

**PSYCHOLOGICALLY SPEAKING**

**FRAMEWORKS OF WORKING WITH ABORIGINAL  
COMMUNNITIES**

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### **3. FRAMEWORKS OF WORKING**

#### **3.1 INTRODUCTION**

Traditionally, training within the field of psychology has involved ensuring that the client is provided with a safe environment in which to talk about their issues and to assist people in dealing with their problems. On most occasions this involves talking directly with the client and significant others and working with them as deemed necessary. Whilst this framework suits many clients, it becomes evident when working with Aboriginal people that this way of working is less satisfactory for the client and the worker.

In working with Aboriginal people, it is essential to have an understanding of policy and the inter-generation effects these are having on Aboriginal people today. As psychologists working in the field of child welfare and with Aboriginal people who have a checkered history with welfare-type Departments, it seems that the most important piece of information that one can receive is about models which have been used successfully with Aboriginal clients. This section provides some generic frameworks that have been tried and tested over time with success in Aboriginal communities (urban and remote). In providing an essentially 'Aboriginal interpretation' on these models, it is hoped that their effectiveness will become more obvious in their usage.

In sections 3.2 and 3.3 we intend to look at how we can begin to plan our intervention strategy with our client. Although these are just initial steps, they are probably the most vital in terms of how they affect the success of our intervention with our client. Under section 3.4 we will expand these initial stages to include a further process covering child protection and concerns in Aboriginal communities.

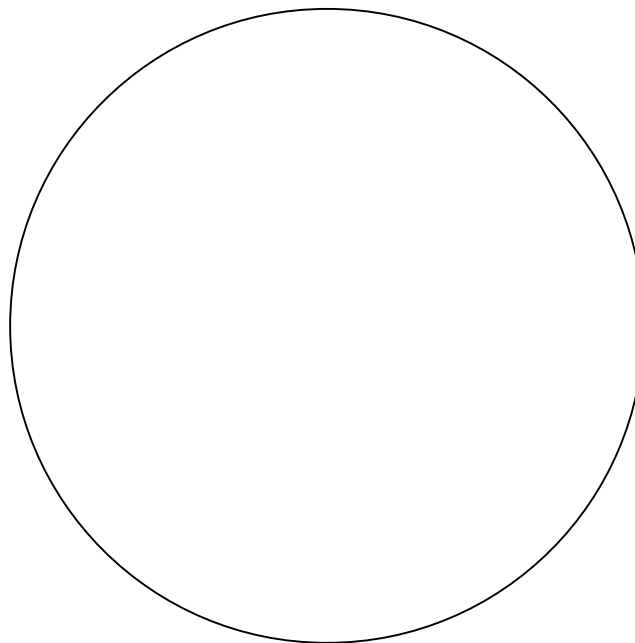
#### **3.2 FRAMEWORK I - "THE BIRDS EYE-VIEW" OF THE ISSUES**

The first model was proposed by Dawn Bessarab, who is completing her Honours Degree in Social Work on the Department's 80% Aboriginal Scholarship, and has had a number of years experience in working as a field officer in the Department for Family & Children's Services north-west offices. This model is commonly referred to as "Expanding the Birdseye View" and it takes into account the totality of the person with whom you are working which includes such things as the socio-cultural, socio-political and socio-economic factors. The model works on highlighting the essential difference in working with non-Aboriginal clients as opposed to Aboriginal individuals, families and communities (IFCs). The model evolved through the comments from many Aboriginal people to Ms Bessarab, which centred on the same theme, that is, when workers come into Aboriginal communities, they often only see the child and the problem and respond from a position of isolation of the problem rather than its acculturation.

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Often what is occurring is that the cultural framework in which the individual is operating and the problem(s) existing is not considered and thus minimising its involvement and impacts. Expanding the bird's eye view is based on the idea of a camera lense, which allows an image of the individual which is more holistic and incorporates the totality of the person's experiences. The model helps counsellors and workers to understand that working with Aboriginal clients will require a "wide angle lense" as a large number of factors possibly impacting on the person and the history of the Department's involvement needs to be considered in the 'big' picture of the problem. It is only once we have looked at all the variables in the context of the person as an individual, a member of an immediate and close extended family, a member of a community, and a person with knowledge of the Departments prior involvement with their people can we begin to 'zoom in' and work with the family and the person(s) with the problems. Inherent within the framework is also the notion that in order to gain maximum effectiveness with the Aboriginal client, the therapist must utilise their skills to work within the boundaries which are contributing to the maintenance of the clients problems. The Aboriginal framework is similar to looking at the layers or "onion skin" approach as shown below. An example of this approach has also been placed in Appendix I of this document. The example was provided by T.Westerman (Aboriginal Graduate Welfare Officer) who was working at the Kalgoorlie Branch of Family & Children's Services (see Appendix I for details).



