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## Journal Conversations: Building the Research Self-Efficacy of an Aboriginal Early Career Academic

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## Journal Conversations: Building the Research Self-Efficacy of an Aboriginal Early Career Academic

### Abstract

This paper shows how I used my research journal mainly as a reflective tool throughout the process of applying for and completing a PhD. Embarking on a PhD can be daunting for anyone and I was challenged by my lack of academic self-efficacy. In the absence of a formal academic mentor my research journal became my confidante, a tool that helped me make progress at times when barriers to research seemed insurmountable. It helped me decrease the cognitive dissonance I was experiencing about issues of subjectivity/objectivity and the positioning of my self in the research. This paper shares research journal entries as I take you on my research journey. The entries make public some of the values I uphold for my research and show how I found ways to embed my own epistemology as an Australian Aboriginal (Koori) researcher into a PhD that also meets a Western academic research paradigm.

### Keywords

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, Research Journal, Research Diary, Indigenous, Research Self-Efficacy, Early Career Academic, Qualitative Methods, Reflective Research

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### Acknowledgements

I wish to pay respect and thank my current supervisors for their support and wisdom. I also acknowledge my first supervisor, whose spirit remains connected to this work.

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*This paper shows how I used my research journal mainly as a reflective tool throughout the process of applying for and completing a PhD. Embarking on a PhD can be daunting for anyone and I was challenged by my lack of academic self-efficacy. In the absence of a formal academic mentor my research journal became my confidante, a tool that helped me make progress at times when barriers to research seemed insurmountable. It helped me decrease the cognitive dissonance I was experiencing about issues of subjectivity/objectivity and the positioning of my self in the research. This paper shares research journal entries as I take you on my research journey. The entries make public some of the values I uphold for my research and show how I found ways to embed my own epistemology as an Australian Aboriginal (Koori) researcher into a PhD that also meets a Western academic research paradigm. Keywords: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, Research Journal, Research Diary, Indigenous, Research Self-Efficacy, Early Career Academic, Qualitative Methods, Reflective Research*

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### Introduction: Family, Fear and Kissing with Noses

When Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people meet each other, we ask questions like “Who is your mob (family/community)?” or “Where are you from?” These questions are the foundation of cultural identity and locate you for others by connecting you to family, community, country. I will follow this Aboriginal protocol by writing a Yarn (usually a verbal exchange of knowledge/a shared story) to position myself within this paper. This paper is not a traditional research report; rather, it utilises some of my research journal entries to describe how using a research journal was pivotal in helping me to blend my own epistemology as an Australian Aboriginal (Koori) researcher with a Western academic research paradigm. Yarning (Leeson, Smith, & Rynne, 2016; Walker, Fredericks, Mills, & Anderson, 2014) has increasingly been recognised as a culturally appropriate and respectful way to collect research data. Yarning was pivotal in the data collection process of my PhD as part of the Indigenous methodology I used. Throughout my PhD “research participants” were named Team Members. This term represents the true engagement between me (“researcher”) and Team Members (“research participants”) throughout the whole research process.

I Yarned with Team Members and with my own family during my PhD. A fellow academic once suggested my Yarning was “mere naval gazing” (MD: research journal), completely misunderstanding their value and importance. In fact, Yarns were woven throughout my entire methodological approach; they aligned with theory presented by Kovach, Brown, and Strega (2015). In my PhD research, Yarns helped me to present my ways of knowing as an Indigenous (Aboriginal) researcher, they used an Indigenous process as a research method, they were shared between me and Team Members as we built and maintained our research relationships and they demonstrated a way of reciprocal sharing of knowledge.

My research journal allowed me to have an ongoing Yarn throughout the entire PhD process. It was an important part of the larger Indigenous research methodology that had ethical approval from the relevant bodies (more details are provided later in this paper). At times when

I did not have a person to Yarn with face to face, I used my research journal. At times when I needed to Yarn about something that might have been difficult to do face to face, I used my research journal. Although my research journal took a written form I viewed it as a being valuable, supportive, ongoing Yarning process that helped me to build my research capacity and self-efficacy as an early career researcher.

My Yarn (below) contains reflections and stories that are either my own or belong to members of my family. I share them with permission, pride and with reciprocal respect.

I am Michelle Dickson. I am an Aboriginal<sup>1</sup> woman from Ngarigo lands (in the Snowy Mountains region in New South Wales, Australia) and Darkinjung lands (on the Central Coast of New South Wales). I have three younger siblings and my parents are John and Deslie Dickson (nee Hayes). Born north of the harbor in Sydney, New South Wales on Cammeraygal lands, I have lived and worked mostly on the lands of the Eora nation in Sydney. My four children are proud to be the next generation of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Australians.

The Stolen Generation (Wilkie, 1997) made a huge impact on both sides of my family. Until 1969, various government laws and policies in Australia enforced the removal of children from their families and communities, resulting in what is now called The Stolen Generation. This generation of children were removed and raised in institutions or fostered to non-Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people. Some of these children eventually found their way home, or were found again by family members, others never found home or family. For some, being Aboriginal was something to hide. The experiences one generation encountered left in them a fear for the next generation. Familial stories identify more safety in being told we “come from the Islands” or have “Spanish blood way back.” My paternal grandmother, an intelligent and loving person, told me that her own “flat nose” was because of the “Eskimo heritage.” When she told me this I was looking at an old photo she had dug out from the depths of her private tallboy (wardrobe). The photo was of her Aboriginal relatives. She smiled as I questioned the “Eskimo” comment, and said to me “Michelle, you know Eskimo people kiss with their noses, and I think we must have done a lot of kissing – look at my nose!”

