esteem.

Other studies on NRM have found direct benefits to psychological health (Ganesharajah & Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2009). For example, Burgess et al. (2009) found that participating in activities on country, such as the control of invasive weeds and feral animals, commercial use of wildfire and cultural maintenance activities, appeared to contribute to lower psychological distress, as measured by the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale. Burgess, Berry, Gunthorpe and Bailie (2008), using a questionnaire and multiple regression modelling, found that participation in NRM was significantly correlated with a construct measure of holistic local Indigenous health, *anngurrunga-wanam*, a state of vitality of mind, body and soul.

Other studies recorded the negative consequences (such as greater stress) for ill and dying Indigenous people who were relocated to respite care away from their Country (McGrath, 2007; McGrath, Holewa & Buckley, 2007; McGrath & Patton, 2006; McGrath et al., 2006). The researchers attributed this to the comfort and familiarity that is associated with their families and community when on Country.

Identity

There have also been links made between the land and a sense of identity and belonging for Indigenous people (Bishop et al., 2012; Dwyer, 2012; Garnett & Sithole, 2007). In one study, Ypinazar, Margolis, Haswell-Elkins and Tsey (2007) found strong reported links between Indigenous people and their community, stories, ceremonies, ancestors, sacred sites and tribal areas, with these aspects of culture helping Indigenous people to establish a positive identity. The authors suggested that colonisation, on-going social practices, and Australian Government policies, and the consequent loss of connection to land, have led Indigenous people to experience a loss of culture and spirituality, which has coincided with a loss of belonging, identity and self-esteem. Morgan, Slade and Morgan (1997) have suggested that this loss of identity has meant Indigenous people have become confused about their identities, which has led to stress-related disorders, antisocial behaviour and self-destructive tendencies.

Some creative texts, such as poetry, anthologies and stories, also discuss the importance of a connection to the land for Indigenous people's identity (Morgan, Mia, & Kwaymullina, 2007, 2008). They suggest that Country allows Indigenous people to experience an identity and sense of belonging, which can help them to improve their self-esteem and provide them with a greater sense of confidence.

The Country is further discussed as a source of nourishment. In Rose's (1996) anthology, she compares Country to a person, who the Indigenous people care for like a family member. This close connection to the Country means that Country is a source of nourishment for the body, mind and heart of Indigenous people, as it provides for their needs. There is also a suggestion that a reciprocal relationship between Country and people exists, in that when Country is unhealthy this impacts on the person, and vice-versa. Rose (2002) suggests that healthy relationships can be changed by damage to Country. The Indigenous person who is aware of this is best able to live according to the Laws of the land and be strong, healthy and happy. However, if the person is at odds with the Law they may become ill (Rose, 2002).

Research Questions

While it is known that an attachment exists between Indigenous Australians and their Country, less is known about the ways in which this occurs, nor the paths through which attachment is strengthened. This is complicated because, as we have seen above, the context of Country has many aspects. The studies outlined also conflate different Indigenous groups who have very different contexts. For the groups of Indigenous people mentioned above, some

have been living on Country for thousands of years, whereas for others, they have been living in urban settings for the last few generations, perhaps with foster care, and are only now rediscovering their Country and Indigeneity. All of the thoughts and aspirations about Country in the various literatures are important, but it can be questioned that their findings are generalisable across all Indigenous groups in Australia.

The aim of the current study was to investigate the attachment to Country for the Nukunu people, whose Country lies north of Adelaide, South Australia. This was conducted with just one group from one Country but the aim was to add to what we know already rather than attempt to provide certainly and generality. This was achieved through talking with key community members about many of the themes discussed above, and any thoughts of their own about attachment to Country. We wished to place this in the specific context of Nukunu and not generalise to other groups. For example, the communities further north in the APY Lands of South Australia have been actively living on their lands for many generations, even after colonisation. Their reports on attachment to Country should be collected and described separately, before any statements regarding general inferences can be made (e. g., Guerin & Guerin, 2010, 2011).

