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"We are born mentors . . . It's in our DNA": exploring Indigenous Australian kinship mentoring practices

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ABSTRACT

Through an Indigenist research theoretical lens, this paper explores Indigenous Australian mentee and mentor epistemological and ontological accounts of kinship mentoring. In this article, kinship mentoring refers to the culturally mediated experiential, custodial, and communitarian-based mentoring that participants describe as innate to Indigenous ways of being, knowing, doing, and nurturing kin. While participants explain how kinship mentoring practices have been culturally ingrained in Indigenous communities for generations, our review of scholarship shows that this approach to mentorship is relatively absent from broader mentoring literature. By centring Indigenous scholarship focussed on mob experiences in mentorship, nurturance, and participant insights, this paper explores the intentional nature of Indigenous approaches to kinship mentoring, wherein lessons and knowledge are deliberately imparted through experientially honed internal schemas. This study recognises that kinship mentoring approaches are vital to Indigenous Australian cultural continuity and aspirational achievement and provides recommendations for preserving and perpetuating sovereign mentoring practices.

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Introduction

Mentorship literature is a vast and growing field, offering a myriad of frameworks designed to optimise mentoring relationships across various domains. However, the scholarship has been widely critiqued for its inherent bias towards Western Eurocentric paradigms (Jacobi 1991; Ladson-Billings 2014; MacCallum, Beltman and Palmer 2005). The existing body of research has not adequately captured the unique historical contexts of Indigenous[1] Australian communities and the distinctiveness of Indigenous cultural, spiritual, social, economic, and political systems (Bainbridge et al. 2014; Peralta, Cinelli, and Bennie 2018). Despite substantial international theorising of

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mentoring processes, mentoring scholarship focussed on diverse populations, such as Indigenous Australians, and their experiences is a relatively recent area of focus (Bainbridge et al. 2014).

Indigenous scholars and communities explain how mentoring practices are ancient traditional processes that have been embedded in culturally centred intergenerational educative and cultural transmission paradigms (Harry et al. 2023). While Indigenous Australian sovereign pedagogy, educative systems and intergenerational knowledge transmission practices have been extensively examined by Indigenous scholars, limited scholarship explores sovereign Indigenous Australian mentoring processes. Importantly, this paper does not intend to negate the exceptional work of Indigenous Peoples and allies who have dedicated their lives to critiquing and changing education through educational policy, pedagogy, curriculum, and practice (Bishop 2021; Coff 2021; Sarra 2011; Shay, Sarra, and Lampert 2023). Rather, the purpose of this paper is to propose that envisaging and recognising sovereign mentoring practices is necessary. In other words, mentoring grounded in Indigenous axiologies, ontologies, epistemologies, and methodologies, is important for all.

Internationally, the scholarship discusses First Nations[2] mentoring approaches to imparting lessons and knowledge as 'informal' and 'less structured' in comparison to Western mentoring paradigms that tend to be systematic and programmed in nature (McCluskey et al. 2004; Sinclair and Pooyak 2007). While there is a growing body of studies exploring formal mentorship programs and experiences delivered in First Nations communities, research suggests that informal mentorship approaches are undertheorised and unacknowledged (Sinclair and Pooyak 2007). Our study aims to address this dearth of the literature by centring Indigenous Australian mentoring experiences and argues that the distinction between formal and informal mentoring is likely a false dichotomy. For this reason, we substitute the term 'informal mentoring' with 'kinship mentoring' as this term better depicts our participants' experiential, custodial, process-oriented mentoring practices. We refer to the term 'kinship' as an Indigenous Australian way of being, noting that kinship connections with nation groups, family group, Country, work colleagues, and peers are pivotal to identity formation (Kiraly, James, and Humphreys 2014). Our review of the literature and research findings led us to question; what is Indigenous Australian kinship mentoring, and how can such practices be more effectively preserved and perpetuated?

This article is led by an Indigenous PhD candidate as a key component of her doctoral research and is co-written with three doctoral supervisors–two Indigenous Australian professors and one non-Indigenous professor. Through an Indigenist research theoretical lens, we explore the mentoring experiences and relationships of Indigenous Australian young mob,[3] and their most exceptional mentors. Through the notions of Indigenous 'collective unconscious' (Jung 1936) and 'socialisation' (Clausen 1968) we examine how kinship mentoring practices are innate to Indigenous ways of being, knowing, doing, and nurturing kin. We explore participant insights about deliberate kinship mentoring approaches and activities embedded across communities that are integral to Indigenous Australian community functioning and cultural continuity. Our study provides a number of

recommendations for preserving and perpetuating Indigenous kinship mentoring practices.

Background

Our review of the literature demonstrates how the concept and practice of mentorship has changed over time and is likely to continue to evolve as mentorship expands to different contexts (Klink et al. 2005). While there is no universal definition of mentorship nor a commonly identified best-practice framework, mentoring is largely defined as the relationship and commitment of time and effort by a mentor who is perceived to have greater knowledge and experience and a mentee or protégé (Bainbridge et al. 2014; Peralta, Cinelli, and Bennie 2018). The process of mentoring is viewed widely as having a positive impact on youth development, and programs designed to create and nurture these relationships have grown rapidly in Australia in recent years (Klink et al. 2005; O'Shea et al. 2016).

In this review, we centre scholarship focussed on Indigenous Australian practices of mentoring and nurturance. First, we examine how, in contrast to formal mentoring approaches, kinship mentoring practices are largely unexplored. We then look to the literature focussed on Indigenous Australian kinship and nurturance systems, examining mobs' custodial obligations to 'hold' and 'nurture'. Finally, we examine scholarship discussing processes of becoming mentors for Indigenous young mob, highlighting the need for further research to better understand Indigenous Australian experiences of becoming kinship mentors.