### **A Koori Academic**

I am also an Australian Aboriginal (Koori) early career academic. On both sides of my family I was first to complete year 12 at high school, and the first to attend and graduate from University. I am a self-confessed nerd and love learning. My undergraduate honors degree inspired me towards postgraduate qualifications, including a Masters. I have many photos of my first graduation day, but one photo speaks volumes for me: it is a photo of my two grandmothers proudly holding my testamur, the legal certification of your degree given to you at the time of your graduation, with me in the middle. That journey was not just mine. Like a number of my Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander academic colleagues, and colleagues from non-dominant cultures around the world (Tuitt, Hanna, Martinez, del Carmen Salazar, & Griffin, 2009), I have worked in the tertiary education sector for many years (25 years at the date of publication) and have had minimal career progression during that time - but not through lack of trying. Over the years my teaching skills developed, and my teaching load and community outreach remained a dominant force, but that teaching/service load meant that there was minimal space for research in my work profile. I wanted to change that. I wanted to

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples are the original inhabitants and custodians of the land now known as Australia. I identify as Aboriginal. Use of appropriate cultural terminology is highly important. As an Aboriginal woman from New South Wales I call myself Koori. I will use this term throughout this paper, when referring to myself. When referring to other Indigenous people from Australia I will use the term Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, unless I know they identify by using another term.

progress alongside my other colleagues to the realm of “Professor-dom” and beyond - but to do that I needed a PhD. So somewhere along my journey I also became a PhD student, exploring the lived work experiences of Australian Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people who worked in the Australian health sector. At the time of writing this paper I am employed by The University of Sydney; but for you to understand my present I need to journey back to the past, to my employ at another University. And that is certainly a story.

### **The Lone Koori Academic in the Faculty**

At my former employ I started working as a casual academic on a suite of postgraduate programs within a well-established University faculty. Soon after, I found myself with a heavier teaching role that also led me to take over coordination of the programs. I loved this job despite being employed on rolling six- or twelve-month contracts over a long period of time. I really put everything I had into the job and worked at a level far beyond my paid level of employ, that of an associate lecturer. When I first talked about enrolling in a PhD I assumed I would have overwhelming collegial support from my fellow academics. I thought they would welcome me into the world of research and help me navigate my way in the realm of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander research: I was, after all, the lone Koori academic in the faculty. I already worked very closely and collegially with a large number of peers who asked me to help “embed Aboriginal content” into the faculty’s core business. I truly believed that the faculty had a desire to learn more about Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander epistemology and ontology. The guest lectures I developed and delivered (in units coordinated by other colleagues) were all well received by both students and staff, and the staff development workshops I enthusiastically designed and facilitated were warmly embraced. I assumed that my emerging research would be seen as contributing to the faculty’s growing body of knowledge about Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander world views and lived experiences. Sadly, I was wrong.

### **Journals in Research, and How I Used My Journal**

Snowden (2015) suggests that two types of journal are commonly used in the research process; the first is a personal journal used by a researcher to record their experiences throughout the research process and the second a journal “used by the researcher as a data collection tool” (p. 36). According to Robson and McCartan (2016) the first type of research journal provides scope for the researcher to record a chronology of their research experiences and their reflections about those experiences, including recording the complete research process from design through to publication of results. Snowden (2015) highlights that research rigor can be enhanced by using a research journal to record the research process and the document the researcher’s thinking and experiences. Some disciplines, like the sciences, have used research journals as a regular component of the research process; these research journals record each step taken in the investigation and note what worked and what didn’t, and reflect on why.

Clarke (2009) advocates for the use of research journals to enhance and support the researcher’s learning, especially for the early career researcher. She suggests that the research journal encourages both “creative and critical thinking” (p. 76) that promotes increased transparency in the research process and was for her a “vehicle for learning in my roles as researcher and analyst” (p. 76).

In qualitative research the research journal is considered a valuable means for learning about the experience of engaging in research and equally valuable for collecting data. Lamb (2013c) states that “writing a research journal is critically important to the documentation of

the researcher's personal research journey and help validate the authenticity of research data collected using this method" (p. 90). Lamb (2013a) and Borg (2001) both suggest that early career researchers might learn from the "realities of research" (Lamb, 2013a, p. 37) through engaging in other researchers' research journals.

While research journals are often excluded from some more traditional research methods, Ortlipp (2008) suggests the research journal allows researchers to clarify research experiences by reflective journaling. Davidson (2012) suggests the research journal also allows the researcher to explore the "I" in their research, to explore the juxtaposition of objectivity and subjectivity in research, a particularly relevant debate for me as my own research methods encouraged my "self" to be very present in my research.