Context: The Nukunu Community, Dreaming and Country

Nukunu Country is about 250 kms north of Adelaide in South Australia, encompassing Crystal Brook, Pt Pirie, Quorn, Wilmington and Pt Augusta, the upper eastern Spencer Gulf and the Flinders Ranges. The Nukunu people have experienced trauma as a direct result of colonisation and the removal of children from their families due to Australian Government policies that were in place up to the 1970s. Like many groups in the region (Andyamathanha, Banggarla, Kokatha, Kaurna, Narangga, Ngadjuri), their Country lay on the route out of Adelaide to the northern pastoral regions that skirted the Flinders Ranges, so during colonisation they had land taken away, were attacked brutally, and later had children removed from the groups that survived. Stories of massacres are told.

A Nukunu Dreaming story (passed on orally through family and therefore to one of the authors) prophesised the negative effects of colonisation, and taking away Nukunu Country from its people. This is the story of the character Kutnyu and the Dreaming Serpent *Wapma.* Wapma created the Flinders Ranges and a river on the southern border of Nukunu country. He later transformed into a whale and ventured out to sea. Wapma saw Kutnyu trespass, so he swam up the river, changed back into the serpent, swallowed Kutnyu for his crime, and returned to the sea as a whale. Many years later, in this Dreaming story, a Nukunu couple are surprised when they have a child who is completely white. Nukunu believed this child to be Kutnyu, returned after punishment and white from living inside of the Wapma's stomach. To this day Nukunu refer to non-Indigenous people as *kutnyu*. This Dreaming story was created before European colonisation and emphasises that Nukunu country should be respected (Mascall, 2009).

Like many of the surrounding groups, the Nukunu people were taken off their Country, and lived in missions (Point Pearce in particular) and on the outskirts of rural towns, and put under strict behavioural control by governments. For example, those in the Point Pearce Mission were forbidden by law to talk to their relatives living on the outskirts of Port Augusta, and the police would arrest them if found. Of course, many stories are told of how they evaded the police and had family meetings together in Port Augusta under the cover of darkness.

All Nukunu now live a Western way of life and almost all are employed in various locations around South Australia, many in professional jobs. Many live in urban centres built on their Country, in Port Augusta, Port Germein and Port Pirie, but none are living on the land in the bush, as

they once had prior to the arrival of Europeans. So many are living on Country but not living "off the Country" for shelter and food.

In the 1980s some Nukunu traditional lands were returned, and so they are looking at ways to redevelop their community. There are plans to create a Nukunu economy on Country in a culturally and environmentally sensitive way (Mascall, 2009). Although no one wishes to live permanently on their Country in the bush at this stage, Nukunu wish to maintain it for visiting, respite, camping and reviving their cultural practices for their children and future generations.

Linking the research to Nukunu was also opportune because there is very little written about Nukunu by the community or others. For example, they are not mentioned in the widely known South Australian volume of Mattingley and Hampton (1998) and only a few details are written about them in Sutton (1995) and Taplin (1879/1967). Many papers exist in museum storage but most of what is known is only known by Nukunu themselves, orally or in creative form, which is where much of the above is sourced.

As an example, a video called *Nukunu stories of heritage and identity: Six short films* (McKinnon, 2003) discussed the impact of colonisation on Indigenous people. The Nukunu descendants discussed the oral history of how the early European settlers and Australian Government officials made no attempt to understand the language, wishes or concerns of the Nukunu people when it came to the ploughing of land, building of dams and chopping down of trees on their country. They also discussed how the settlers attempted to control Nukunu people by fencing off their land, keeping them off waterholes, and preventing them from kangaroo hunting and going to scared places. This meant they were unable to conduct ceremonies and pay respects to their ancestors, which was a very important aspect to their culture.

At that time the Nukunu people did not voice their disapproval of these activities, as they had no power. Similarly today, the descendants are "getting on with it", rather than letting the grief and hurt regarding these historical events dominate their lives. However, they speak of their ancestors as experiencing their culture and beliefs "crumbling", and refer to the tremendous mental anguish, depression, and feeling of total hopelessness that their ancestors must have felt when their land was taken from them.