Indigenous Australian mentorship practices

Gunggari/Kunja scholar Bainbridge et al. (2014) systematic review of existing academic and non-academic literature in the Indigenous Australian mentorship field found that scholarship focussed on Indigenous Australian mentorship has been present and growing for two decades. This is still a fair critique of the available literature. Much of the current research field is contextually bound to individual programs, singular communities, and cohorts (Harry et al. 2023). Limited scholarship examines Indigenous Australian cultural mentoring relationships and processes that have been practiced across Indigenous Australian nations for tens of thousands of years (O'Shea et al. 2016). Several scholars have found that, despite differences in cultural beliefs and attitudes across Indigenous nations, there have always been tribal customary practices that emphasise connecting young people with significant others for the cultural affirmation and the provision of guidance and traditional wisdom (Klink et al. 2005; Walker 1993).

Indigenous Australian kinship systems and practices of nurturance

Indigenous Australian communities have dynamic and complex social structures with evolving collectivist kinship systems that prescribe individuals' roles and obligations with others across Indigenous communities (Lohoar, Butera & Kennedy 2014; Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care 2011). Despite the ongoing impacts of colonisation, research suggests traditional Indigenous constructs of 'kanyirninpa' still

inform attachment to kin and the social, spiritual, physical, and moral codes of living in urban and remote Indigenous communities (Ryan 2011 185). Ryan (2011) used the term 'kanyirninpa' to refer to traditional Aboriginal constructs and practices of holding when explaining how in many Indigenous Australian communities' connections, relationships, traditions, place, Dreaming, and Lore are held together by holding and nurturance obligations. Priest et al. (2008) and Ryan's (2011) studies use Central and Western Desert Indigenous Australian language terms to explain how the practice of 'kanyirninpa' binds 'waltja' (family), 'tjukurpa' (the Dreaming), and 'ngura' (place of belonging). Practices of 'holding' mob are not merely defined as a physical act, but also imply spiritual, emotional, psychosocial provision of senses of security, protection, guidance, and nourishment.

Our review of scholarly and non-scholarly literature demonstrates how Indigenous mentorship begins from early childhood and continues through adolescence and later in life (Lohoar, Butera, and Kennedy 2014, Perry 2001; Ryan 2011). Research showcases how aspects of traditional Aboriginal practices of nurturance are retained in contemporary Aboriginal child-rearing practices, community functioning, and custodial obligations (Lohoar, Butera & Kennedy 2014). For example, studies explain how Indigenous Australian children often learn responsibilities to hold and protect kin at young ages through unstructured play and kinaesthetic cultural activities such as camping, fishing, and yarning (Lohoar, Butera & Kennedy 2014; Ryan 2011; Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care 2011). Research also notes that older Indigenous Australian children often have significant obligations to Indigenous family functioning as they are often encouraged to nurture kin, model-positive behaviours, and be self-reliant (Lohoar, Butera & Kennedy 2014; Ryan 2011).

International scholarship also documents the roles of First Nations Elders in cultural transmission and nurturance (Baskin 2020; Fitzpatrick et al., 2023; Kensington-Miller and Ratima 2015). Scholarship recognises First Nations Elders as cultural and community anchors and explains how Elders have always played critical roles in transmitting language, tradition, Dreaming, Lore, and custodial obligations (Busija et al. 2020; Eades et al. 2022). Eades et al. (2022) study, for example, found that there was a broad consensus across Indigenous Australian communities that Eldership is earnt, with 89% of participants noting that Indigenous mentoring and role modelling is an important step in becoming an Indigenous Elder. There was agreement that "Elders traditionally acted as mentors for the younger generations and willingness to interact with youth was noted as an important aspect of becoming an Elder" (Eades et al. 2022, 610). More research is needed to explore the trajectory of Indigenous kinship mentors to the Eldership.

Becoming mentors to Indigenous young mob

Much of the research field focusses on experiences of becoming formal mentors to First Nations youth, with studies recommending a plethora of cross-cultural training, professional development courses and 'how to guidelines' for developing mentor competency (Cinelli and Peralta 2015; Sinclair and Pooyak 2007). For example, research focussed on the Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience (AIME) program explains how before an individual can become a mentor, they must "complete two online training sessions on Australian Indigenous history, and

child protection and policy . . . and sessions focussed on cultural identity, mentoring techniques and details about the programme and associated responsibilities" (O'Shea et al. 2016, 67). While the literature recommends different training approaches and processes for individuals becoming mentors in formal programs, limited studies explore Indigenous Australian practices and trajectories of becoming and being kinship mentors.

Research methodology and design

Indigenist research methodology

This paper reports on findings from the first and second stages of a broader qualitative study that adopts Rigney (1999, 2006) Indigenist research theory as its methodological framework. This research paradigm provided us vast scope for honouring Indigenous Australian epistemologies, ontologies, and axiologies by emphasising the importance of respecting Indigenous knowledges, self-determination, and reciprocity within research relationships. Our analysis is relational and grounded in Rigney's (1999) three principles of *emancipatory imperative, political integrity,* and the *centring of Indigenous voices.*

In upholding Rigney's *emancipatory imperative* we actively challenged the dominance of deficit and assimilationist thinking across mentorship research, policies, and practices. Furthermore, we acknowledged the *political integrity*[4] of Indigenous participants as sovereign Indigenous Australians and advocated for Indigenous autonomy and control over kinship mentoring, nurturance, and cultural transmission processes (Rigney 2006). Finally, our research deeply engaged Indigenous scholarship and incorporated Indigenous research protocols and methods of yarning to help *centre Indigenous participant voices*. Rigney's methodological framework helped us to ensure our research design and findings were ethically sound and supported Indigenous Australian communities' kinship mentoring practices that are vital to cultural continuation and community self-determination.

