



Use of appropriate language when working with Aboriginal communities in NSW



NSW Department of
Community Services

Introduction

This Research to Practice Note has two purposes. The first addresses concerns raised by a number of Aboriginal staff in the Department of Community Services (DoCS) who identified the need for such a resource. The second highlights the important role of language when DoCS staff work with Aboriginal people and communities.

This Research to Practice Note was prepared by Hyllus Munro, a Senior Research Officer (Aboriginal) in DoCS Centre for Parenting and Research.¹

The information in this Research to Practice Note is a guide only. The references listed at the end should be considered a starting point for anyone wanting further information relating to this topic.

Background

Aboriginal communities are diverse and one of the key challenges is the use of appropriate language within a cross-cultural context.

Aboriginal communities are diverse as any other community. They are not all one cultural group and not all the same. Every community will have common ground and similarities, but also very different issues. Too often it is assumed that one Aboriginal person is the knowledge holder and sole voice for the whole community in which they live. There are different ways of communicating, different understandings, different sensitive issues, different Elders.²

The responsibility of ensuring the use of appropriate language lies with those who seek to work with diverse Aboriginal communities in the following ways:

- when meeting face-to-face with respective Aboriginal communities to seek their input on various issues and/or participation in activities related to DoCS
- when making formal presentations on activities relating to Aboriginal people, communities and issues
- when writing about Aboriginal people, communities and issues
- when developing literature targeting the Aboriginal community.

Language can be a tool that either empowers or disempowers people. Therefore, it is important to use everyday, plain English. Technical terms and acronyms should be clearly explained when working with any community-based groups, in particular Aboriginal groups.

The key areas discussed in this paper are:

- historical context
- use of appropriate language in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
- identity.

Historical context

The historical context for DoCS

All people associated with DoCS need to be aware of the intersecting histories between the Department, its history as a welfare agency and the Aboriginal community in NSW.

Many Aboriginal people today have a lived experience of past colonial policies and practices. This includes the use of racist and demeaning language to define power relationships between Aboriginal people and those non-Aboriginal people employed as managers of reserves, missions and institutions, the police, welfare officials, education staff, employers, pastoral managers, health officials and so on.

Power relationships based on use of language still exist between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in many key areas. It is important to be aware of what this language is and monitor its use.

The broader historical context

A country's formal institutions teach people the 'winner's version' of its history and formation. This has been the case for Aboriginal Australians since 1788 until recently. From the mid-1970s Aboriginal people started to write their own stories which debunked and/or challenged the 'winner's version' of Australia's history.

One of the key challenges of writing and talking about Australia's history is the use of the term 'invasion' or 'settlement', which would depend on 'whether you were standing on the shore or on a ship in Botany Bay'.³

When talking about Australia's history since 1788 the use of the term 'settlement' should be avoided as many Aboriginal people find it to be an incorrect historical account from their perspective.

Aboriginal people use the term 'invasion' to describe the arrival of European people to Australia on 26 January 1788. The alternative to using settlement could be 'European colonisation' or 'European invasion'.⁴

Care also needs to be taken in using the terms 'traditional' and 'traditionally-oriented', which are widely used, sometimes in combination with the contrasting descriptions of 'non-traditional', 'urban' and 'contemporary'.⁵ These terms can imply that either the pre-contact Aboriginal societies were unchanging or that only those Aborigines who retain to a large extent their 'traditional' culture, language and lifestyles are to be considered 'real' Aborigines.

*It also infers that history in NSW did not begin until the landing of the First Fleet and subsequent European invasion, and that Aboriginal culture has no history. Pre and post contact is the preferred terminology and refers to the period before and after European invasion.*⁶

Use of appropriate language in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

One of the challenges in writing this Research to Practice Note was whether or not to include a word list of inappropriate language which is openly racist and highly offensive, particularly from an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander viewpoint. Rather than include a word list, more specific examples can be found in other material referenced below.^{7,8,9}

In relation to language which is openly racist and highly offensive, it must be pointed out that 'in some parts of northern Australia both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people continue to use such terms in popular language'.¹⁰ This does not mean that using these terms is acceptable and would be tolerated by other communities across Australia.

Indigenous, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

*First Nations, First people or First Australians are collective names for the original people of Australia and their descendants, and are used to emphasise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people lived on this continent prior to European invasion.*¹¹

The names 'Indigenous', 'Aboriginal' and 'Torres Strait Islander' are not the original names people used to identify themselves. These names are a legacy of colonisation. It is important to remember that before, during and after invasion the First Nations' people of this land identified themselves by their country, such as Darug, Gandangarra, Tharawal, Eora, Kamilaroi, Wiradjuri, Barkinji and so on.¹² The names 'Indigenous', 'Aboriginal' and 'Torres Strait Islander' are colonial labels imposed on a range of people with diverse cultures and languages.