My research epistemology was underpinned by the work of Peshkin (1988) who believed that researchers should develop a method for systematically unearthing their subjectivity during the entirety of the research process, not simply exposing it at the end when the research data has been collected, analysed and written up. Peshkin (2001a; 2001b) also believed that subjectivity is always present in one's research and non-research life "like a garment that cannot be removed" (Peshkin, 1988, p. 17). Like Bradbury-Jones (2007), I too adopted Peshkin's theory and explored how the use of a reflective research journal as data provides a means for systematically exploring my subjectivity as a researcher.

Interested in establishing methods for enhancing credibility in qualitative studies, Bradbury-Jones used a research journal to construct an audit trail (Meyrick, 2006; Rolfe, 2006). The journal was used as data to track decisions made throughout the research process, to make explicit research positioning and prejudices (Koch, 2006), and importantly, to enhance rigor by making explicit the influence of the researcher on the research process (Bradbury-Jones, 2007).

From the early days, my research journal was a trusted, safe space. I freely explored questions I had about research, bias, positioning, subjectivity, academic expectations:

*Sometimes, in my researcher mode, I really feel like I am in trouble: Even like a child sitting outside the School Principal's office, waiting for a "talking to." He said to me: "So, Michelle, how exactly will you recruit then? Snowballing? Will you stick to that or will you take a more casual approach? You know, talk about your research with your community? Direct contact? Recruit that way? Ah...Michelle. That's not allowed, you know? Not favored in the academic world at all." ... [breathe Michelle...He is an academic colleague who you quite like.]*

*Well, #!#!. Smack my bottom (hah). YES. I...DO...KNOW!  
I am boiling over, sitting here. Where did this comment come from? And from a colleague who I hold in esteem and respect! Is this an assumption about me? An assumption about my academic rigor? My capacity? Direct contact. Subjectivity. Can you be objective? Do I know what is expected of me academically? (MD research journal: shortly after acceptance of my PhD proposal)*

### **My Journal, My Academic Mentor (in the Initial Absence of a Human Mentor)**

Despite the fact that I had worked as an academic in the same faculty for several years I had not connected with an academic mentor for research. I had colleagues who were also friends, one of whom worked with qualitative research – the paradigm I aligned myself most closely with. But we were busy with other things, she was already supervising other PhDs and

we were aware of maintaining a certain boundary. I needed to talk to another academic about my apprehension, about my sense of self-worth as a researcher. I needed to build my confidence up enough to actually apply for a PhD, but I didn't know anyone in the faculty who I felt I could talk with about those things. At that time academic mentoring was not built in as a formal process in that job and I found it difficult to "confess" to colleagues that I was worried that "I didn't have what it took" to do a PhD and embark on a research career:

*I am not sure why I feel such an intense sense of lack, a low level of capacity. I feel so confident in other areas of my work, but in approaching a PhD, I feel lacking. Actually, I feel like an imposter. I am not sure I have what it takes to do a PhD, but I want to do one. Without a PhD I really can't progress my academic career – should I even be doing the job I am doing without a PhD? Maybe I am truly an imposter? Can I do this? What does it take to make me feel like I can? What will they think of me if I can't? (MD research journal: PhD contemplation)*

### **Contemplation. A PhD. Am I Good Enough?**

As a first in family academic, I didn't have a relative who had gone before me, someone I could share a conversation with about university level study, about worrying over my capacity for a PhD. There were a couple of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander academics in other faculties at the University, but they might as well have been on the moon. Their work spaces were so overloaded; they were so constantly busy that I felt I would only be an added burden. I was worried that a confession of that type, to a colleague in my Faculty, might create a whole range of unwanted stereotypes (Rochecouste, Oliver, Bennell, Anderson, Cooper, & Forrest 2016; Tarbetsky, Collie, & Martin, 2016) about me:

*What if I don't get it done? Will I been seen to be lazy? Not up to it academically? What if life gets in the way and really puts up walls- will that be seen as "Aboriginal"- too much chaos and not enough focused effort? I know I will work my #!#! off to do this. Just to prove all of that wrong. Just hope I don't kill myself in the process. (MD research journal: contemplating PhD)*

Stereotype threat (Hickey, 2015; McInerney, 2016; Rochecouste et al., 2016; Tarbetsky, Collie, & Martin, 2016; Wall & Baker, 2012): it was alive and kicking in my head and in my journal:

*I remember when I really felt inadequate as an academic. A colleague, new to the department, was introduced to me. I was introduced as "This is Michelle. Michelle is an Aboriginal member of our faculty. She is involved in the graduate counselling programs."*

*Hmmm...did that person know I was actually running six graduate programs? They should know- they hold a senior management position in the faculty. I wasn't just involved in them, I was steering the ship!*

*But it wasn't that comment that made me feel inadequate. It was the new member of faculty who replied, "So, Michelle...do you have a university degree, or are you here on a training program?" Grrr...I remember it felt like it took me hours to make my response. Time just stopped.*

*“Actually, I am the program coordinator and lead lecturer for the six graduate counselling programs. I do have a university degree. Actually, I have more than one!”*

*That was hard. Hard to be nice. I didn't really even want to be nice. But then out it came. Out of the mouth of another colleague who was listening in “Ah, but Michelle doesn't have a PhD. Maybe one day, eh?”*

*BANG. Shot down, left feeling like the imposter in the room otherwise filled with academics. “Maybe one day?” Paternalistic #!#!. Condescending. Made me feel like I was not good enough. Or is that just my own thoughts, about myself? I need to feel like I can do a PhD. I need to know I can. (MD research journal: PhD contemplation)*

I was raised with a social and community norm that said it is not right to “talk yourself up,” nor was it right to “speak up” or challenge one’s Elders. Throughout my research journal I reflected on comments made to me by my academic elders to whom, at that point in my academic trajectory, I felt unable to “speak up” to. My research journal played an important role in processing the comments that I felt unable to vocalize. By writing them down I was able to see the merit in making such responses (when I felt I was ready to do so).