Recruitment

This study aimed to prioritise the lived experiences of two cohorts: young Indigenous Australians and their mentors. Fifteen young Indigenous participants, aged 18–30, were recruited using an approach akin to the 'pockets of brilliance' recruitment model (Dadich et al. 2023). The 'pockets of brilliance' recruitment model identifies and explores positive examples of a given experience or phenomena to identify the elements that are present when outcomes are positive (Dadich et al. 2023). We embedded this approach to challenge deficit thinking and discourse. Instead of relying on conventional recruitment channels and pre-defined definitions of success and qualification, we sought out individuals who demonstrated exceptional skill and knowledge in specific areas, even if their experience and qualifications did not perfectly align with conventional ideals of success. This approach helped us identify new talent and locate a diverse and innovative participant group. Notably, these young people identified with diverse definitions of success. All participants aligned with Indigenous Australian conceptualisations of success, such as being a respected community member and maintaining strong connections to Country,

culture, and language. The participants also represented conventional (Western) markers of success, such as being recognised for advocacy and leadership, receiving awards and achieving high levels of educational, business, or creative performance success.

Two recruitment approaches were applied to locate the young mob. Firstly, professional contacts and networks were consulted to identify potential participants. Secondly, a LinkedIn post with contact details, a research summary, and a QR code for those interested was shared. This recruitment approach resulted in 21 expressions of interest, either initiated by the lead researcher or by potential participants themselves. However, due to professional, community, or family commitments, six individuals were unable to participate.

Nine Indigenous Australian mentors were recruited through a snowball sampling approach (Parker, Scott, and Geddes 2019), wherein the young mob identified and recommended individuals who had offered meaningful and influential mentorship that significantly contributed to their aspirational trajectories. It was not a requirement that the mentors were Indigenous. However, the young mob made introductions to 16 potential mentor participants, all of whom identified as Indigenous Australians. Due to professional, community, or family commitments, seven mentors were unable to participate.

This study is not representative of all Indigenous Australian mentorship experiences, rather the findings contribute to larger, more nuanced discourse about Indigenous mentor and mentee insights. The value of our qualitative study is in our collection of high-quality data and trenchant data analysis which adds to the depth and richness of findings and conclusions.

Participants

This study involved 15 young Indigenous Australians aged 18 to 30 years old, and nine mentors aged between 35 and 66 years old. All participants identified as Indigenous Australian and had different experiences connecting to Country and culture, as some participants did not identify continuity in sovereign connections while others identified with one nation or multiple nations.

The young mob represented 26 Indigenous Australian nations and pursued diverse academic and professional paths. Fourteen participants were employed at the time of the data collection and five were entrepreneurs or charity founders. Two had graduated at year 10 or equivalent, and 13 graduated from year 12 or equivalent. Nine were enrolled in tertiary education degrees or vocational courses at the time of the data collection, with two participants studying abroad. The cohort accessed various pathways and support services, such as internships, traineeships, and entrepreneurial programs during their post-secondary school transitions.

Comparably, the mentors represented at least 11 different Indigenous nations. Two participants held Elder status within their communities, and three reported kinship ties with the mentees who referred them to the study. All reflected on experiences where they had received informal kinship mentoring and seven discussed formal mentorship experiences. Six participants had graduated at least once from Universities or Vocational Education colleges at the time of data collection, and two were currently enrolled. All

were employed part-time or full-time, and four were business owners and founders at the time of data collection. Interestingly, no participant was employed in a mentorship role with the mentees who referred them.

Data collection and analysis

Our research design prioritised Indigenous communication styles as we embedded yarning methods to encourage participants to share insights in culturally respectful and prescribed ways (Bessarab and Ng'andu 2010). Yarning, a cultural-mediated variation of semi-structured interviewing, is an Indigenous Australian research method grounded in conversation and storytelling (Bessarab and Ng'andu 2010; M. Walker et al. 2014). We utilised two yarning styles, as initially we conducted social yarns to establish rapport with participants through open-ended, culturally respectful dialogue. Social yarns preceded research yarns which had similar structures to semi-structured interview formats and were embedded to explore our research topic (Bessarab and Ng'andu 2010). During research yarns, the lead researcher encouraged participants to share relevant experiences and insights (Kovach 2021). This approach helped us foster collaborative and culturally respectful spaces for knowledge exchange (Walker et al. 2014). All yarns were conducted and recorded online via Zoom, allowing participants and researchers to choose a safe, and comfortable location. The research team found yarning methods central to grounding Rigney's Indigenist methodology in practice, as this method helped foster relational connections with research participants and create culturally safe and supportive space for truth-telling (Bessarab and Ng'andu 2010). Throughout the yarns, participants engaged in truth-telling when acknowledging the historical silencing of injustices, and the ongoing impacts of colonisation on kinship mentoring experiences and as such deepened understandings of a fuller, more accurate account of this continent's history.

All recorded yarns were transcribed using a professional transcription service, and then, in line with Indigenous Australian ethical research protocols, all participants reviewed and approved transcripts before analysis. The transcripts were then uploaded into NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software program. Participant demographic attributes were first coded, and then, we employed Braun and Clarke's (2012) reflexive thematic analysis approach. The six tenets of Braun and Clarke's (2012) reflexive thematic analysis approach provided a systematic method for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within the qualitative data. We embedded this approach as it offered a rigorous six-stage framework for extracting meaningful insights from data. Once we familiarised ourselves with the transcripts, the lead researcher independently coded yarns to ensure consistency. This iterative coding process involved identifying patterns and searching for themes by collating codes under thematic headings. Utilising NVivo software's functionalities, we undertook a cross-case analysis and this was vital considering participant diversity.