Method

The context for the interviews, therefore, was of an Indigenous Australian group that had been broken up and prevented from living on Country in the bush and carrying out many cultural practices since early colonial times. They had not lived on Country in the bush for years, and most were living in urban centres in relatively good employment. Some of these centres are built on top of their Country, however. They now wished to reinvigorate tradition and culture, re-learn from early accounts, and develop their Country for future generations of Nukunu.

Participants

The Nukunu community is small, and the 17 main adult members were contacted through one of the authors who is a member of the community. Of these, 10 Nukunu leaders and community members over the age of 30 were willing to share what attachment to Country meant to them. All the others were interested but unable to oblige because of work and family commitments. There were four women and six men; five of the participants were based in the Port Augusta area and five were based in the urban Adelaide area. Their ages ranged between 30 and 60 years.

Procedure

With the Nukunu leaders' approval, participants who were willing to be part of the study were chosen from the community. The researcher followed the cultural consultants' advice (cf. Bishop, Vicary, Andrews, & Pearson 2006) on all matters. The nature of the project was circulated to all involved and the researchers followed up with a phone call, email or Facebook

enquiry. To aid this, the researcher created a Facebook page titled *The importance of Country for social wellbeing of Nukunu*. This contained information about the project and what participation would involve. The researcher requested to be the Facebook friend of participants who the cultural consultants advised to contact, and then invited them to join this group. The researcher advised participants that they were able to post comments on the page, and that they were able to do this anonymously by sending it to the private email box of one researcher. An information sheet and consent form was also provided to potential participants by email and through a letter.

The researchers travelled to Port Augusta to speak to participants and also had meetings with others in Adelaide. The researchers informally interviewed ("yarning") a number of Nukunu about their attachment to Country. They also informally yarned with some Nukunu who were not greatly involved in Country about similar ideas, focusing on what it would mean if they *could* be involved in Country more in the future.

The focus groups and interviews were conducted for approximately one hour but some went much longer. No interpreters were required as all participants spoke fluent English (their language is still being revived from colonial suppression). All informal interviewing was done under approved ethical protocols of the University of South Australia but with any provisos requested by Nukunu.

Bishop et al. (2006) suggest the most effective way to carry out research with Indigenous people requires developing a relationship and 'yarning' with them. The participants were free to withdraw their consent to participate in the project at any time without prejudice, and they could choose whether to respond to each general question as the interviewer raised it (see below). The general questions were not inherently stress-provoking, indeed it was welcomed. Their answers were recorded in note form since they did not wish for audio-taping as it was considered rude. However, this was done rigorously with more than one researcher present. This is common in Indigenous research methods.

Due to the nature of the topic, there were no specific set of questions but there were general issues for participants to respond to as well as raising issues of their own. During interviews and focus groups, they were asked about:

- What they think attachment to Country means?
- What it would mean to lose their Country?
- What being on Country means to them?
- What are the different ways that caring for Country affects or changes their life?
- What do they actually do with the Country in the past/present?
- How do they see the redevelopment of their Country affecting them?
- How would they like to interact with the Country in the future?
- How does attachment to Country enhance their social and emotional wellbeing?

Findings

There were several themes that emerged from discussions with Nukunu. These themes were based on the authors' reading and re-reading of the notes taken and later discussion with Nukunu community members. The main themes suggested that: Country was a source of identity; being on Country provided Nukunu people with an opportunity to be "nourished"; the participants were upset at the loss of Country; the Country was seen as a place where people would be able to recover from illness; and activities such as natural resource management (NRM) brought people a sense of social wellbeing. Within these themes, there were also some subthemes which are highlighted below. We see these themes as over-lapping to make a general story, but we have separated them into theme headings for ease of presentation.

Identity

Connection to community, land and culture. Most Nukunu interviewed reported a strong spiritual connection to Country, which enhanced their identity and sense of belonging. For example, the participants reported experiencing acceptance for who they were on Country, as they were surrounded by their families and the community. Country was also depicted as a part of who they were and a part of their soul, the country and people being viewed as interconnected. One 40 year old male participant claimed he did not own the country, it owned him:

> Nukunu people have been removed from Country only by a physical nature not spiritual. For us today the hills, trees, animals and ocean remain a strong and spiritual connection. We as individuals experience different and similar emotions upon our visits. I have heard of a saying "the hills are alive", as a Nukunu person, I truly understand what is meant by this statement. My connection to land reminds me that I do not own it, it owns me. I have a responsibility to ensure that it is no longer taken for granted and its riches are preserved for future generations.