### **And the Advert Read: “Desperately Seeking Supervisor”**

Thankfully, in my PhD contemplative period, I found an academic who expressed excitement about my “challenging” research ideas. “James” became my first supervisor<sup>2</sup> and applauded that I was keeping a research journal. I thought that the journal would be a vehicle for me to use, to keep track of my thoughts, keep a record of my progress, a place to record key information. And while all of that was true, James also suggested that the journal could give me space to reflect on some of the cognitive dissonance I was experiencing as a potential PhD student. He also suggested that later it would document my research journey. Tick. PhD candidate and supervisor on the same page.

Early pre-supervision sessions covered deep discussions about qualitative and quantitative research. Interestingly James was a senior academic with almighty expertise in quantitative methods and I was a student of qualitative research. Our supervisory relationship was built upon respect and on reciprocal learning. I felt safe to share some of my journal entries with James and found in him a colleague with whom I could confess my belief that I was an academic imposter:

*It's funny how differently I am seen by James. After I read out my journal entry today he looked at me and smiled and said something like “You don't see it do you? You really don't see your worth, your mind? Do it Michelle- get the paperwork filled out. Bugger others – remind yourself you want this, and remind yourself you have it in you.” (MD research journal: PhD contemplation)*

Many things challenged my self-efficacy. Many journal entries explored doubt, self-doubt, perceptions of public doubt, and evidence of collegial doubt. While my newly appointed

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<sup>2</sup> My PhD was commenced at one University, under the supervision of “James.” Sadly, James passed away during my early years of candidature, and I felt the loss. I completed at a new University with a new supervision team.



supervisor shared wonderful insights with me during early supervision sessions, my extremely poor self-efficacy continued to fill the research journal space.

### **Step One: Writing a Research Application – Am I in Trouble Already?**

*I am curious about how challenged I feel. As I sit writing up my PhD research proposal I feel both empowered and disempowered at the same time. I am empowered by my enthusiasm and vision of what the research journey will be like, and I feel disempowered by my inability to make my ideas fit into the required research proposal template. Are my ideas and methods wrong? Not academic enough? Not rigorous? “How will I maintain objectivity in my research?” Well, that’s a great question. How do I answer that one? Do I want to maintain objectivity in my research practice? Is it as clear cut as research being either objective or subjective? So, if I talk about myself with my participants in research, will I dilute my PhD in the eyes and minds of academia? What I do know, is that if I don’t Yarn about myself during the research process I will dilute myself. How can my research participants share with me if I don’t share with them? To **not** share “me” is disrespectful. ### it. The research proposal template needs a rewrite! (MD research journal: writing a PhD proposal)*

As I started to write up my PhD proposal I thought about what the academy would require of me, and how my research might fit. I had lots of questions and took myself off to the University Higher Degree Research advisor to find some answers. My preliminary discussions with the higher degree unit encouraged me to think deeply about research bias and subjectivity:

*Well. That was interesting. The advice about “checking in” to make sure my research methodology is sound and transparent was welcomed. I imagine most students get offered that gem. But I wonder if other students get asked questions about juggling personal interactions during research? “You need to think about the position you take when you talk to your research subjects. I mean, you wouldn’t want to dirty your data by getting personal. I guess it would be easy to move away from data collection into more of a chat. You need to show us how you would avoid that.” Hmm... getting personal. I should have asked him exactly what he meant by that. And of course, I would chat! Oh wow. Am I in trouble already? (MD research journal: pre-submission of research proposal)*

I was acutely aware that there was an interesting interplay between the connectedness of my own professional and personal identity and that of the health workers who were part of this research. I was an Aboriginal woman (who also worked in Aboriginal health) researching the working lives of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander health workers. I saw that combination as exciting and empowering, but the higher degree unit clearly saw it as a challenge. My chosen research process engaged this identity interplay; it drew upon all parts of my “self” - my gender, my personal history, my professional history, and my Aboriginality. It felt natural to me that these parts of my “self” had to be shared with the research participants, and be part of the research itself (Day, 2002), creating a respectful research space that was highly fluid, albeit challenging of the traditions of academic research (Crick, 2002).