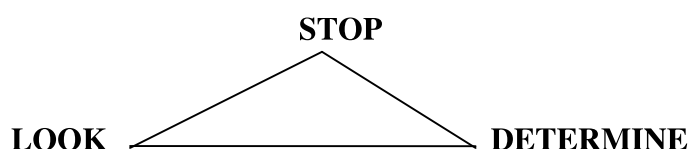
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### 3.3 FRAMEWORK II - “STOP, LOOK, DETERMINE”

The general work practice of the Department to date has involved field workers rushing straight in, trying to get the individual to talk about their innermost problems, solve the problems, make referrals and close the case. What emerged from this process was repeated concern reports and issues re-surfacing time and time again. Dawn Bessarad clichèd that we need to “stop, look, determine”, before contacting the parents/carers with concerns or becoming involved in the problem. That is, determining what should be considered and completed prior to social work and thus psychological involvement. This model is a carbon of the “stop, think, do” strategy used in behaviour management strategies with children.

From this triadic approach it is hoped that a dialogue will develop surrounding the issues and thus instigating the emergence of synthetic logic (ie. the logic of sharing/transformation) which looks like this:



If we take the first sign on the triad, which is ‘STOP’, it means just that

**STOP**

We need to consider

“This is an Aboriginal client” and

“What are the implications/issues I need to be aware of?”

Then keeping in mind the issues that have been raised in the previous model (Expanding the Bird’s eye view), we need to take into account all of the factors impacting on our client, such as social, cultural, historical, emotional, familial etc.

**LOOK**

When looking at the situation these may be some questions to consider:

- Σ “What am I the worker dealing with here?”
- Σ “How does my work tie into that of the Case Manager and other involved in this case?”
- Σ “Will I be practicing in a framework of familiarity to the client or the Department?”
- Σ “What could be some of the issues that I need to be aware of and/or alerted to?”
- Σ “What could some of the driving forces and restraints (eg. geographical issues, family situation, previous involvement etc.) operating in this situation?”

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We need to be mindful of the role our services play in the problems and solutions of the client's issues and do they fit the ethos and missions of the Department.

## **DETERMINE**

Who else will need to be involved?

Again, according to the Birdseye view model, who does the client consider to be within their family, extended family, community. Who should be consulted with? Who is contributing to the maintenance of the problem?

What do you do, if there is no Aboriginal person available?

Is there someone - an objective third party who can be called in to consult with about the client. Check with the client if the person you wish to consult with is an acceptable and credible person, in their eyes. You may unwittingly put yourself in the middle of a feud by consulting with someone from a family that is in (in)direct conflict with your client's family. Also, understand that Aboriginal communities are very small and word travels quickly, particularly on issues of a personal nature. Can this person be trusted to maintain confidentiality?

*When and how will you carry out your intervention?*

Take into account the issue of time which is very different between Aboriginal and White Australian lifestyles. Ask yourself "How do you get something done within your time constraints when you are working within a culture that does not see time as an issue". Working within the boundaries in the Bird's eye-view model, and identifying community contacts from the outset will help to complete work within a shorter time span, especially once your trust and role is clearly established within the community.

*What information do you need based on your survey of the country?*

Ask yourself "What do you need to know about the client's family/community/extended family/ customs/ traditions?"

*How much time is this going to cost?*

Try to plan this beforehand so that enough time is set aside which allows respect of the 'Aboriginal' way of doing things. For example say to your client, "Do you need to talk to the family and come back in two days" or "Do you have to wait a period of time after Law Business before you can talk to particular people within the community", "Are you only allowed to talk with X when Y is around and have to wait until they are together?", "Is it OK to talk with X on their own?" and/or "How can you get to talk to X about this?"

*How are you going to introduce yourself to the family and tell them why you are there?*