Self –respect. The participants linked disrespecting country to disrespecting their own self. For example, killing an animal or chopping a tree unnecessarily were both viewed as sacrilege. Country was spoken about as a "blueprint for living". The attachment of the Nukunu to the land was depicted as holistic, involving physical knowledge of Country, and knowledge of spiritual and cultural beliefs associated with their Country. One participant spoke of the sea, sky, land, water, wind, plants, animals, ceremonies and song and how these are all interconnected and governed by the Dreaming stories and storylines that run along Nukunu Country, with the Dreaming seen as Law. This Law governed how to be a good man/woman and how to look after Country .

Source of values. The Nukunu spoke of Country as pulling people back to their values and giving them a sense of meaning by which they were able to focus on what life meant to them and discover who they were. They believed that upon losing their Country they would feel disconnected, because they would lose their identities and lose their self. One 31year old female participant described the experience of being away from Country and losing this foundation, which for her meant losing a sense of who she was, and her identity:

> People have built a home (the Country), however they may continue to travel a journey without this foundation. The experiences they have are the bricks, however if the bricks are loose and they are without their foundation (the country) they experience emptiness as they don't have the resilience and strength to keep going.

The Country as a Source of Nourishment

Nurturing. The participants spoke of their Country as being a source of comfort. One participant discussed driving over the hill on the highway and seeing the Flinders Ranges, comparing this to having a "*hot bath or putting on a pair of fluffy socks*". They felt the weight lifted off their shoulders; it was a relief to get there. This was again emphasised when participants reported that returning to Country was like walking into open arms, where they felt at ease and safe. One 50 year old female participant spoke of the uplifting feeling she had when on Country:

> Country is a powerful place and by being there you absorb this energy. This energy is our ancestors talking to us and teaching us about Country.

Vulnerability pressures. Some Nukunu reported that the Country could be used as a place of respite for people with drug and alcohol problems. The participants associated dislocation from Country and the

resulting loss of culture with anti-social behaviour. They believed that people involved in these behaviours would benefit from learning the knowledge and meaning associated with Country. The Nukunu believed that Country was important in discovering your identity and that forming an identity was a huge struggle for 'lost people' because they have no spiritual connection to their ancestors.

Places on Country with healing and nurturing qualities. Other participants spoke of going to specific places on country to feel at peace. When they needed closure on personal issues or they were troubled, they returned to Country, comparing it to going to church, a psychiatrist or Gallipoli. Some Nukunu spoke of visiting sacred places on Country. They reported feeling familiarity and they felt watched over or looked after here by their ancestors. When faced with problems, these special sites were where they claimed their ancestors spoke to them and gave them advice.

One place was Woma farm and the remains of the church at Baroota Reserve, which was seen as a sanctuary for many Nukunu. Many participants reported Baroota to be a special site where they were together, and could "*talk and be blackfellas without having to answer to anyone*". They claimed Baroota was a place where Nukunu ancestors had a very strong presence and where they enjoyed going due to this strong connection. One participant recalled a dream he had in which he fell into Baroota Creek and the ancestors wanted to talk to him. Others specifically referred to the Great Tree (now destroyed), the salt-lake crossed by the road to Stirling North, the salt-lake near Umeewarra, and the adjacent spring which is now buried, as places of significance.

The Loss of Country

Losing you soul. Many individuals also spoke of what would happen if they lost their Country. They believed taking away their Country compares to taking away their heart and to the rape of their mother. The participants spoke of dying inside, feeling violated and disempowered upon the loss of their land. A 60 year old male participant claimed:

> Losing Country is like losing an arm or a leg, it's a part of you, you have to have it.