Just as Ochieng (2011) does, I firmly believe that personal and professional identities are shaped by life experiences and similarly that the research process is shaped by our personal and professional identities. My belief system immediately blends the objective and the

subjective, seeing them not as oppositional positions but as useful allies in research. Bhopal (2009; 2010) and Phoenix (2000) explored the roles of the personal and professional attributes of the researcher, examining how attributes such as cultural background and gender can influence the research process. They also explored how interconnectedness between the identities of the researcher and the research participants has potential for methodological and ethical complexities. I was acutely aware of this but didn't perceive there to be any potential negative ethical complexities; rather, I saw the connection between researcher identities and research participant identities as adding a richness or thickness to the research. However, I do believe that very few things are simple and perhaps strangely, I enjoy complexities. My faith in this was not shared at the higher degree unit:

*So, they told me I needed to be very clear in my PhD application. Clear about me being the researcher and "them" being participants. "me" and "them" – hasn't there been enough "othering" in research? And how can I change who I am anyway? I am Koori. I have a history working in health, in jobs similar to those who I will be Yarning with. Doing a PhD doesn't take any of that away from me. Surely the similarity might even make things more enjoyable for everyone! I am not asking people to tick boxes on a survey, I am asking them to Yarn with me about themselves, their work....and that deserves time and relationship. That's it. They are worried I will have conflicting relationships within my role as a researcher. It's just weird that building that relationship is actually one of the first things I need to do, before any "research" starts. (MD research journal: The Higher Degree Research Unit)*

### **Finally, My PhD Application Accepted**

It felt like a lifetime before my PhD application was approved. A short, stock-standard email advising me that my application had been approved. Nothing personal. The senders had no idea about the impact that short email would have on me, nor could they begin to imagine the depth of my mixed emotions:

*Approved! Oh God. Here I go...let me be able to do this. Whoever might be looking over me, please help me to get this done. Don't let me fail- don't let those others have reason to say, "I told you so." (MD research journal: PhD approval day)*

### **Blurred Lines: A New Way of Looking at Subjectivity/Objectivity**

As I embarked on my PhD journey I was given advice from several academic colleagues. They had read my research proposal and were concerned that I might not be able to maintain "pure research objectivity," often suggesting that my research methods might encourage a dangerous "blurring of lines" between my personal identity and my professional identity:

*Get to know your research participants? Eh? That's a bit personal. Ah, but you will, of course, not just walk in and have a chat, or a Yarn as you say? Well, that'd be just dangerous. Think about it, Michelle. There are not too many of us around here who would spend that much time, if any, getting to know research participants. That's just asking for a dangerous blurring of the lines. (MD research journal: shortly after PhD approval)*

While I listened and understood their position I also sat firmly with my own belief that I would not be able to do respectful research if I did not blur those lines. I know about academic rigor. I respect it. I perform it daily in my job. I know a PhD needs to meet a whole range of standards-ethical, academic, legal, practical. And I am about to “do” a PhD. I know objectivity is believed to produce “clean” research. But if that is true then does subjectivity immediately make research “dirty”? I know my PhD needs to meet the academic standards, but I also know my research methods will make my work “dirty” by definition (Mosselson, 2010). I am not convinced it needs to be that clear cut and my journal helped me to work through my research processes (Alaszewski, 2006) rather than just focusing on research outcome:

*There is something about the division between dirty and clean data that I don't understand. I mean of course I understand the difference, but why assume the methods I use in my research will dirty things up. It's all about keeping the distance between me (researcher) and the people who are willing to share their lived experiences with me...hmmm...that just does not sit right with me. Any good engagement has reciprocity as the foundation. But perhaps that is the problem. I see this as engagement and others see it as data collection. I am determined for it to be both, determined that I can share while I listen and “gather” (learn). And all in an action of respectful objective subjectivity! (MD research journal: shortly after PhD approval)*

### **Receiving a Summons: Meet the Ethics Committee Face to Face**

I already had received one ethics approval for my first round of Yarns (in depth interviews in other words), and the interactions I had had with the human ethics committee for that were relatively straightforward. Not simple, just straightforward. Mostly the committee was treading very carefully around issues related to research with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people, and I respect that. But after just one round of responding to written questions, my ethics application gained approval.

It was the second application that took me by surprise. I have to admit I was completely shocked when I received a letter requesting that my supervisor and I attend an ethics committee meeting and speak to my second ethics application. I had already answered two rounds of questions about the application, and the committee felt it best to “give [me] the chance to defend my application.” It felt terribly official, almost as if I was being asked to attend a court hearing to defend myself, my honor. My supervisor tried hard to dissolve my fear and anxiety, however he had never heard of any such request in his entire academic career:

*So, James tried hard today to make me feel OK about the request from ethics. But I could see he was almost as puzzled as I was. When he said “OK, I've never heard of this before, never in my whole career,” well, it made me feel somewhat unique – and not in a good way. “Don't worry,” he said. “We'll just explain what they don't understand, and it will be fine,” he said. I don't have such a sense of “OK” at all. I am terrified. (MD research journal: seeking ethics approval)*

And so, James and I reviewed the application, and reviewed the first review of the application, and the second. I still did not feel OK, but realized that it was something I had to do. And what exactly was the issue? Well, it was all around using photographs in my “data collection” stage. It was about using photos as data, it seemed...but both James and I had another theory. We

both agreed that it would be more about photographing Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people and workplaces, rather than just photos as data, and we were right.