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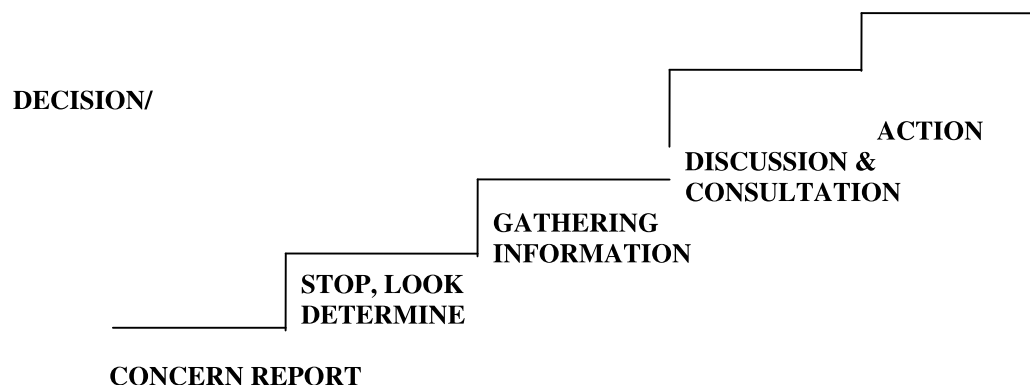
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It is important to check whether or not you will require the assistance of a facilitator. This information can be obtained from the family with which you are working or the Aboriginal Officer within your local Family & Children's Services office. (For more information regarding this see section 4 on 'Establishing Rapport').

*An important point which has been stressed to me throughout my consultations, communications, and involvements with Aboriginal communities, clients and workers is that: “YOU HAVE TO SPEND TIME TO SAVE TIME”*

This means that your initial outlay of time in getting to know your community and the people will be beneficial in the long run. Taking time to establish trust and rapport will allow you time later to work within time constraints in the communities. You will find that community people will be more honest with you, provide invaluable resources and information which will help in understanding cultural ways of working. You will also learn how to find people more readily and who are the right people to develop networks with. This initial outlay of time will save you many hours of pointless work and chasing or waiting for people who may or may not be helpful to your client.

### 3.4 **FRAMEWORK III - “CLIMBING THE STEPS” TO CHILD PROTECTION IN ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES**



The first two steps of the model involve the report of a concern or in the case of psychological involvement “a problem/issue” and the “stop, look, determine” framework. These steps are sometime completed prior to psychological involvement (ie. social work assessments from the allegations or concerns raised during the process of Intake within the Department). From here some further steps need to be considered and will often require the assistance of Departmental clinical and counsellings psychologists.

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### *Gathering Information:*

From steps one and two we should have enough information to determine whether further assessment and appropriate intervention is required. I call this the “time-out phase” as it is an opportunity to consider the information one has and to plan for what is still required and who will need to be involved in obtaining this information.

### *Discussion & Consultation:*

At this point, it is probably pertinent to present the information you have obtained to either a supervisor and/or to team members for discussion or consultation. It is also highly recommended that an Aboriginal worker (preferably within the Department) be involved in the consultation process as they can provide invaluable information regarding the cultural appropriateness of plans. Should there be no Aboriginal person available in your particular office, it may be useful to call any of the Head Office Senior Aboriginal Staff, or Aboriginal Field Staff in other Districts for their opinions and advice.

### *Decisions & Actions:*

Once all the information has been gathered, the strengths and weaknesses identified and the appropriate people have been consulted, you should now be able to proceed with your decisions regarding appropriate action intervention for your client. Although all of these steps may seem insurmountable, in practical terms, it actually becomes easier the more it is enhanced by the team and place of work. It comes back to the adage of ‘spending time to save time’. Thorough planning ensures that you do not leave out integral parts of your client’s world which may have major effects on the success or failure of intervention strategies, thereby creating a huge amount of work for the team later.

NB. This process is developmental and other information can be added or taken away as the worker proceeds through the assessment and consultation steps.



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## **4. ESTABLISHING RAPPORT**

### **4.1 GENERAL**

#### **4.1.1 Language and Respect for Culture**

- x When getting to know your client take particular notice of the language they use in every day discussions. It is not necessary to be totally fluent in the particular dialect. Sometimes all it takes is one word in the client's language to be able to put them at ease. Try making up a game whereby the client gets to tell you what they call certain things in their language. A book of pictures may be helpful.
- Σ Always use plain language avoiding professional jargon and explanations. It is also important to check the client's understanding of what you have said. It is very easy to retreat into professional mode when trying to talk with someone from a different culture, but at the end of the day that little bit of time that you have spent can be rewarded in the knowledge that your client will at least understand most of what you have said.
- x Be prepared to listen to the client and to put yourself on the side of the novice. Ask them to explain to you how it is for them living in their particular community/group. What does a normal day look like? Who do they closely associate with? Find out what their cultural obligations and expectations are, as they may prevent them from participating in certain tasks which you may assign to them. Eco-maps and family trees are very useful tools in getting to know these things.
- x Most importantly, find out what the person likes to be called, or indeed what they are called in their communities. Never use Christian names unless you have checked that is alright to do so. This is due to the fact that when there is a death in an Aboriginal community, the name of the deceased person is no longer used out of respect for that person. You may have heard a deceased person being referred to as "X's brother, sister" etc, or even the "dead one." Each person on the community who shares the same Christian name as the deceased person, is also no longer called by their Christian name. Instead, another name is used from the particular dialect, for instance, in Wongi language, these people are referred to as Mr, Miss or Mrs. This is also the case for non-Aboriginal people who live on the community and this process may continue for a couple of years at least until it is considered that respect has been paid. The safest tact to take is to address people, particularly in remote communities is using Mr, Miss or Mrs or asking them directly what they would like you to call them.
- x Trips may need to be delayed as a result of tribal rituals and ceremonies. It is particularly important to respect "sorry time" for the death of a community member. This will mean that people cannot usually be contacted for weeks at a time. Similarly for boys going through the Law, they will be "bush boys" for a couple of months. This process cannot be disturbed by any urgency, but,