Loss of culture. The Nukunu discussed that upon losing their Country, their culture would be lost or would disappear. This included their kinship, status of their clan group, their heritage as a proud race, sites of significance and the Dreamtime, which were a vital aspect of their identity. The loss of these traditional roots means many participants would lose their strength and depth in life, as described by a 40 year old male participant:

> Our traditionalistic roots are a great starting point for seeking personal strength and depth to life. The music, dreaming, ancestors, language and land of my native place are food for my soul and have a profound effect on my wellbeing.

Resilience. The participants discussed how previous Australian Government policies were aimed at separating Nukunu people from their Country and culture, but they were proud of the resilience of their people in maintaining this connection, as described:

> However this has come at a price, knowing that we have been denied our Aboriginal culture. Our ancestors were unable to practice and pass on their customs, Laws, language, spiritual beliefs and the true meanings of land unreservedly. It is amazing to know how resilient Nukunu generations were and have been considering, the abhorrent policies of yesteryear were designed to remove them from (Country) the Australian landscape, under the premises of colonisation.

Living or travelling away from Country. Most Nukunu reported that it was painful living in the city away from Country. They spoke of feeling unhappy and unfulfilled when away from their land,

whereas at home they spoke of feeling comfortable. Many described going overseas and feeling homesick, as they yearned to return to country. One participant cried as he left their land to go overseas and spoke of wanting to be home while being there.

Some Nukunu who have built a life in urban Adelaide have claimed they would like to return to Country to live and work if this would be possible. One participant liked to take the Country with them, and took rocks and a desert rose from their Country to keep with them in the city, to remind them of their Country when they were unable to visit. A 50 year old female participant explained that she had a feeling that her destiny is to return to Country and become more involved and contribute to the Nukunu community:

> You can take away Country, but you can't take away our spiritual connection. The Country is always with me, it has never left me.

Loss of Country through mining and 'development'. The participants spoke of being devastated and sad at being unable to prevent the development of their land by mining companies. They claimed these companies were destroying the ecosystem and environment and putting money and profit before preservation of the country. They compared chopping down trees and destroying sand hills to taking away the stories of the Dreamtime, their ancestors and their heritage. One of the participants spoke of the spirits of their ancestors living in these sacred areas. Further, Nukunu were upset that the marina, weirs and dams were blocking tidal flows and were concerned at the harmful environmental effects that were occurring to an area they valued and with which they felt a strong sense of spiritual connection. The participants spoke fondly of their childhoods when they walked freely in many of these areas to gather food. A 40 year old male participant described his feelings regarding the effects of redevelopments on the ecosystems:

> If you take water out of the system it falls apart. If you take my spirituality away I fall apart. It does not belong here.

The Country's Role in Recovery from Psychological Distress

Many of the points already reported show the sense of well-being associated with being on Country and working with Country. Other, more specific, comments were also made with respect to mental health and Country.

Relation to mental health. The Nukunu spoke of returning to Country when they experienced illness. This was not only for "physical" illnesses but many reported needing to return to Country when they became sad or depressed. Further, when a Nukunu person became ill they were advised to return to Country and make a fire, as this was seen as nurturing and a way for them to heal. Many participants emphasised that the Country was somewhere where they were able to relax and feel less stressed, as described by a male participant:

> When burnout or rundown from work life the Country is somewhere where I can recharge my batteries and regather myself and be replenished.

One participant claimed their job was highly stressful and being on Country allowed them to get their thoughts back. They reported feeling normal, and at peace when on Country.

Activities on Country that Brought Greater Social Wellbeing

Healing properties of food. The Nukunu also spoke of activities they completed on Country that were beneficial for their wellbeing. Participants spoke about how bush tucker was not just eaten for its taste, but also for the properties of the food, and that the knowledge surrounding it had a purpose. The participants believed foods would aid in the healing of illness. The foods eaten were emu, yabbies, kangaroo, fish (snapper, yellowtail, whiting, tommy rough), crabs, oysters, razorfish, cockle, squid, sweet potato, yams, quandongs, bush grape, wattle seed, bush celery and red berry. A 40 year old female participant commented that these foods contribute to

positive mental health: "There are certain foods that keep you in check."

