Research Article

The Uluru Statement from the Heart – A consideration from three perspectives

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This article positions the author in a relationship with Australian First Nations people that was made possible through their publication of *The Uluru Statement from the Heart.* That statement offers a distinctive First Nations perspective. I position myself, affirmatively in relation to the Statement, using a philosophical approach based on the relational concept of complementarity between perspectives. First I refer readers to that Statement, which speaks directly to anyone who is receptive to its message. Second, I bring to bear a framework of conceptual analysis derived from occupational science, utilising the work of Ann Wilcock. Third, I draw upon some of the thoughts concerning Aboriginal worldviews offered by Aboriginal philosopher, Mary Graham. The juxtaposition of these three perspectives, contributes to the development of a perspective of complementarity that is offered here for dialogue within the overarching framework of truth-telling and justice.

Acknowledgement of First Nations people

I acknowledge First Nations people, their ancient spiritual connection with the land on which we live, and their elders past, present and future. From the location where I currently live, I pay respects to the Bar Burrum, Girramay, Gugu Badhun, Jirrbal, Malanbarra and Dulebed, Mamu, Ngadjon, Tablelands Yidinji, Warrungu, and other First Nations people on the Atherton Tablelands of Far Northern Queensland, and elsewhere in Australia.

Introduction

The current article is part of a series of articles that are directed towards the development of a concept of occupation from a perspective of complementarity, with potential for consideration in the specific

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discipline of occupational science (Turnbull & Barnard, 2023a; 2023b; 2023c). In this article I draw upon the legacy of occupational scientist Ann Wilcock, as well as taking into account perspectives drawn from First Nations people in Australia. The article draws from material that has been published by First Nations people, and is freely accessible. It is not based on the acquisition of new information dependent on research that would require institutional ethics approval, but entirely on previously published reports. It embodies, however, an example of what Jane Palmer and Celmara Pocock phrase, 'an act of voluntary discomfort' (Palmer & Pocock, 2019). This article is not one that presupposes that the author, as a descendent of settler Australian heritage, possess knowledge that would heal wounds or dispense justice. Rather, writing this article, and others like it, is more akin to swimming in a stream that is filled with the blood and the anguish of First Nations people. There are personal connections with the terrible separation of children from their parents and culture that was perpetrated in this land.[1]

What follows is a consideration of *The Uluru Statement from the Heart* (First Nations National Constitutional Convention, 2017) from three perspectives. The first perspective is that of the First Nations people who issued the Statement. The second is drawn from occupational science and the legacy of Ann Wilcock. The third is based on writing by Aboriginal philosopher Mary Graham. The article fully supports the aims of *The Uluru Statement from the Heart*, for truth-telling, and for justice.

The First Nations perspective

This perspective is contained in *The Uluru Statement from the Heart*. The Statement is the voice of the First Nations people who issued it. It can be viewed at the following website: Uluru Statement

A perspective drawn from occupational science

In 2007, Australian occupational scientist Ann Wilcock published an article entitled, *Occupation and Health: Are They One and the Same?* (Wilcock, 2007). The article makes no mention of Australian First Nations people, but it does have quite a lot to say about what Wilcock terms *natural health and occupation*. Wilcock wrote:

> *all the things that people do can be recognised as part of the human condition and relate to health or illness of a physical, mental, spiritual and social kind. This gave me a deep*

*appreciation, unrecognised at the time, that '**natural**' health and occupation **may be** one and the same.* (Wilcock, 2007, p. 4, bold face added for emphasis).

In that article Wilcock wrote down a definition of occupation as '*all the things that people do'.* She also defined occupation as a 'synthesis' of four aspects: *doing, being, becoming and belonging*. Effectively, Wilcock has offered two definitions of occupation, the first defining occupation as what people do; the second more complex definition added the three terms *being, becoming and belonging*. The second of these definitions signals a shift in Wilcock's thinking. That shift is captured in the following statement: *'doing, being, becoming and belonging are essential to survival and health'.* (Wilcock, 2007, p. 5, italics added for emphasis).

One way to understand *The Uluru Statement from the Heart,* from an occupational science perspective, is through Wilcock's model of occupation, using her more complex definition, and her statement that natural health and occupation *may be* one and the same.