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community people will sometimes attempt to get extremely important messages through or pass on information if required.

- x To avoid misunderstandings and tokenism, it is sensible to encourage consultation with the local Aboriginal community on a regular basis. Regular consultation rather than responding mainly to the crises, will assist in establishing rapport and trust and thus in time lead to the more respectful relationship between yourself and the community.

#### **4.1.2 Communication styles**

- Σ Be alert of communication styles/taboo within the community. As a general rule never ask a man questions about his mother-in-law and vice versa as this is considered taboo. Find out who is allowed to talk to who and about whom. This is particularly important in relation to skin groupings which dictate communication lines within and between Aboriginal communities.
- Σ Avoid planning visits for pension days as it is likely that no-one will be home.
- Σ In some communities young boys and girls are treated as though they are adults. It is very demeaning to refer to a 12 -13 year old who has gone through the Law as a "boy." as they are considered to be adults within their communities and are treated as such.
- Σ Never approach small groups of men or women talking amongst themselves. Wait to be invited over as approaching the group may shame them and isolate you from the community. Stand near your car in clear vision of the group or person you wish to see and wait to be motioned over.
- Σ Never enter the person's home without first being invited. Be prepared to do your business on front door steps or out on the porch if full view of others. If the business is of a sensitive nature it sometimes helps, begin to walk to an isolated place (out of others earshot) and encourage the person to follow.
- Σ Don't take yourself too seriously. Although our work is serious and involves a lot of traumatic issues for our clients, be prepared to laugh at yourself if you mispronounce a word. Humour is a most valued commodity in Aboriginal communities and it cannot be underestimated as a way to establish immediate rapport.
- Σ Avoid too much direct eye contact wherever possible.
- Σ In communicating with your client, avoid starting with a barrage of questions that they may not be prepared to answer. Be prepared to put up with long silences and try to avoid answering questions on your client's behalf. Try to be creative in your approach if your client is having difficulty sharing something with you. Take note of the following suggestions:

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1. Give your client permission to nod for yes/no
  2. Give your client permission to write down what they are afraid to say
  3. Make use of drawings or pictures to try to help client to tell their story
  4. Give the client permission to invite a significant third person who may either act as an interpreter or a support for that person.
  5. When discussing issues of a sexual nature, keep in mind that it is not appropriate for Aboriginal males to discuss such things with females, nor is it appropriate for Aboriginal females to discuss these issues with males. Networking with local Aboriginal agencies, may be able to offer a same-sexed objective third person, who will be able to assist with the interview process. In line with Departmental policy, this person should not be involved in conducting the interview, but simply acting as a support.
  6. Keep in mind the concept of shame within Aboriginal communities particularly when talking to a perpetrator of abuse. The perpetrator not making eye contact, or shrugging shoulders and/or answering "I don't know" to questions about their feelings regarding the assault, does not necessarily mean that they have no remorse for their actions. Within Aboriginal communities, perpetrators are dealt with quite harshly and the result is extreme shame for the offender, and sometimes ostracism from the community. It is important to have a cultural perspective particularly and to make recommendations to Courts. Ask the person how his family, and other community people have treated him since the offence; find out whether there has been any punishment handed down (without having to know the details, as this is culturally privileged); find out how the person felt about this punishment and if they feel as though they deserved it etc.
  7. Make use of colours or drawn faces when asking the person to express their feelings. Ask them to pick a colour or a face which best describes how they are feeling.
- Σ Avoid making promises that you cannot keep or are likely to forget. Cynicism within Aboriginal communities towards Government agencies is strong and based on a history of many broken promises. Not following through with something may not seem important to you or other (non-Aboriginal) clients but is likely to be judged harshly by Aboriginal people. You have to put this into historical perspective and always endeavour to do what is promised.