Healing properties of plants. The Nukunu also spoke of the healing properties of plants, such as the Madison plant which was used as medicine or an antibiotic for colds. Three participants were also aware of signals that indicated good and bad times ahead for the Nukunu people. For instance, they discussed how leaf structure and growth, the sky and the appearance of certain animals such as the eagle and the return of whales to the Spencer Gulf (a sign that Nukunu culture is getting stronger) were important to their understanding of what was happening to them and their Country.

Recreational activities conducted on Country benefited mental health. The Nukunu also spoke of activities that they completed on Country that they felt were important for their social and emotional well -being: walking, hunting, fishing, driving through the country, having picnics, camping and sitting by the campfire and sharing stories or listening to birds. One 50 year old male participant expressed his desire to walk on Country:

> I like catching up with family in any environment, but most of all I miss the trips to the Flinders Ranges that I used to do so often when I was living and working in Port Augusta. Our busy working schedule makes it hard to do all of those things now, and the Flinders always beckons. I have walked over 400km of the Heyson trail and none of it was in Nukunu Country, so I am eager to see it sometime soon.

Another participant spoke of dancing on the Country for their ancestors. The dancing was intended for the purpose of showing respect, and finding spiritual healing for the loss of an Indigenous person. They reported the dancing gave them the ability to let go of their inhibitions, hang-ups and it made them stronger. It was also a source of identity and belonging. Some Nukunu also spoke of renewing connection with the land today by hunting and gathering, suggesting this was a way to join their families together. The participants also expressed a desire for Nukunu youth to have an education on Country so that they could better understand their culture. They felt it was important for them to know that in life you need your group to "prop you up", and make you feel better about yourself.

Natural Resource Management. The Nukunu spoke of healthy environments producing healthy people. They believed that contributing to the environment was important for Nukunu people's physical and mental health. A 60 year old female participant spoke of "Healing others by healing the land". This involved having knowledge of Country and the properties of bush tucker, and being resourceful in their own Country. For example, they were taught not to take things for granted (to pillage), not to break/chop trees, and to leave bush tucker for future generations.

The Nukunu expressed a desire to share the resources of the Country but also protect them and keep them safe. They believed that activities which have been planned for the future, such as planting trees, seed gathering, walking tours and building a cultural centre, will help future generations and bring people together, and generate cohesiveness. They felt that these activities would be empowering and give people hope for the future as it would allow them to add another layer to their culture. Many participants expressed their enthusiasm for the activities they were involved in with the Country. For example, a participant who was involved in the clearing of Country enjoyed this activity. However, many felt a heavy sense of obligation to participate, reporting heavy work and family commitments that required them to be off Country.

Discussion

Despite being Westernised and living in urban centres, all Nukunu people in this study reported strong feelings and connections for their Country, and they made a variety of points that give a more concrete understanding of the nature of attachment to Country. It should also be noted that not all

Nukunu agreed with, or reported, all of the points and there was diversity therefore amongst community members. Moreover, when talking about parts of Country, different Nukunu had different key sites they talked about. This re-emphasises the point made at the beginning that we should not assume a common focus for Country even within a strong community. Nevertheless, some relatively common themes emerged.

There are clearly limitations in this research, and any similar research. It is difficult to get large samples or ask rigorous questions or get concrete answers to questions about Country. We acknowledge these limitations but in turn we do not wish what we have found to be seen as any more than what Nukunu told us about the effects of their Country. Within these constraints, we believe we gained a comprehensive picture from the majority of the adult members, but much more remains to be done. We also want these limitations to warn future researchers to be open for events other than those we have found.

There were strong health and mental health outcomes attributed to the various factors related to Country and being on Country. Nukunu attachment to Country is clearly associated with psychosocial benefits. Five main themes emerged from the discussions conducted with the Nukunu people, which give more concrete examples of "attachment to Country" for them. The country was a place that allowed Nukunu to develop an *identity*, where their connection to the community, land and culture meant it was a place of acceptance, allowing them to develop self respect and a set of values that were important to the formation of a secure identity. Their Country was also a *source of nourishment*, upon returning to country the participants felt at ease, experiencing greater comfort and a renewed feeling of energy. The Nukunu felt that the *loss of their Country* would be disempowering, comparing it to heartbreak, as it would lead them to lose their cultural heritage. They claimed to be unhappy and unfulfilled when away from their land. The participants returned to Country to *heal from illness*, in particular, depression. They reported feeling relaxed and less stressed when there, which aided in the recovery process. The *participation in activities* such as natural resource management allowed Nukunu to generate group cohesiveness and was believed to be an empowering activity for their whole community (Dwyer, 2012; Guerin & Guerin, 2012).