I shall take, in this instance, the term 'natural' to refer to First Nations people's health and occupation prior to the arrival of English colonists in 1788. That First Nations people had survived on the Australian continent for over 60,000 years in a predominantly healthy state has finally been accepted. This has required a long process of inquiry and accumulation of evidence that was needed to dispel colonialist myth making. For most of colonial history it has been commonly accepted that prior to European settlement, the life expectancy of Aboriginal people was less than forty years (Blyton, 2009). More accurate descriptions of what First Nations people were doing over the vast span of 60 millennia includes not only that they were expert hunter-gatherers, but also, they had a vast repertoire of knowledge concerning medicinal plants, as well as cultural practices that contributed to their survival and health. One book that contains accurate and insightful descriptions, with photographic evidence, comes from an anthropologist, Donald Thomson, who lived with Australian Aboriginal people in the 1920s (Thomson, 1983). His engagements with them occurred in remote regions prior to having their lives permanently disrupted by European expansion, and represents one of the last opportunities for Western anthropologists to encounter First Nations people in their original or 'natural' environment. That their survival and health has been drastically compromised since 1788 is borne out in the historical record of genocide (Elinghaus, 2009), removal from traditional lands (Commonwealth of Australia, 1997, *Bringing Them Home Report*), confinement to colonially imposed regimes on missions (Mattingly & Hampton, 1988), and exposure to new infectious diseases, the introduction of a diet that resulted in hitherto unknown dietary and lifestyle related conditions such as heart disease, diabetes

and alcoholism (See Closing the Gap, Reports 2005 - 2020). To this day, the rates of these diseases in First nations people grossly exceed the rates in populations descended from immigrants (ABS, 2018 - 2019) It is logical to infer that these rates of disease were substantially lower prior to the arrival of Europeans.

The Uluru Statement from the Heart makes mention of several factors concerning First Nations People's *ancestral* being, becoming and belonging and their relation to present matters of urgent political concern.

Being: '*Our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tribes were the first sovereign Nations of the Australian continent and its adjacent islands, and possessed it under our own laws and customs.*'

Becoming: '*This sovereignty is a spiritual notion: the ancestral tie between the land, or 'mother nature', and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who were born therefrom, remain attached thereto, and must one day return thither to be united with our ancestors.'*

(Note that 'becoming' is based on the spiritual notion of a natural cycle of coming from the land, having attachment to the land, and returning to the land and being united with the ancestors.)

Belonging: '*This link is the basis of the ownership of the soil, or better, of sovereignty.'*

These three ancestral concepts provide descriptive evidence for the enduring quality of First Nations sovereignty and the justification for doing what needs to occur based on the notion of empowerment.

'It (i.e sovereignty) *has never been ceded or extinguished, and co-exists with the sovereignty of the Crown.'*

'With substantive constitutional change and structural reform, we believe this ancient sovereignty can shine through as a fuller expression of Australia's nationhood.'

'We seek constitutional reforms to empower our people and take a rightful place in our own country. When we have power over our destiny our children will flourish. They will walk in two worlds and their culture will be a gift to their country.'

Finally, *The Uluru Statement from the Heart* speaks of a relational connection between First Nations people and other Australians. This relational connection expands the notion of belonging in three ways, so that all Australians are prospectively included.

The first requires constitutional reform.

'We call for the establishment of a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution.'

The second is the notion of Makarrata and the establishment of a Makarrata Commission.

'Makarrata is the culmination of our agenda: ***the coming together after a struggle****. It captures our aspirations for a fair and truthful relationship with the people of Australia and a better future for our children based on justice and self-determination.'* (Bold face added to capture the emphasis in the original.)

'We seek a Makarrata Commission to supervise a process of agreement-making between governments and First Nations and truth-telling about our history.'

The third is an invitation.

'We invite you to ***walk with us*** *in a movement of the Australian people for a better future.'* (Bold face added for emphasis.)

The invitation suggests an ongoing relationship between First Nations people and settler Australians. The phrase '*walk with us*' provides a metaphor for many kinds of *occupational engagement*. The question of what sorts of 'doing, being, becoming and belonging' characterise such engagements should be of interest to researchers using an occupational science perspective.

A perspective based in Aboriginal philosophy

It is not appropriate to turn to Western philosophers for this perspective; it is essential to take into account what a First Nations philosopher has to say. Here we shall turn to Aboriginal philosopher Mary Graham (2008). Graham writes a great deal about Aboriginal spirituality, and it is evident that this is a spirituality involving immediate and sensed (phenomenological) contact with whatever it is that is called 'spiritual'.