#### 4.1.3 The Time Concept

- × Don't expect to get things done within one meeting. Aboriginal and White Australians have varying concepts of time. In Aboriginal communities, there is no urgency to do anything and this is based on the notion that things get done when that person is ready to do them. If you push for a response, you may get a

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"Yes" answer which is likely to mean that they have heard you not that they agree with what was asked. As counsellors we always implore our clients to take their time in their decision-making to ensure that they have made the right choice. Becoming comfortable with silences and topic changes may be required. Initially, it is not unusual to experience discomfort with having to go to an Aboriginal community two or three times to speak to a person about the same issue. The pressure of working within a Department that demands decisions to be made as quickly as possible may also place pressure on the therapist thus inadvertently challenging the time concept. A useful way of getting around this, is to go and see the person for a quick visit and explain to them, and any other relevant family members that a certain decision has to be made. Then tell them that you will come back the next afternoon or in two days time to give them time to think about it. Invariably a decision has been made by the family in this time. This also allows the family privacy to make important decisions appropriate for the individual/family and community.

- Σ Whenever possible try to be as flexible as possible about appointment times. The keeping appointments is not the most highly valued in Aboriginal communities. This is due to the concept of time issues mentioned above. It is also important to remember that although an appointment is not kept it does not necessarily mean that the person does not want to see you. Try to respect this as much as possible, by keeping time spare either side of your appointments. It is not a good idea to try and make someone commit to a specific time for an appointment. Try instead as an example, "I will come and see you on Wednesday, (morning or afternoon time), just before/after lunch, when the kids get home from school etc."
- Σ It may also be useful when needing to pinpoint events to time frames to relate these events to certain occurrences within that person's environment. For instance, when it was hot, rain time, moon calendars around the time of the Shinju festival, before the start of cyclone season and so on.

## 4.2 ESTABLISHING RAPPORT IN REMOTE COMMUNITIES

In my work with remote Aboriginal communities in the Central Desert and Goldfields, the most important lesson I learned was to spend a considerable amount of time familiarising myself with the community I am to visit. Find out who is the Chairperson, the community adviser, and who is on the committee; who are the Community Health Nurse, the teachers, and project officers employed by the community that need to be met. If possible offer to meet with all of these people, either as one group, or a number of groups and clearly to explain your role within the Department. I found that I had to spend several days listening and talking to assure the people that I could be trusted to maintain confidentiality about any culturally privileged information and to find out what were their needs and expectations of me. Don't be surprised if it takes at least three visits to get to talk to every one before you actually get to work with your clients. The importance of your initial contact cannot be stressed strongly enough and thus it is important to plan and study prior to visiting

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the community. Take note of the following important check points prior to visiting any remote community:

1. Always make my visits known to the Community at least two weeks prior to arrival via a faxed message and follow-up telephone call to the Community Adviser, Chairman, Community Health Nurse, and the individual whom you wish to see. The reason for this are threefold. (1) Communities see a continuous stream of Government officials coming and going on a daily basis, often not knowing what is the purpose of the visit. Unless you make yourself and your business known to the community, they will not be able to recognise you or help you with your work, in terms of networking with relevant people. (2) If a funeral or ritual is occurring, most of the community people will not be there making your visit pointless. Community advisers will be able to tell you if the people you wish to see are going to be at the community at the time of your intended visit. Knowing about rituals and funerals is also a matter of personal safety as these events occur in secrecy and are not open for public scrutiny. It is easy to find yourself in trouble by offending customs particularly when you don't understand the rules. (3) Due to the remoteness of many communities it is important to acquire first hand knowledge of the road conditions and precautions you may need to take (i.e. water shortage, lack of fuel/AV gas etc).
2. Make sure that you inform someone at your office when you are leaving and expected time of arrival, telephoning them when you arrive. Similarly, telephone when you are about to leave and when you anticipate arriving home.
3. Upon arriving at the community, it is important to first visit the community office, or Nursing Station to check if your client is on the community, and to obtain directions. Do not disappear into the office for long discussions - your client should be your first priority. Once your business is complete explain to your party that you will need to go and see the Community Nurse or whoever, in order to discuss any issues that may have arose within your discussion with your client, which requires that person's input. Verbal permission should be obtained and when possible written permission.

Texts such as "Jalinardi Ways" by Fran Crawford and "Working with Aboriginal in Remote Areas" by DeHoog/Forrest and Sherwood are useful to consult prior to visiting aboriginal community or becoming involved in therapy with an Aboriginal family and/or groups. Chapter 5 of Jalinardi Ways has been placed in Appendix II as it provides further useful information and guides for working with Aboriginal people in remote communities.

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