Within each of these themes, there were a plethora of specific activities and concrete consequences related to Country, which was a context for important and varied positive outcomes. Clearly, there are strong reported benefits to health and mental health from being on Country, whether living there or visiting, and these were linked to the roles of family and community when on Country, food and exercise improvements, stress reduction and respite, and the ability to sense identity and engage in cultural practices. The specific contributions of these different aspects are difficult to determine, as many are interconnected. For example, walking on Country will also typically involve being with family and community, exercising, respite from work and Western influences, etc. It would be difficult to separate these in research.

It can also be seen in the discussions reported here that there are many concrete ways that "attachment to Country" can have effects on both physical and mental health. "Attachment to Country" is not a hazy notion just experienced as a vague feeling, as many non-Indigenous people might believe. The results show clear and observable paths through which being on Country can change health. This might be through increased family and community attachments, medicines or healthy foods taken from Country, healthier behaviours when doing things on Country, or the stress-reducing and depression-reducing effects reported by participants when spending time quietly in certain, special locations on Country. All these can be fruitfully explored in future research with Indigenous clients as part of treatments for ill health.

Nukunu also strongly report that visiting or being on Country is vitally important to their reinvigoration of

community and culture. Their context is different to many other Indigenous groups—they are mostly well-employed and living in urban centres, have lost their Country many decades ago in bad circumstances but have had some country returned, they have lost many oral traditions of their cultural practices, and much of the land has been degraded. So the attachment and relationships to Country that have been expressed here are clearly part of this context unique to Nukunu. This becomes especially important when most reported how important it was for young Nukunu to be taken on Country and learn their culture, and was seen by many as a useful antidote to the increasing drug and alcohol lifestyles of those young people.

Combining these themes with the material outlined in the Introduction—both research and creative texts, we suggest Figure 1 as a guide when thinking or researching the effects of Country and treatments for clinical work. When on Country, there is a "hub" of family, spiritual and identity aspects that are usually present—they usually go together and might be difficult to separate in future research. While one can be with family and community when *not* on Country, participants spoke of a special difference when on Country with family. One can also be engaged with spirituality and identity when away from Country and from family and community, but special significance