Research ethics

Western Sydney University's ethics board granted this project human research ethics approval (H15091). The research team developed and maintained clear ethical guidelines

and accounted for additional ethical considerations as Indigenous Australian peoples' voices and insights were centred in this project. The AIATSIS (2020) Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research and National Health and Medical Research Council (2018) guidelines of reciprocity, respect, equality, responsibility, survival and protection, and spirit and integrity were respected throughout the life of the project. Participant consent, privacy, and confidentiality were and continue to be priorities of the research team.

Findings

Participants in this research study shared insights and reflections on mentorship experiences in diverse professional, educational, community, and cultural settings. Interestingly, all participants at the time of data collection identified as both a mentee and mentor, irrespective of age and professional or cultural status. Twenty-two of the 24 participants in our study (15 young mobs and 7 mentors) shared insights from formal mentorship experiences. All participants unanimously identified as kinship mentors and mentees, noting that kinship mentor relationships with family (immediate and extended), Elders, Indigenous colleagues, and community members were most meaningful and influential in supporting their aspirational achievements and trajectories.

Firstly, we share findings that suggest kinship mentoring paradigms are innate in Indigenous ways of being, doing, and nurturing kin. Then, we explore participant reflections on deliberate kinship mentoring approaches and activities where Indigenous communities work together to build community, cultural strength, and support young mob to become kinship mentors themselves. Finally, we share participant insights on the need to better recognise and invest in kinship mentoring practices. Participant reflections highlight the unnaturalness and inflexibility of imposed formal funding systems and prescriptive evaluation processes and how this often undermines Indigenous kinship mentoring practices.

Understanding kinship mentoring

Participants discussed Indigenous kinship mentoring practices and explained that such practices have been passed down for tens of thousands of years, which resonate deeply and feel part of their DNA.

'We are born mentors'

Unanimously, all participants explained that mentorship is innate in Indigenous Australian kinship systems, reflective of Indigenous epistemologies, ontologies, and axiologies. Many identified as being born mentors and nurturers and described their engagement in kinship mentoring relationships as 'custodial obligations', 'kinship duties', and 'cultural and spiritual responsibilities'. Jannali, a young Indigenous university student and facilitator of youth leadership programs, explained:

> Mentorship has its own form for Blakfullas . . . we are born mentors. It's in our connections with kin. It's in our DNA . . . We as mob naturally mentor . . . Us Blakfullas don't need

> mentorship to be really structured . . . mentorship is kinship, cause there is cultural respect there.

The notion that the practice of kinship mentoring is 'natural', 'intrinsic', 'inherited', 'expected', and 'ingrained in our ways of bringing all mob along' was a common theme across the data set. The research participants explained how Indigenous mentorship relationships often develop without the structured, scaffolded approaches of formal programs and are based on commonalities which evolve into a 'kinship-like connection'. Many described experiences of nurturance, empowerment, and mentoring from and with mob, noting that they 'didn't realise it was mentoring', and how 'for mob, mentorship is not separate activities and sessions, it just happens at the right time'.

Aunty Lenah, an Indigenous Elder, explained how kinship mentoring practices align with traditional Indigenous knowledge sharing practices:

> You don't have to have a program. Our mob have been mentoring forever. Mentoring and nurturing kin has always been cultural practice. It is so natural for mob, it's just who we are and what we do . . . The mentorship our mob need most ain't in a book. . . It's not about training or getting a degree. Mentorship for mob comes from your heart and your connection to your people. It is about understanding your connection, your strength and helping mob who need direction. It is listening and providing wisdom the same way our Old People have done for generations.

Aunt, like many other research participants, explains how kinship mentoring practices have been central to sustaining Indigenous communities and cultural knowledge transmission for generations.

'We sit, listen, and hold space for each other'

Many research participants reflected on kinship mentoring experiences of sitting together, observing, and listening to others share words of wisdom. For example, Uncle Balun, an Aboriginal Elder, described kinship mentoring experiences when growing up yarning and being on Country with his Old People:

> I now see that throughout most of my life experiences I was being mentored without realising it. It was times when I was on Country mutton birding with Pop or my appreciation for the small gems of wisdom my Father gave when he wouldn't say a lot when we worked on the fishing boats. Those moments have been some of the most influential mentorship experiences in my life. It's the small things or yarns that inspire you or challenge you . . . it's being mindful and taking on the gems of advice or opportunity. A lot of mob mentor this way naturally. This way of mentorship where we sit, listen and hold space for each other has whole community impact.

Several participants discussed the importance of Country and the physical environment in kinship mentoring practices and paradigms. The cohort's multi-directional, more-than-human understandings of the human – Country mentoring relationship is explored further explored in a recent publication entitled *'We are Country – Country mentors us'*, which reflects on young mob experiences of enacting and embodying Country (see Harry et al. 2024). However, the participants further explained the need to establish more gathering spaces where mob can 'nurture', 'hold each other' and 'feel valued, safe, and

have a sense of cultural healing'. When asked where these spaces should be and what they need to include, participants described Indigenous-specific spaces in organisations, schools, and workplaces that could provide specific services such as 'soup kitchens', 'proper hubs with fire pits and cultural workshops', and 'outreach centres with Indigenous specific services offered'.

Jannali, for example, explained the importance of finding physical spaces that are places of emotional and cultural safety:

> We need to be creating places for us to be mob, to share culture, to connect. It's gotta be a safe place to come home to ourselves, where we can just be ourselves and get strength in being Aboriginal. It'd be a physical space for cultural learning and that kinship exchange of mentorship between not just young mob, but all in the community. We do have places which are community gathering spaces, but they're really heavily dictated by where they get their funding from . . . creating and holding spaces where we truly relinquishing control and power back, where we can be together healing, yarning, and self-determining is what we want. The value is not just in the four walls, it is in the space where we can hold each other.