I thought I would be most anxious about the actual day of the meeting, but that turned out to be less a challenge than I imagined. Sadly, a few days before our scheduled meet and greet with the human ethics committee, James fell terribly ill and was hospitalized. I had to face the squad alone. My turn-around was fascinating. I became more worried about James's health than I was about the ethics committee defense- suddenly that seemed like a walk in the park!

*I knew James was sick but really didn't think he would be at this point, in hospital. Now that is something to worry about- the ethics meeting just fades, by comparison. I must go and do a great job defending my research proposal- James would expect nothing less. After all, this is what I want to do, what feels right. And I was actually responding to requests from my "participants," my Team Members as I called them. (MD research journal: seeking ethics approval)*

During round one of our Yarning sessions (in-depth interviews) we had all found ourselves drawing or signing with our hands to try and describe something that was hard to place in words. We all discussed how useful it would be to have something visual; you know the old "a picture paints a thousand words" thing. We all felt that to be true and decided that taking photos would infinitely assist in developing our extended Yarning about workplaces and lived experiences of work in the health sector. So, I applied for a second ethics approval, seeking permission for Team Members to take photographs that represented their lived experiences of work:

*It feels really strange, having to ask an ethics committee for permission to allow the Team Members to take photos of their own work, their own photographs! All of the paperwork is prepared, checked with the legal department even. Nobody will be identified in any photo, nor will any workplace. Every photo will be taken with respect, permission, and dignity – and with signed photo releases! It just doesn't feel right that a committee, who will never meet the Team Members, can say yes or no to their own request to take their own photos. But...I understand. I have set this up with respect and all of my processes follow all of the required cultural, social, legal and academic protocols – but others might not be so vigilant. I understand. It just doesn't feel right. (MD research journal: seeking ethics approval)*

### **Questioning the Ethics: Mine? Theirs? Others'?**

I realized I was experiencing a severe case of cognitive dissonance; I knew I needed to follow the ethics committee requests, but both my head and heart also felt that the process just was not right. Regardless, I fronted the committee, alone and anxious. I sat in the lone chair in front of the semi-circle of desks that housed the large ethics committee. I answered each question in as much depth as possible. And I smiled as much as possible – in fear that if I didn't smile I might just crumble. Some of the questions just sought clarification of my correctly applied protocols and processes. Those questions were easy because I had prepared all of my paperwork perfectly. The questions that I found difficult were ones that cast doubt on my "data collection methods," on the ability of my "participants" to actually take photos that "met with the high ethical requirements of anonymity," and on my "ability to maintain objectivity in my

research.” However, with each question I took a deep breath and just replied as best I knew how:

*How could they even ask me if my “participants” would follow the protocols? Why wouldn’t they? And the question about the “real need” for an image, when I already had gathered words! And suggesting that I was shirking my research responsibilities by asking the “participants to do [my] research data collection”!!! They really didn’t get it. (MD research journal: seeking ethics approval)*

James got a laugh later, as I described how I answered questions for about forty minutes and then was asked to wait outside the room, told that they would need to discuss things before they made a final decision. After waiting for twenty minutes I was called back in, only to be told they needed more time to consider, and advised me that I “would hear from them in due course.” And I did, eventually. But it took about four more weeks.

### **James, My Journal and Me: Exploring My Academic Identity and Planning for “Data Collection”**

While I eagerly awaited ethics approval on my PhotoYarning (Dickson, forthcoming paper “PhotoYarning”) application I used my journal to explore my academic identity. James really encouraged me to use the journal for this. Together we used the research journal entries to pull apart my thoughts and feelings about being “an academic.” James was worried when I explained I often struggled with juggling an academic identity with my personal identity and my community identity. I talked with James about how I often felt that other colleagues saw me more as “the Aboriginal colleague” and less as an academic colleague. And yet when I was out in community I got more comments about being the “big professor” and less about the personal me. I felt like I constantly juggled my identity. James was concerned that I might need to shift my identity before I went out to interview, or Yarn with, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people working in the health sector:

*Now I am thinking.... James’s suggestion that I felt like I needed to leave my academic identity at the door before I walked in to a room to Yarn with a Health worker puzzled me. Do I think I need to do that? How in the hell can I do that? I am there as a PhD student, attached to a university. That is as much a part of my “self” as other things. I can’t take off one coat and put on another, only to replace that first coat later on. How bloody confusing! Is that what the research process will make me do?.....So, does the same apply when I come back to my office at uni? Do I take off the coat of “me” that is my Aboriginality and replace it with a coat of academia? I don’t think so! At the risk of overheating (hah) I wear all of the coats all of the time. (MD research journal: waiting for ethics approval)*

### **Yarning, Yarning and More Yarning**

Visiting the workplaces and communities of the fifteen Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Team Members was an honor, but it was not simple. Like Lamb (2013a, 2013b, 2013c) I used to reflect on the challenges and triumphs in my research journal, and talking with my journal like that often helped me to sort out some of the dilemmas that I faced along the way. At times the journal celebrated creative research with me:

*What an amazing Yarning session today with [Team Member]. We were both surprised when the kids appeared at her office door after school- we had no idea that time had flown by so fast. It was so fun to pause the Yarn, go help make the kids afternoon tea, have a cuppa<sup>3</sup> while they told us about school, and then get back to the Yarn when the kids were safely playing in the office courtyard. Ahh, now that is data collection at its best! (MD research journal: Yarning)*

And at times my journal helped me debrief the “hard stuff”:

*I knew something was wrong when the young fella met me at the driveway gate. “You Michelle?” “Sure am, hear to see [Team Member] - what’s your name?” “Jack. But you can’t come see him today. Uncle died. Everyone’s gone. Sorry business<sup>4</sup>, y’know? I stayed to tell you. And now I will go meet them too. [Team Member] said sorry.”*

*And off he rode on his pushbike. And so, here I am in my room at the local pub, after driving ten hours to get here. Poor Jack. Poor [Team Member], and Uncle. Sadness. I’ll have a drink and a feed, and think. And tomorrow I will drive home. And I will wait ‘til [team Member] calls me. He will, when the time is right. And then I will come back. Life. It is short. (MD research journal: Yarning)*

My journal also captured some of the situations that might have been considered, by others, as ethical dilemmas:

*Journal, I love my research. In the middle of our Yarning today [team Member’s] mum knocked on the door and cam in holding the most beautiful bubba – a hungry one! Granny had to suddenly go help someone and couldn’t watch bub anymore, so there she was, all gorgeous and hungry in the office with us. And [Team Member] then got called outside to calm down a client who had started to make some noise in the waiting area. And, journal, I got the bubba! Yep, in the middle of our Yarning I had to pause the recorder and feed bub the bottle. I loved it. [Team Member] then returned and switched on the recorder again. She just kept on Yarning and left me to the bottle and burping. Seriously. Can’t wait to tell James how happy this Yarning session was. (MD research journal: Yarning)*

### **Juggling Identity. Of Course, I Am Not the Only One Who Does This.**

Interestingly, the juggling of identity emerged in the Yarning data – as clear an issue for the health workers in my research as it was for me. It was a familiar story, experienced by me and told over and over again in the research Yarns. This common ground could potentially pose a challenge to the research process – my focus should be on the professional identity stories of the health workers, not on my personal experience of identity juggling. Again, the research journal provided space to explore this dilemma:

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<sup>3</sup> A cuppa is a colloquial term for a cup of tea.

<sup>4</sup> Sorry business is Aboriginal term that refers to the passing of a person. Sad news is a Torres Strait Islander term that refers to the passing of a person.

*He could have been telling my story, but I was listening to him tell his. At work he is the health worker, expected to do his job and not get distracted by phone calls from family, or about community needs. At work he was the health worker, full stop. But after work, in personal time, he still took time to listen to the health needs of people in community. Community saw him as a community member who worked at the health service, so even at a BBQ he talked to people about their health, answering their questions. He didn't turn that part of himself off after work but at work he had to turn off the personal part of himself. Juggling identity. I know this well. (MD research journal: after a Yarn)*

However, there were times when the identity juggle worked in favor of all parties:

*Am I tired. A HUGE Yarning session with [Team Member] and then a community BBQ! But how much fun was it! When those kids [teenagers] came to the door as we were just finishing the Yarning I could feel that there was something else in store for me...and I was right. They talked to [Team Member] about the youth BBQ night and left to get things set up.*

*[Team Member] explained that the kids wanted to have a BBQ with the Elders, so they could help the Elders understand more about the importance of sexual health and sexual diversity education. The kids knew how important it was to know about things, but there was some reservation from the Elders. The whole BBQ was set up to help the Elders understand the need, and approve of a new program that would focus on sexual health and sexual diversity. It meant a lot to the kids... [Team Member] must have clued the kids in to my own background in the area, because they had actually dropped in to check I was still here. Little did I know they had asked [Team member] to get me behind the BBQ with the Elders, to Yarn with them about "stuff" and help them understand. No pressure, eh? And it was great. Sitting here I can say two things: (1) I smell of BBQ sausages and (2) I juggled my identities so well tonight. (MD research journal: after a Yarn)*

### **And then There Was PhotoYarning**

At times my research journal allowed me to critique my own ideas and provided scope for me to debrief when I returned to my hotel room after a PhotoYarning session. I travelled alone on those research trips around Australia and my journal was the next best thing to a debrief with my supervisor at the end of a day:

*Amazing sharing of experiences and wisdom. The hard work (and nightmarish logistics) involving gathering of a few Team Members together around a set of photos all paid off. How do other researchers do this without sharing "self," positioning the "me" in the process? I would feel very cold, clinical, detached if I didn't show reciprocity. When [Team Member] spoke about juggling her young children's needs around her workplace demands, well I had to agree...and my nodding head just invited the rest to ask me how I did it. Imagine if I declined to answer! They'd have walked right away. (MD research journal: PhotoYarning)*

The richness we achieved today is amazing. It feels like months of Yarning took place around that one set of photos – and all in one afternoon. There is no way we could have shared such thick and engaging stories without the images and without each other. The whole [process supports sharing, encourages a process that establishes a common ground, common experience that screams “resilience.” So much in common. So many gentle nods to acknowledge same/same. So much laughter when sharing good reflections, and so many tears – for many reasons. (MD research journal: PhotoYarning)