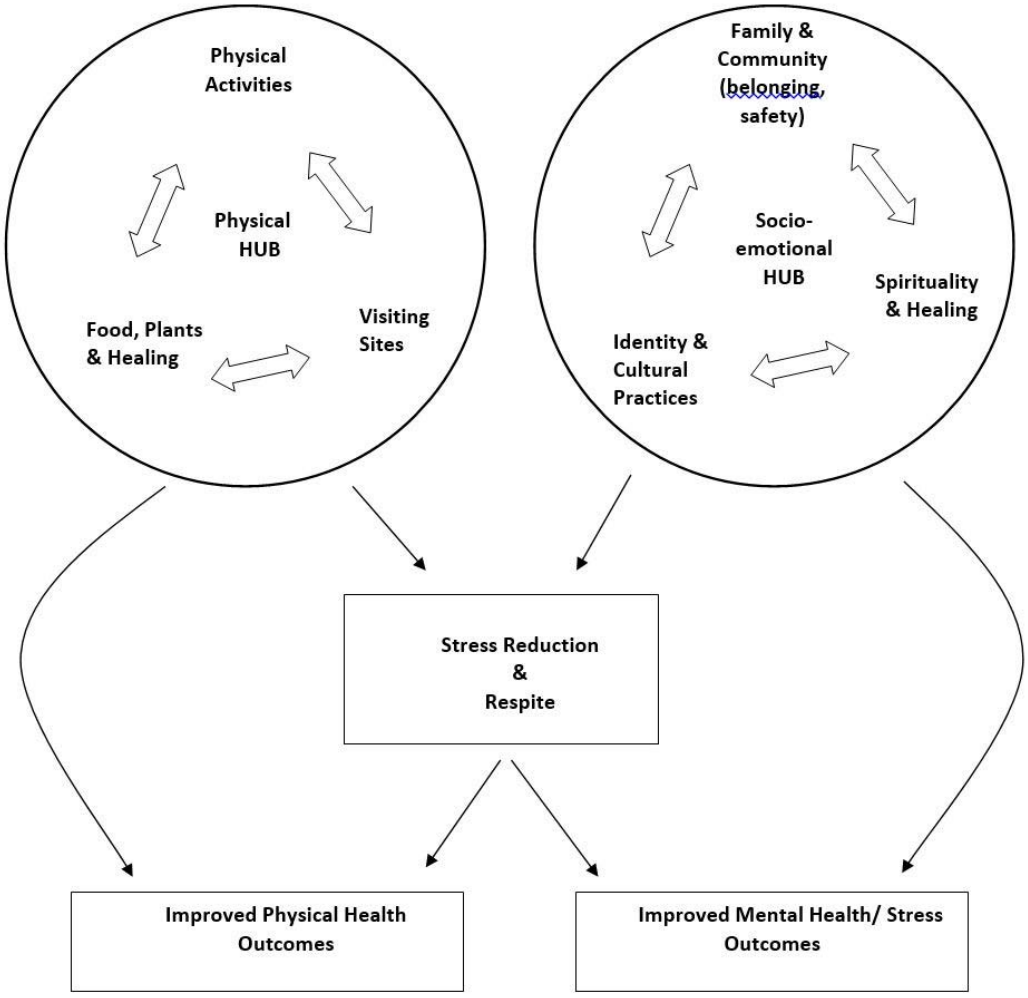

Figure 1: Possible Pathways to Better Health Outcomes from Being on Country

seems to rest on this hub being present simultaneously when on Country. This needs to be further explored in many diverse communities.

There also seems to be a "hub" of physical activity, better eating and nourishment when on Country. Once again, parts can be achieved when *not* on Country but the hub seems significant. Through these two "hubs" participants reported direct physical health (from the physical hub) and mental health (from the family and community hub) benefits.

Some other benefits were less clear and more indirect but we have tentatively linked them, from talking with participants, to general effects of stress-reduction and respite. This means that the separation of the two hubs is not clear and would be difficult to prove in research. It would be especially useful for future research looking more closely at the links from being on Country to better mental health outcomes, and how these might be utilised in mental health treatments in culturally appropriate ways. This Figure is meant only as a guide to help researchers think through the many connections.

Figure 1 is not meant to apply to all Indigenous groups in this country, and the different contexts for the different groups will lead to many variations in how these hubs are formed, if at all, and which components are more or less important. As pointed out above, even within Nukunu there were differences in how these and other items were considered. What is important, we believe, is to treat the context of each group as potentially being importantly different, and to take into consideration that specific context before beginning the investigation. When enough context-specific studies have been undertaken, commonalities and differences across contexts can be explored.

Overall, these results point to the likely strong positive effects of attachment to Country on stress, mental ill health, and poor physical health. This applies not only to treating adults with psychological distress, but also to preventative measures for younger Nukunu. Although it has been previously noted that Indigenous people have an attachment to Country, this research shows what this means in a more concrete way for the Nukunu people of South Australia.

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Authors' Note

[1] The terms for referring to people are all contentious in different contexts. It is preferable to use specific group names whenever possible so Nukunu has been used in this way throughout. However, when referring to descendants of the original peoples of Australia in general we have used "Indigenous" instead of "Aboriginal" since Nukunu were happy with this and there is no contention-free term. One of the aims of our research is to be more specific and move away from research and statements purporting to be about "all" Indigenous Australians.

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Address for Correspondence
Bernard Guerin
School of Psychology (Magill Campus),
University of South Australia
GPO Box 2471
Adelaide 5001
+618 83024485
guerinbj@unisa.edu.au