

## Remotely Interested

by **Tim Thornton**

I have been a school psychologist for about 20 years (with about a five year hiatus in private practice). During this time I have worked as a school psychologist and Student Services Manager. I have spent most of my time working in the Esperance District (the very southern part of WA) with four years (two x two year stints) in the Kimberley (the very northern part of WA). I do like extremes! For the past three years part of my responsibilities has been providing psychological services to schools in the Ngaanyatjarra (Pronounced Nah.na.tha.rra) Lands. I am pleased to have this opportunity to share some thoughts and experiences from this period.



### **Brief Description of the Ngaanyatjarra Lands**



The Ngaanyatjarra Lands comprise a vast area of Western Australia adjoining the NT and South Australian borders. It is around 250,000 square kilometers in size (about the size of NSW) and encompasses sections of the Gibson Desert, Great Sandy Desert, Great Victoria Desert, and all of the Central Ranges that occur in Western Australia.

Traditional Owners have maintained continuous association with their country, comprise the majority resident population, and provide the entire regional infrastructure such as roads, roadhouses, stores, health clinics, and aerial services. The Great Central Road or Outback Highway as it is sometimes known bisects the Ngaanyatjarra Lands providing access to the two major central regional areas; Kalgoorlie 900km SW of Warburton and Alice Springs 1000 km to the NE of Warburton. The 1800km stretch from Laverton to Uluru is unsealed and can be closed to all traffic in the wet. There are lots of other roads and tracks but maintenance can be sporadic and they can be very (very) rough.

### **Ngaanyatjarra Lands communities**

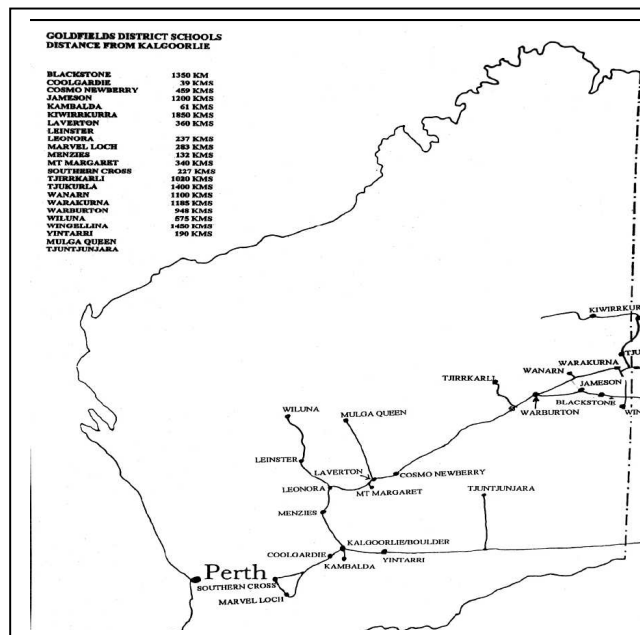
Eleven remote Aboriginal communities make up the Ngaanyatjarra Education Area (NEA). However, two of the communities, Kiiwirrkura and Cosmo Newberry, fall outside of the official boundary of the Ngaanyatjarra Lands. My job is to provide psychological services to the school communities comprising an executive Principal, 11 Associate Principals, 24 teachers and 240 students that are spread across this enormous area. Oh yes, and I have a day a week to do it!

### **A day or so in the life of a travelling psychologist...**

Obviously you can't travel far in a day so I save it up and about once a term head bush for a week or two. If you have a look on a map you will note that Esperance is located on the South Coast of WA about 400km south of Kalgoorlie. This is where I start from. I'm up early on Saturday morning for a surf and then to the shops to stock up on provisions. I am a seafood eating vegetarian and there are not too many fish in the desert so careful shopping is essential. Pack up the fridge, esky and swag and a suitable wardrobe (my NT and SA colleagues will know how the temperature in the desert can vary from 0 -40)

and head up to Kalgoorlie. In Kalgoorlie I pick up the Department 4WD and check the recovery gear, sat phone, jerry cans and spare tyres and get packed up. I try and get to the pub for a beer (because that's what you do in Kalgoorlie) and because the Ngaanyatjarra Lands communities are all dry so it's going to be a liver cleansing week.

Up early on Sunday and head off. I generally like to travel with someone else and preferably with another vehicle. The first days drive is a big one, about 1000km and we'll camp out or stop at Warburton Roadhouse depending on the weather. Monday morning will be my first school visit and whilst I have a rough itinerary planned I have learned to be flexible. It is a long way to travel to see a particular student or family only to find that they are 500km away at a funeral or attending to other cultural matters or at the football.