The account that follows focuses on the notion of 'belonging' which is one of the key terms on Wilcock's definition of occupation.[2] My proposal is that there are two versions of belonging to consider, the first relating to First Nations people's ancestral connections, the second relating to European settlers belonging to a colonial culture.

Beginning with *The Uluru Statement from the Heart* requires taking a First Nations perspective as the starting point for an inquiry about belonging. This perspective asks the question, 'who are you?' The answer to this question necessarily takes a relational form that begins with human society which is already understood as a spiritual form of belonging within the cosmos.

Graham proposed two axioms relating to the belonging of First Nations peoples. The first is, '*The Land is the Law.'* The second is, '*You are not alone in the world.'* (Graham, 2008). First Nations cultures have always belonged to the land, from which the Law regulating relationships between clans was

established. Graham also maintains that this Law does not and cannot change. Accordingly, First Nations belonging to the Land cannot change either.

Graham writes,

> *Aboriginal Law is natural law, in that if it was legislated at all, this was done not by humans, but by the spiritual ancestors of the Dreaming, so that Aboriginal Law is incapable of being added to, amended or repealed by any human agency* (Graham, 2008).

The cosmological view of First Nations people emphasises the relationality of all beings. Of course it takes being human to develop such a cosmology through stories that make sense to successive generations. The European 'enlightenment' tendency has been to sweep all such stories into the dustbin in favour of scientific explanations. However there is no warrant drawn from naturalistic philosophical considerations for doing so.

For First Nations people the answer to 'who are you?' is in terms of connection with land as well as with kin. Graham states,

> *Aboriginal people have a kinship system which extends into land; this system was and still is organised into clans. One's first loyalty is to one's own clan group. It does not matter how Western and urbanised Aboriginal people have become, this kinship system never changes. (It has been damaged by, for example, cultural genocide/Stolen Children/westernisation etc., but has not been altered substantially.)* (Graham, 2008)

Many settlers, by contrast, are convinced that a small number of generations are sufficient to confer an entitlement of belonging. Others point to their own recently acquired citizenship papers as sufficient proof of belonging (and this undoubtedly means a lot to those people). However, this is clearly a different kind of belonging to the cosmological view of Aboriginal people.

Original European settler-colonists - those whose cultural identity was tied to their European heritage - arrived with no concept of, or relationship with, the Land and its Law, instead building cities and towns where they were prone to floods, bushfires and droughts. They cut down vast swathes of native forest and replaced them with open paddocks that, when grazed, or infested with introduced species, turned to dust in drought and eroded after rainfall. The introduced species, predominantly from Europe, destroyed fragile, ancient ecosystems. The European colonists did not *belong* to the land, and in their rush to acquire and exploit it, destroyed many of the ancient kinship networks that existed

across it. For generations, colonial artists and intellectuals returned to Europe to find the sense of belonging that they were unable to find in Australia. Their *longing* to return to Europe was indicative of not-belonging, their alienation; the absence of a spiritual connection with the land, not only *this* land but the earth itself (Arendt, 1958).

It is a reminder of the inclusivity of the Aboriginal worldview to discover that (perhaps paradoxically, or aporetically, when considered from a European perspective) there is the possibility for settlers to *become part of* the sense of belonging inherent in that worldview. As Graham writes,

> *The land is a sacred entity, not property or real estate; it is the great mother* ***of all humanity****.... Because land is sacred and must be looked after, the relation between people and land becomes the template for society and social relations. Therefore all meaning comes from land.* (Graham, 2008, bold face added for emphasis).

Philosophically speaking, the perspective that Graham provides also points towards ways in which the invitation contained in *The Uluru Statement from the Heart* to be fulfilled; 'to walk with us'.

Speaking directly to the question of whether settler people can participate in the Aboriginal sense of belonging to the land, Graham suggests that this would not require full participation in Aboriginal law but only taking, for oneself, a custodial ethic.

> *Aboriginal law is valid for all people only in the sense that all people are placed on land wherever they happen to be, so that the custodial ethic, which is primarily an obligatory system, may be acted on by anyone who is interested in looking after or caring for land.* (Graham, 2008)

Graham's suggestion implies that for settlers, accepting an Aboriginal custodial ethic depends on voluntary participation or having a prior interest in caring for the land. Graham appears at this point to be leaving it up to individuals to decide. This is an ethical issue that goes beyond voluntariness or interest. It is a primary matter of taking responsibility. Taking responsibility for the land and its people is a matter of humanity, regardless of cultural background.