Many participants discussed how traditional cultural teaching approaches such as sitting in circle on-Country are important in kinship mentoring practices. For example, Jandamarra, an Indigenous leader in the mental health sector, reflected on his experiences of facilitating kinship mentoring with men in his community and the importance of sitting in circle for strengthening mentorship connections:

> Community led mentorship that embeds traditional approaches are important. It's where we create space for our people to sit with things in circles of support, wisdom and role models. They might see their friend or cousin or brother talk up in these circles, which then opens a safe space to dive into that emotion. We have men sitting there crying, telling their kids how much they love them and how proud they are to be able to do these things on Country. It is so powerful and what it does, is then plants the seed of respect and wisdom intergenerationally. It is all about modelling for the next generation to change behaviours and strengthen those kinship bonds. By embedding traditional approaches of sitting in circle the young people knew that there was nobody higher than each other, this is different to the power differences they experience in formal mentoring programs. Whenever the young person looked left or right, he had a strong male figure there. That is what makes the difference.

Jandamarra's reflection demonstrates how kinship mentors' hold kin when sitting in circle. While Jandamarra's practices bear some relationship to social corroborees,[5] his example shows the sense of care, respect, authority, and accountability fostered in Indigenous kinship mentoring approaches, wherein the young men develop authority and cultural values. His reflections also compare hierarchies of power present in formal mentoring programs with Indigenous mentoring practices that centre power sharing approaches where both mentees' and mentors' community cultural wealth are acknowledged and honoured.

Strength in community

Participants further discussed intentional activities Indigenous communities embed to build cultural strength and empower young mob to become kinship mentors themselves. The participants discussed the importance of nurturance and kinship mentoring experiences across academic, professional, and community spaces.

'Creating waves of change'

All participants shared accounts of Indigenous communities collaborating and working together to nurture young mobs' aspirational achievements. They recounted experiences where Indigenous kin, Elders, colleagues, and peers 'took us under their wing', provided 'networking opportunities and opened doors', 'helped with applications and submissions for grants', 'shared content-specific knowledge and broader wisdom', 'created a home and community away from home', and 'shared paths to take when walking in both worlds'. For example, Mahlee, a young Indigenous creative, explained how kinship mentoring relationships were 'game changers' in successfully transitioning post-secondary school into college:

> One of my Aunties, who is a filmmaker filmed and edited my entire creative portfolio. My other Aunty proof-read my admissions essays. My Mum helped me put together my CV. One of my Uncles from community helped me fundraise for tuition. Every single step that it took to get there, my community and family mentored me through. I still worked my ass off, and I still put in the work. But the difference was that I had an army of mob behind me. I acknowledge that there may be many other kids who have the same work ethic and may be 10 times more talented than me, but because they don't have access to those very specific skillsets and mentors, they may not be able to get to the same place or have access to the same spaces as me. Family and community mentorship was my game-changer.

Participants further explained that kinship mentoring built their self-esteem and pride in cultural identity. Many participants demonstrated agency when reflecting on the importance of facilitating kinship mentoring for strengthening 'leaderful movements' and 'creating waves of change' in reclaiming traditional ways of being, doing, knowing, and nurturing kin.

'It's our duty'

Participants discussed how kinship mentoring and nurturance are governed in their Indigenous communities through both-way cultural obligations. Dolly, a young Indigenous educator and artist, noted that it is her 'duty' and 'responsibility' to both engage in kinship mentoring practices and learn from mentors irrespective of their age:

> I have always felt a lot of cultural and kinship responsibility to mentor as a young Blakfulla. As First Nations people, it's our duty to give back and nurture the next generations, in our own time... In our communities mentors are younger and older ... My mentors are the people around me, even our little ones. The person I am was created by little bits of everyone. For us mob, the saying 'it takes a village to raise a child' is so true.

When acknowledging the critical roles Indigenous young people undertake in kinship mentoring practices, our participants do not seek to diminish Indigenous Australian Elders' authority in nurturance relationships. Rather, participants also acknowledged Elders as cultural and community anchors and recognised the critical roles Indigenous Australian Elders play in kinship mentoring practices.

Imposed systems and processes

While participants discussed the significance of kinship mentoring practices for sustaining Indigenous communities across the continent, they warned that current mentorship systems and prescriptive processes fail to effectively support Indigenous kinship mentoring practices. When asked how mentorship program designers, funding providers, broader government, and industry sectors could better support kinship mentoring and nurturance and facilitate this organically, many participants provided recommendations for decolonising systems and practices.

Pushing back against prescriptive processes

Research participants highlighted the urgency of pushing back against manualised, structured programs, and prescriptive reporting mechanisms for funding requirements, which codify implicit white bias. Aunty Lenah, for example, said:

> It's not about formal mentoring programs or tick-a-box approaches. Throwing money at programs built for and by whitefullas isn't working. We need to fund communities to be supported to get back to our ways. We need space and time to get it right. We need to be supported to heal our kin and build these relationships like the old ways . . . We need mob supported by mob to be mob. We mentor and nurture all the time, it is natural for us, but we need more support, space, time and resources to do it the proper ways.

Many participants concurred and suggested changes to funding and resource allocation systems and structures. The cohort noted that far too many Indigenous mentors or Indigenous organisations providing kinship mentoring are 'begging for sustainable investment'. All mentors in our study spoke of the need to reframe rigid funding systems that are often based on prescriptive evaluation strategies and measured outcomes. Uncle Balun, like many others, called for reporting mechanisms and mentorship outcomes to be re-evaluated to take into account the immeasurable quality of kinship mentoring and cultural, spiritual, and emotional nurturance:

> We need to change systems, especially funding systems. Currently funds and resources come from evaluations of white objectives and cause our ways of growing up young mob and mentoring don't necessarily have KPI's or measurables, whitefullas struggle to see it as an approach and they struggle to see how to support it. It's like 'we can't put guidelines in places, so let's not do anything'.