My work with individual students is quite limited. I may only be in a school two or three times a year so it is difficult to establish relationships for meaningful counselling or assessment. Assessment, that's one of my gripes so I may as well clear the air early in the piece. Sometimes as school psychologists we seem expected to administer psychometric tests in order to determine if a student qualifies for assistance and resources. I find this position distasteful at the best of times (I argue that resourcing should be provided on the basis of need regardless of aetiology) but with indigenous kids I find some practice downright unethical. I believe that most IQ tests, even the so called performance measures, are culturally biased and I urge caution in their (mis) use. I think that if we must conduct assessments they need to be comprehensive and in a cultural context. But of course this takes time.



My lack of individual work is not because there is not need. It is obvious through only a cursory look at mental health, suicide or drug and alcohol statistics that there is need. It is obvious when we read the newspaper or see the news headlines that there is need. It is obvious when we see the mortality rates and life expectancy of indigenous Australians that there is need. It causes me great frustration and shame to see this and do so little. There is great need and I hope that sometime soon we will see a better coordinated and resourced program of support to empower communities to address these issues. I am surprised at times on my travels to encounter folk from other NGO and government agencies doing not



dissimilar work to myself. I wonder what service efficiencies could result from a little coordination, even a website linking different supports may help.



A lot of the time I work with teachers. I help them with behaviour management, with teaching strategies and with strategies for health and wellbeing. A lot of the time I just listen. It seems a bit sad that we send some of most inexperienced teachers and administrators to some of the most challenging environments. It can be a very big transition for many teachers and whilst it can be tremendously rewarding it can be very useful from time to time to have someone from outside that can be dumped on. This raises ethical concern number two. In Western Australia the Education Department employs a private Employee Assistance Provider to provide psychological counselling support to staff. This is available face to face in Perth and some major centres but in most rural and remote areas it is via telephone. When you work as a psychologist in these settings you are likely to gain the trust of those you work with. In this context therefore teachers are far more likely to confide their personal concerns and problems in you. In WA the prime mandate of school psychologists is to assist students. Taking on the responsibility of providing counselling support to staff poses concerns in regard to client confidentiality, dual relationships and a raft of similar issues. It poses an ethical dilemma as to when you should provide direct support and when you should refer on. Of course like all good ethical dilemmas it is rarely black or white. But there are colleagues and the APS does provide ethics advice. So if in doubt ...share.

In working with the Communities the key for me is Daisy. I think that everyone working with Indigenous communities needs a Daisy. Daisy is a respected Ngaanyatjarra elder and is my link to the communities. She will introduce me to the people I need to speak to, provide an interpreting service, explain cultural factors, let me know when I have put my foot in my mouth (and tell me how best to retract it) tell me her stories of the land and make me feel welcome and respected. I know for sure that I am a lot less likely to get lost (either literally or culturally) when I am driving with Daisy.



Over the course of a week I will most likely visit half a dozen schools deal with a diverse range of issues from reading problems to suicide. I drive between 4 and 5 thousand kilometres trying to avoid the caravans of camels (nice collective noun) and grey nomads and listen to 30 hours of country and western/ truck driving music. Maybe that's why no-one wants to drive with me?

I usually spend my last night on the road then head back in to Kalgoorlie before dark on Friday. Just time to wash the dust down with a couple of quiet ales before a good sleep ready for the short 400km drive home on Saturday.

### **A Cautionary Tail ... Expect the Unexpected**

Once when travelling to the Lands with a colleague (Herman) we didn't have a sat phone. So the District Director (Big Boss) lent me his. I left Kalgoorlie with his words "It's brand new and very expensive so take care of it Tim" ringing in my ears. Well, it was the only thing ringing in my ears because a few days later I said to Herman –

“What did you do with the phone after you used it last night?”

“Put it back under the seat in the car...”

“Well it ain't there now...”

Panic and confusion set in. Amazing how certainty turns to doubt under pressure...We unpacked the car eight times. Each time getting a little more panicky and wondering how to apportion blame. “Maybe when we refuelled...? Maybe when we stopped for lunch..? Maybe you left it on the roof and not under the seat!

And then I remembered. I remembered the dingo at the roadhouse that had scavenged the bag of food from the esky. Maybe the dingo...?

At the next school I called the District Office. Is he in a good mood I asked? Do you think he will buy the Lindy Chamberlain defence... “The Dingo Stole My Sat Phone”. Feeling like I may have to stay remote and not venture home I stayed at the school whilst Herman ventured off on a 300km round trip reconnaissance. About two hours later I received a call. A satellite connected call. The phone was found. 100 metres from where we had been parked, teeth marks on the plastic cover and a 1500 number half dialled. The dirty dog...

Serendipitously the Cover Feature of InPsych (The Bulletin of The Australian Psychological Society) of October 2007 was on Psychology Services in rural and remote Australia so anyone interested in some different perspectives may want to refer to this.

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