Graham concludes,

> *The world is immediate, not external, and we are all its custodians, as well as its observers. A culture which holds the immediate world at bay by objectifying it as the Observed System, thereby leaving it to the blinkered forces of the marketplace, will also be blind to the effects of*

> *doing so until those effects become quantifiable as, for example, acid rain, holes in the ozone layer and global economic recession. All the social forces which have led to this planetary crisis could have been anticipated in principle, but this would have required a richer metaphysics.*
>
> *Aboriginal people are not against money, economics or private ownership, but they ask that there be a recognition that ownership is a social act and therefore a spiritual act. As such, it produces effects in the immediate world which show up sooner or later in the 'external' world. What will eventually emerge in a natural, habituated way is the embryonic form of an intact, collective spiritual identity for all Australians, which will inform and support our daily lives, our aspirations and our creative genius.* (Graham, 2008)

Conclusion

This article has juxtaposed three perspectives: *The Uluru Statement from the Heart*, the occupational science perspective of Ann Wilcock, wherein *'doing, being, becoming and belonging are essential to survival and health'.* (Wilcock, 2007), and the philosophical perspective of Graham (2008). This perspective is required to interpret the colonial experience of First Nations people, and to understand the impact of colonisation on First Nations occupations. Wilcock's occupational perspective of health (OPH), offers a very suitable model for occupational science investigations of First Nations peoples' experiences prior to and during colonisation, towards enhancing prospects for First Nations people's survival and health. The suggestion is that the phrase 'walk with us' in *The Uluru Statement from the Heart* opens the door to partnerships with First Nations people. This poses a challenge for occupational science: to develop the notion of *complementarity*[3] between science and First Nations peoples' knowledge.

One vitally important aspect to consider is that such knowledge is considered sacred, and is not freely available to those who come from a perspective of mere curiosity (Sherwood, 2010). For example, respect for First Nations women's knowledge concerning 'birthing on Country' is a hallmark of research conducted by Helen Myles and Isabel Tarrago (1992; 1996). In conversations with Helen Myles over the past decade, I have learned the vital importance of acknowledging whose knowledge it is, and what outsider researcher's interests are in the matter. Such considerations apply generally to settler researchers in their relationships with First Nations people. There is, in fact, only one possible interest, from a settler perspective, that could count towards developing such relationships. It is to

complement First Nations people in their struggle for truth-telling and justice; to follow their lead; to support and encourage and never to take control.

In its broadest sense, in the study of human cultures, the word 'complementarity' can be applied to non-indigenous and Aboriginal relationships, the reciprocal relationships of one community with another, and reciprocal learning, especially in connection with the custodial ethic of 'caring for country', consistent with the ideas introduced by Mary Graham. The further development of this concept is left for future work, in the hope that others will see how taking up this challenge might further the cause of truth-telling, and justice, of and for First Nations people.

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Footnotes

[1] The author, David Turnbull, spent his early childhood in northern South Australia, as the child of Christian missionaries. David remembers his earliest years during the early-to-mid 1950s on a mission (situated on a cattle station) at Finniss Springs, where for some time he was the only non-Aboriginal child. Later at another mission at Gerard, situated beside the Murray river, he went to the nearby school at Winkie with both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children. David has an enduring friendship with his earliest childhood friend, who identifies as Stolen Generation. His mother died in childbirth; his father was an itinerant stockman who brought the new-born child to the missionaries. He was taken in, later fostered to a family near Adelaide, and was permanently separated from his Aboriginal family and culture. Conversations with him over many years have been formative in David's progress towards understanding the role of missionaries in what he now regards as 'the colonialities of occupation and being' in Australia.

[2] Wilcock herself (as far as I am aware) did not explicitly investigate 'belonging' from an Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspective.

[3] The original sense in which the term 'complementarity' was used by Niels Bohr (Turnbull & Barnard 2023b), was based on considerations of the complementarity of measurements of certain phenomena that entail different entangled systems, (as discussed in Pais, 1991, and Howard, 2004). Bohr extended this idea further in suggesting its application to psychology, biology, and the study of human cultures and language (Pais, 1991, pp. 438 - 447). It is worth noting that Pais termed this extension *complementarism*, thereby distinguishing it from the methodology of science.

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