Uncle Balun provided further recommendations for decolonising and restructuring systems to better recognise Indigenous kinship mentor's knowledge and contributions:

> Long term we need to decolonise and bypass systems . . . these mainstream Westernised systems are so ass covering that to actually provide the kinship connection and mentorship in our terms, our ways, we've got to abide by white structures before we can do what we need to. There needs to be change because you can't expect old fullas from the bush or Elders or community people to sit there and fill in risk assessments when they can see in the eyes of our youth. The structure of these systems has us and our ways in chokeholds . . . Maybe we need mob advising government about approaches to support our ways of mentoring across education and all the sectors . . . Maybe there's cultural knowledge appraisal of traditional kinship and cultural mentors . . . Maybe we also introduce cultural leave or community leave across all industries and sectors.

'Support us to heal our kin and navigate the complexities of raising strong Blak kids in whitefulla systems'

Participants unanimously called for all Australians to deepen their understandings of Indigenous kinship systems and practices of nurturance. The cohort explained that broader systemic recognition of Indigenous ways of mentoring is critical for Indigenous Australian cultural survival and continuation. Aunty Lenah, for example, highlighted that it is everyone's responsibility to advocate for system and structural recognition of kinship mentoring approaches:

> Our mentorship approaches need to be better supported and recognised to help communities heal kin and navigate the complexities of raising strong Blak kids in Whitefulla systems. There needs to be reform. The focus needs to be supporting communities to grow our young ones up, our ways. These days, we as Blakfullas can't make this happen by ourselves. Everyone needs to be speaking up for us and our ways of nurturing mob, even when we're not in the room.

There was a general consensus across the data set that non-Indigenous practitioners, policy-makers, and researchers in mentorship do not understand kinship mentoring practices. Participants called for non-Indigenous peoples to listen and respect the value of Indigenous kinship mentoring practices.

Discussion

Despite the ongoing impacts and trauma Indigenous Australian communities experience as a result of colonisation and assimilation policies, our research, like many other studies, demonstrates how Indigenous kinship nurturance is still practiced across communities (Bodkin-Andrews and Carlson 2016; Eades et al. 2022; McCoy 2008; Ryan 2011). Our research addresses the dearth of scholarship exploring the interrelationship of Indigenous mentorship paradigms and kinship approaches and offers a new lens to examine international scholarship which describes First Nations mentorship approaches as 'informal' (McCluskey et al. 2004; Sinclair and Pooyak 2007).

Honouring kinship mentoring approaches for cultural continuity

By centring participant accounts of culturally mediated, custodial, process-oriented mentorship, we argue that the term 'informal mentorship' fails to represent our participants' experiences and the mentorship paradigm more broadly. Instead, we introduced the term 'kinship mentoring' to better recognise the distinctiveness of Indigenous Australian cultural, spiritual, social, economic, and political systems and their impact on Indigenous mentorship. While the mentorship processes participants' describe may not be structured in a conventional Western, formal sense, with session scaffolds and outcomes, our findings demonstrate that Indigenous mentors have very clear ideas about what young mob require, and deliberately impart lessons through experientially honed internal schemas. Our findings illustrate that kinship mentoring practices have been embedded, honed, and culturally ingrained in Indigenous cultures across the continent for tens of thousands of years and remain important for strengthening identity and understandings of cultural responsibilities. As evidenced

by the mentee and mentors' experiences shared, kinship mentoring approaches incorporate Indigenous epistemology based on circular, non-linear notions of life and are premised on the inter-relatedness of all things, bringing together ways of knowing, being, and doing (Martin 2008). While our participants used terms like 'innate' and 'natural' to describe their mentoring practices, it is clear from deeper analysis that these processes are culturally mediated, intergenerationally modelled, and learned.

The notion of the 'collective unconscious', a repository of archetypal knowledge, and shared ancestral memories (Jung 1936), offers a compelling lens through which to examine participant accounts of Indigenous Australians being 'born' kinship mentors and 'inheriting' kinship mentoring practices. Through this lens, we suggest that kinship mentors, acting as cultural repositories, can be seen as conduits for this collective unconscious, passing down knowledge, and skills that transcend individual experiences. The multigenerational, communitarian kinship mentoring paradigm ensures continuity of cultural identities and practices, and thus, we suggest kinship mentoring practices are an archetype and are collectively inherited forms and patterns of behaviour. Further analysis of kinship mentoring in relation to psychological renewal, which explores the notion of psychological nurturance and revivification, applies not only to self-maintenance in Indigenous Australian cultures but also to group and cultural maintenance, extending also to spiritual maintenance of Country (Jung 1928; Petchkovsky, Roque, and Beskow 2003).

Theories of socialisation also provide valuable insights when analysing participant reflections on the processes of becoming kinship mentors. Examining the experiential practice of kinship mentoring through participants' accounts of mentorship being exercised, expressed, and experienced through traditional cultural teaching activities and kinaesthetic land-based approaches, through the lens of sociocultural learning theory, offers a more nuanced understanding of how such mentorship paradigms are transmitted intergenerationally (Clausen 1968; Nichol 2011). By applying this perspective to our participants' reflections and studies describing how knowledge is transmitted "through everyday life, where teachings are often done subconsciously; we follow, we observe, and we go on to teach our own families" we highlight the centrality of community and socialisation in shaping identity and fostering a strong sense of cultural resilience (Walker 1993, 53). This adds to American sociologist Clausen's (1968) work which explains that socialisation is "the means by which social and cultural continuity are attained" (p.154). The notion of kinship mentoring practices being developed through Indigenous 'collective unconscious' and 'socialisation' challenges much scholarship which recommends and prescribes formal professional and cultural development training for foundational and functional mentorship competency.