### **Shared Analysis: Working Through My Cognitive Dissonance as a Researcher**

PhotoYarning initially was used to gather a richness of lived experiences that words struggled to voice. But quickly I realized it turned in to something so much more – and without a doubt I let it flow into being a natural process of shared data analysis. Of course, my journal helped me work through the cognitive dissonance:

*I know this is how it is meant to be, but all I kept thinking about were research colleagues looking down on my process, our process. It was a natural progression. We Yarned about one photo until nobody had anything else to share, and then someone said “So, what does that all mean then?” ... and we were off. EVERYONE contributed their thoughts, perceptions, their analysis. It was amazing to be a part of a process that was so collaborative – on the spot shared analysis. And when we reached a group agreement on what might be called an emerging theme, we paused and breathed again. That’s when I saw just how excited we all were, how eager everyone was to use the time this way. Who was I to stop this creative research activity? Sublime analysis. (MD research journal: sharing the analysis)*

### **Reciprocity: It Works for Me and For You**

In my research journal I documented the give and take in our shared research process. This was important for me to do, because I consider research never to be a one-way street. Documenting what the Team Members were gaining from the research allowed me to ensure that reciprocity stayed at the core of our research relationship:

*The PhotoYarning reeked of reciprocity. Team Members were eager to contribute to the process, to analyze the photos in a collaboratively way. Today Team Members pulled me up on saying “thank you” far too often: “What you thankin’ us for, sis? We’re getting just as much out of this as you are.” Clearly this research is giving us all something – and that is exactly how it should be. (MD research journal: on reciprocity)*

### **And I Wrote Down My Tears**

James’s illness took an incredible hold and sadly, unexpectedly, James passed away. James had been my anchor, my colleague, my friend, my supervisor. He believed in me when I did not:

*James. I will finish this. I promised you and you made me promise myself. I am not sure you knew how I appreciated the cup of coffee you would have with me during supervision – when you were on such restricted fluids that cup probably*



*was most of your daily intake. I knew that. I felt privileged to share those cups with you. I am so sad. Deeply sad. Your knowledge and your wit, your honesty and your faith in me – I will miss all of you. Thank you, thank you, thank you.*  
(MD research journal: James)

James' death influenced me so significantly that I took a leave of absence from my PhD for a time. During that time, I changed jobs, moved to another University. After a settling in period I started to feel inspired by my new colleagues, by their support and encouragement. I found a kindred spirit with a reputation- respect, qualitative research, and patience. I pitched my PhD to her in hope that she might take me on, might encourage me to unpack the actual boxes of research paper and open the symbolic vault that had shut tight with James's passing. She was a brave woman. She became my new supervisor. After several years of helping me patiently chip away at the boxes and vaults she took a brief leave of absence – although she never removed herself fully from the supervisory relationship.

While she was living other parts of life she entrusted my supervision to two other kindred souls, colleagues who also have given me patience, deadlines, and support beyond expectation. I now have two amazing women supervising my PhD completion.

### **Discussion: Advocating for the Use of a Research Journal**

Importantly a research journal can be the reflective tool that assists a researcher to build research self-efficacy, particularly in the absence of other support systems. Like Davidson (2012) my research journal helped me to reflect on the cognitive dissonance I was experiencing between objectivity and subjectivity in research. My journal allowed me to understand that, for my research, there was no one answer to the objectivity/subjectivity debate. My reflective journaling helped me to find my own position on that debate; by using my journal I was able to bring the issues of subjectivity/objectivity to the surface, to name them, make them public. In the process I had my own research ethics confirmed. My reflective journal entries helped the Koori academic in me find a space to name the value a subjective connect with the research process had for me, and by naming that I felt less like an academic imposter. I wish the same for any PhD student.

A research journal provided me with a reflective approach, allowing me to write about my research experiences, choices, assumptions, ideas, and actions (Mruck & Breuer, 2003). Choices that I was making throughout the research journey were really visible to me as I wrote them down on the pages of the research journal. In turn, the reflective practice of journaling allowed me to see how my decisions and choices were constructing my research outcomes (Borg, 2001; Mruck & Breuer, 2003). James commented about how the process of journaling was providing acknowledgement of my values as a researcher. It provided a reflective space to clarify what Davidson (2012) called the "I" in research. Initially we both saw the research journal as just that. However, it also encouraged me to sit well with the cognitive dissonance that was causing me grief that had me feeling like an imposter in the academy. I found security in the ease by which I shaped my research process and methods, using my journal reflections as evidence to support my decisions. I had found a way to embrace the familiarity I had with my Team Members' lived experiences without creating a negative impact on the research itself (Berger, 2015).

### **Still an Imposter in the Field of Academic Research?**

My new supervisor ever so gently questioned whether my research journal was, in itself, data. At first, I was afraid to admit that I already knew it was, but I didn't let that fear stop me

from answering “Yes, yes, it is.” That response is highly significant. When did I become confident enough as an academic, a researcher, to make that brave statement? I wouldn’t have answered that if James had asked that of me. Had my imposter academic self stepped aside and made room for an emerging Koori early career academic with creative research methods? Hell, yes.

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