The term 'Indigenous' is used when referring to the two First Nations' people of Australia – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. 'Indigenous' is generally used by the Commonwealth Government which has a charter of providing services and programs to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples at a national level.

The term 'Aboriginal' refers specifically to the Aboriginal people of mainland Australia and does not necessarily include Australia's other Indigenous population – Torres Strait Islanders.

It is highly important to note that there is a population of Torres Strait Islander peoples living in NSW, and it has to be acknowledged that a proportion are DoCS clients and/or staff members.¹³

Using the acronym 'ATSI' should be avoided at all times, both in the written and spoken form. Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people find this offensive and disrespectful. It is best to use the term 'Indigenous' when writing or speaking about the two First Nations' peoples of Australia or 'Aboriginal' when only speaking or writing about mainland Aboriginal peoples, particularly in NSW.

Never write 'Aboriginal*' and then footnote that (*) includes Torres Strait Islander people. Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people also find this offensive, disrespectful and a form of laziness on behalf of the writer.

The first letter of 'Aboriginal' and 'Indigenous' are always capitalised. Not doing this is regarded by Aboriginal people as being 'racist, offensive and belittling, a way of negating our identity and nationality and can be similar to misspelling a person's name (gail or dianne) or another country name (chinese, european) by not capitalising'.¹⁴

Identity

It is highly inappropriate to use terms such as ‘half-caste’, ‘quarter-caste’, ‘full-blood’ and phrases such as ‘he/she doesn’t look Aboriginal’.^{15, 16}

*Aboriginal people both individually and collectively as a community, define themselves by their culture – not the colour of their skin.*¹⁷

There are two points of contention in using this terminology.

- When Aboriginal people are confronted by these terms, their identity as an Aboriginal person is called into question. Often they are left in a position of having to qualify their cultural identity, sometimes to complete strangers who do not have a good understanding of the colonial history of Australia and its impacts on Aboriginal people.
- The use of these terms in a particular setting (such as a meeting or community consultation) is offensive and their use could have a negative impact on how the meeting progresses.

Therefore, it is highly recommended that the use of these terms should be avoided at all times.

Nationally, Aboriginal people have terms of reference^{18, 19} by which they broadly identify themselves. These are listed in the following table:

| Area ²⁰ | Name |
|---|--|
| New South Wales/Victoria/ Australian Capital Territory | Koori |
| New South Wales northern coastal regions | Goori |
| Queensland/Far northern New South Wales | Murri |
| South Australia | Nunga |
| Western Australia | Nyoongah |
| Tasmania | Palawa |
| Northern Territory | Yolngu (top end) Anangu (central) |

It is generally advised that permission and/or acceptance of the use of these names by non-Aboriginal people should be sought first from the relevant person, group or community.

Torres Strait Islander peoples identify themselves by the name of the island where they were born or where their family comes from.²¹

Other terms such as ‘tribe’, ‘chief’ and ‘nomad’ have specific meanings derived from foreign societies and do not necessarily apply to Aboriginal people. Alternative forms, depending on circumstances, include language group, community and clan²² plus kinship ties and country, which is ‘a term used to describe a culturally defined area of land associated with a particular, culturally distinct group of people or nation. For example, the township of Dubbo is in Wiradjuri country’.²³

The Aboriginal community is as culturally diverse as other groups that make up the broader Australian community. The diverse cultural identity of Aboriginal people in NSW is no less ‘Aboriginal’ than the diverse cultural identities of their counterparts in other parts of Australia.

*Those who query identity of Aboriginal people often imply that loss of language and cultural practices reduces the authenticity of a person’s Aboriginality. This theory argues that Aboriginal people living in remote areas who continue to speak their languages and practice their culture are more ‘real’ than those who live in country towns or cities.*²⁴

But cultures are not static. Cultures and lifestyles change, develop and move with technological innovations and outside influences. Just as the cultural norms of European Australians have changed enormously over the past 215 years, so too have the cultural norms of Aboriginal Australians, whose commonality is based on their shared history of colonialism and their identity as Aboriginal Australians.

Therefore it is important to be mindful that:

*Your approach when communicating with Indigenous people will be different depending on the community’s location. Each has to be recognised as culturally distinct, whether it is in a remote or rural location, or in a provincial town or major city.*²⁵

Conclusion

It is important to stress that it is the responsibility of all of us to be mindful of what language is used when writing about or discussing Aboriginal people, communities and issues, particularly in a public forum, and more importantly when working with Aboriginal people as part of our day-to-day work activities.

People should avoid 'parroting' the terms they hear Aboriginal people using in everyday conversations or in formal meetings when discussing issues relevant to Aboriginal people. These terms, when used out of context, can be offensive to other Aboriginal people who may not necessarily understand the relationship between individual Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.

Where there is the smallest degree of uncertainty about the use of various terms when formally writing about or discussing Aboriginal people and/or issues, it is highly recommended that advice is sought from a diverse range of Aboriginal people.