It is evident from participant experiences and shared knowledge that a key motivation for kinship mentoring in Indigenous Australian communities is cultural continuity. Our findings suggest that kinship mentoring and nurturance provide security and guidance within a sophisticated network of relatedness, where the ability to mentor others is integral to the functioning and sustenance of Indigenous cultures from generation to generation. This adds an Indigenous Australian lens to international scholarship, such as Portman, Garrett's, and Tlanusta (2005) study which suggests First Nations American community mentor "young people to support their self-mastery, inner strength, and the

development of individual abilities that contribute to the well-being of the tribe" (p.287). Kinship mentoring practices have been found to support Indigenous cultural resurgence and renewal by carrying forward culture, identity, and restoring Indigenous presences that are beginning to remedy the disconnections of colonisation.

Multi-generational both-ways kinship mentoring approaches

While the beliefs and attitudes that guide kinship mentoring practices differ across Indigenous Australian nations, it is evident that Indigenous mentoring paradigms are communitarian in practice and centre values of interdependence, group cohesion, and community loyalty. Our findings suggest that kinship mentoring takes a collective approach wherein multiple mentors act as a secure base. While dominant understandings of mentorship relationships rest on the tenet that an older, more experienced mentor will guide a younger, less experienced mentee, in an apprentice-like learning experience (e.g. Peralta, Cinelli, and Bennie 2018), our findings suggest that there may be alternative approaches that are not always generational. As highlighted in the findings, for example, Dolly noted that "in our [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander] communities mentors are younger and older . . . ". Jandamarra further referenced the importance of inter/across generational mentoring experiences when sharing insights about young Indigenous men sitting in circle and engaging in kinship mentoring with cousins, brothers, and uncles. The notion of young mob becoming custodian and mentoring Elders and older mob across diverse community settings through kinship mentoring practices centred in multi-generational and both-way transmissions of knowledge and learning needs further exploration as it challenges discourse that prescribes mentors to be older than mentees. While no Australian research has explored the role of Indigenous young people in mentoring older Indigenous generations to date, Australian studies of nurturance have found that Indigenous Australians are expected and obligated to care for family members at young ages (Ryan 2011). While the current literature recommends that Indigenous Australian youth should be involved in mentorship planning processes to ensure "youth have a sense of ownership of the program and will more likely respect and feel connected to the program" (Klink et al. 2005, 119), more research is needed to centre the experiences of young mob who are mentors.

Recommendations

To better support the preservation and perpetuation of kinship mentoring practices, this study calls for individuals, institutions, policymakers, mentoring program developers and the broader Australian community to embed the following recommendations:

1. Engage in ongoing processes of truth telling and education to strengthen our understanding of Indigenous kinship mentoring practices.

Similar to other studies, the participants explained how practitioners, policy-makers, and researchers in mentorship lack an understanding of Indigenous values, practices, kinship mentoring paradigms, and child-rearing models (Lohoar et al., 2014; Ryan 2011). Our findings align with scholarship that suggests the "general consensus of non-Indigenous people misunderstand the positive aspects of traditional kinship responsibilities" (Lohoar et al., 2014, p.10). Participants recommend ongoing processes of truth

telling, listening, education, and action to better recognise, understand, and honour Indigenous kinship and nurturance mentoring practices and deepen broader Australian community understandings of the importance of these sovereign approaches for Indigenous Australian cultural continuity and thrivance. Our participants concur with Ryan's (2011) conclusions that "it is necessary for non-Aboriginal people to listen with "open ears" to the views of Aboriginal families and communities, to continually consider their own values and practices, and reflect on the applicability of such and the possibilities to better cocreate systems" (p.196). This study finds that it is the responsibility of every person, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, every sector, and every institution to advocate for and create systemic and structural changes to better recognise and support Indigenous communities' preservation and perpetuation of nurturance and kinship mentoring practices.

2. Reform and decolonise mentoring policy, reporting, evaluation, and funding approaches to better support Indigenous community self-determination.

The participants highlight the need for an urgent reform in mentoring policy, evaluation, and funding approaches to support community led, governed, and self-determined mentoring approaches where more decision-making power is transferred to Indigenous communities. Participants recommend the re-evaluation of, and changes to, current decision-making power structures to better support community autonomy and provide greater capacity for Indigenous advisors to influence government-wide policies and service delivery. Our findings show Indigenous communities' current frustrations with systemic and structural constraints and highlight the importance of mob having power to bypass such system constraints and hold programs, policy-makers and government resourcing to account. The cohort call for better recognition of Indigenous kinship mentor's knowledge, skills, and contributions of time. Specific recommendations were provided such as introducing cultural knowledge appraisal of kinship mentors as well as introducing cultural leave across industries and sectors to recognise and honour kinship mentors' obligations and responsibilities.