If you work in a position which requires you to work with members of the Aboriginal community on behalf of DoCS, either as a staff member or contractor, then you should seek advice and support from Aboriginal colleagues within the Department, or Aboriginal organisations based within various communities.

When working with diverse Aboriginal communities across NSW

Using appropriate and accurate language is fundamental in ensuring the use of non-discriminatory language and developing positive relationships between all (government) staff and Aboriginal communities, and that the use of accurate and non-offensive language is an essential component of Aboriginal cultural respect.²⁶

Summary of key points

History

- Use of the term 'settlement' should be avoided. Preferred terminology is 'European colonisation' or 'European invasion'.
- Be wary of using terms such as 'traditional', 'traditionally oriented', 'non-traditional'. 'Pre contact' and 'post contact' is the preferred terminology.

Indigenous, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

- Always capitalise the first letter of 'Aboriginal', 'Torres Strait Islander' and 'Indigenous'.
- The term 'Indigenous' includes both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
- Aboriginal refers specifically to the Aboriginal people of mainland Australia (and does not include Australia's other Indigenous population – Torres Strait Islanders).
- Never use the term 'ATSI' either in a verbal or written form.

Identity

- Aboriginality is based on cultural affinity, family and community connections.
- Therefore it is offensive to query an individual's identity, particularly in a public forum.
- Avoid racist terms that define Aboriginality based on blood quantity.

Endnotes

- 1 Acknowledgement to DoCS Aboriginal Services Branch and the Aboriginal Reference Group, who have provided helpful feedback and comments in the preparation of this Research to Practice Note.
- 2 Hurley, A. (2003). *Respect, Acknowledge, Listen: practical protocols for working with the Indigenous community of western Sydney*. Retrieved January 15, 2007, from Community Cultural Development NSW. Web site: <http://www.ccdnsw.org>
- 3 Burney, L. (2003). *Inaugural Speech, Member for Canterbury*. Retrieved March 9, 2007, from NSW Parliament. Web site: <http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/PARLMENT/hansArt.nsf/V3Key/LA20030506036>
- 4 NSW Health. (2004). *Communicating positively: a guide to appropriate Aboriginal terminology*. Retrieved January 15, 2007, from NSW Health. Web site: <http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/pubs/2004/aboriginalterminology.html>
- 5 Hollinsworth, D. (2004). *Guidelines for non-racist language use in Aboriginal Studies*. Retrieved January 11, 2007, from University of South Australia. Web site: <http://www.unisa.edu.au/unaipon/current/non-racist.asp>
- 6 NSW Health, op.cit, p.26.
- 7 Heiss, A. (1999). *Writing about Indigenous Australia – some issues to consider and protocols to follow*. Retrieved January 15, 2007, from Australian Society of Authors. Web site: http://www.asauthors.org/lib/pdf/Heiss_Writing_About_Indigenous_Australia.pdf
- 8 Hollinsworth, op.cit, p.1.
- 9 NSW Health, op.cit, pp.29-30.
- 10 Hollinsworth, op.cit, p.1.
- 11 NSW Health, op.cit, p.11.
- 12 Refer to the website of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) Canberra, Aboriginal Australia Map for further information. Web site: http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/aboriginal_studies_press/aboriginal_wall_map
- 13 Those seeking further information on appropriate use of language when working with Torres Strait Islanders should visit the website of the Queensland Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy (DATSIP). Web site: <http://www.datsip.qld.gov.au/resources/cultures.cfm> for a copy of the paper *Mina Mir Lo Ailan Mun – Proper Communication with Torres Strait Islander Peoples*.
- 14 Huggins in Heiss, op.cit, p.13.
- 15 Hollinsworth, op.cit, p.1.
- 16 NSW Health, op.cit, p.29.
- 17 Queensland Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy, (1999). *Protocols for Consultation and Negotiation with Aboriginal People*. Retrieved January 1, 2007, from Queensland Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy. Web site: <http://www.datsip.qld.gov.au/resources/cultures.cfm>
- 18 Ibid, p.19.
- 19 NSW Health, op.cit, p.13.
- 20 These state boundaries did not exist before and during the early years of Australia's colonial period. These boundaries are used as a reference point to identify the origins of where Aboriginal people come from.
- 21 Refer to Community Profiles on the website of the Torres Strait Regional Authority. Web site: <http://www.tsra.gov.au>
- 22 Hollinsworth, op.cit, p.1.
- 23 NSW Health, op.cit, p.15.
- 24 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission. (1999). *As a matter of fact: Aboriginal history is not Australian history*. Canberra: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission.
- 25 Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry – Australia. (2002). *Guidelines for reaching our clients – Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders*. Retrieved January 1, 2007, from Charles Darwin University. Web site: <http://www.learnline.edu.edu.au/wip/cce/topic4.html>
- 26 NSW Health, op.cit, p.3.

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