Participants further recommend a paradigm shift from unnatural and inflexible, imposed, formal, prescriptive evaluation policies, and processes that often dictate funding and resourcing of mentorship activities, to self-determined community-led evaluation and decision-making approaches. The findings suggest that current formal evaluation approaches with prescribed metrics often codify implicit white bias and undermine the discretion and nuance of spiritual, cultural, and kinship mentoring. Our research adds an Indigenous Australian perspective to Sinclair and Pooyak's study (2007) which finds that evaluation approaches and funding systems for First Nations Canadian mentorship are too reliant upon data collection and the measurement of Eurocentric success outcomes instead of focussing on holistic wellbeing and learning. Participants call for re-evaluations of current reporting mechanisms, evaluation strategies, and outcomes of successful mentorship not solely based on funder accountability but rather to centre collective wisdom, relational accountability, and recognise mentorship practices as ways of enacting reparative activism. Our study recommends funding agencies to create conditions to better support Indigenous community self-determination by providing long-term, flexible funding, and Indigenous economic development support. This would support changes to funding and resource allocation systems wherein mob self-determine and govern success measures, creating evaluation

tools (such as impact yarns), and resourcing approaches that take into account the immeasurable quality of kinship mentoring and cultural, spiritual, and emotional nurturance. These recommendations are important for heightening Indigenous self-determination. As Torres Strait Islander academic, Nakata (2020) explains, "self-determination operates to transfer power and resources from the coloniser to the colonised, giving rise to critical questions and challenges about policy, institutions and their governance" (p.339).

3. Create and hold space for kinship mentoring practices.

The need for long-term and further investment in physical spaces to facilitate kinship mentoring is evidenced in participant accounts. Participants highlighted the need for investment in cultural infrastructure, specifically in the creation of physical spaces that foster mobs' senses of cultural safety and belonging to promote community cohesion and intergenerational connectedness. This directly aligns with First Nations Canadian Elders' and community members' calls for spaces to transmit cultural teachings and facilitate cultural-based group mentoring activities such as culture camps, tipi teaching approaches, and powwows (Fitzpatrick et al., 2023; Sinclair and Pooyak 2007). Our study recommends the creation of more Indigenous physical spaces, even within existing infrastructures such as schools, workplaces, and organisations, to be designed and held specifically for kinship mentoring purposes to support mob development of social capital, social connectedness, social reconstruction, community identity, and community cultural wealth.

Conclusion

This study honours Indigenous Australian kinship mentoring approaches that have been culturally ingrained and practiced across Indigenous Australian nations for tens of thousands of years. Our findings add scholarship to a research field that is described internationally as undertheorised. By centring Indigenous Australian voices, we explore how kinship mentoring practices are culturally mediated, experiential, custodial, process-oriented, communitarian, and innate in Indigenous ways of being, knowing, doing, and nurturing. Our research challenges dominant mentorship dynamics by exploring the multi-generational, both-way mentorship paradigms that participants identified as vital to Indigenous Australian communities' intergenerational cultural functioning and continuation. By embedding Rigney's (1999) Indigenist principles, we challenged deficit, assimilationist thinking in mentoring policy, and literature by demonstrating how kinship mentoring approaches are deliberate, experientially honed, and so much more than 'informal' paradigms, and call for decision makers to consider different approaches to funding, resourcing, and measuring mentoring impact. Our study calls for more recognition and sustainable investment to better support kinship mentoring approaches to improve Indigenous Australian communities' holistic wellbeing, strengthen cultural connectedness, and promote community self-determination.

Matilda Harry is a proud, young Wiradjuri woman who is passionate about making positive social change for all Australian young people. She is completing a Doctor of Philosophy at Western Sydney University. Her thesis will examine mentorship provided to Indigenous Australian secondary school graduates and establish a model of best practice, culturally strong Indigenous mentorship. Matilda has recently graduated with

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Professor Michelle Trudgett is an Indigenous scholar from the Wiradjuri Nation in New South Wales. Michelle holds the position of Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Indigenous Leadership at Western Sydney University. Prior to this appointment, she served as the Inaugural Director of the Centre for the Advancement of Indigenous Knowledges at the University of Technology Sydney and was previously the Head of Indigenous Studies at Macquarie University. In recognition for her contributions to higher education, Michelle has received several awards including the highly prestigious National NAIDOC Scholar of the Year Award, the Neville Bonner Award for Teaching Excellence, and the University of New England Distinguished Alumni Award.

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Professor Rebekah Grace is the Director of TeEACH (Transforming Early Education and Child Health), a Western Sydney University research centre. Her research seeks to understand the complexities characterising the lives of people who experience disadvantage, adversity, and marginalisation. It is multi-disciplinary research, spanning the education, psychology, health, and social welfare fields. Rebekah is committed to participatory methods and privileging the voices of key stakeholders, including children and community members. In the 16 years since the commencement of her academic career, Rebekah has secured more than $11 M in research funding and published over 60 works. She has received multiple awards, including four for excellence in Aboriginal research and community engagement.

Notes

1. In this paper, the term 'Indigenous' refers to people of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent, who identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and are accepted as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person in the community in which they live or have lived. It is understood that not all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people identify using the term 'Indigenous'; however, this term will be used for the purposes of this paper. The term non-Indigenous refers to all other Australians.
2. In this paper, 'First Nations people' refer to people with familial heritage from, and membership in, the ethnic groups who are the earliest known inhabitants of an area.

Literature discussing First Nations people's experiences across a range of countries is considered in this paper.

3. The term 'mob' refers to a group of Indigenous people. Participants used the term 'mob' to connect and identify extended family groups, clan groups, or wider community groups. Participants further identified themselves and their Indigenous Australian peers as 'young mob' and this term is used throughout the paper to refer to the cohort of participants.
4. Indigenous political integrity is defined as 'Indigenous ontological and epistemological views about the world that directly translate to Indigenous philosophies, languages, cultural and spiritual values and beliefs' (Rigney 2006, 43).
5. The term 'corroboree' is derived from the Darug language and is used to describe Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' deeply spiritual gatherings and events. Corroborees have been practiced across Indigenous Nations since the Dreaming and they continue to offer Indigenous communities opportunities to share stories, practice culture, and come together to share memories, laughter, and be reminded of their place in the world and their responsibilities.

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Ethics approval

This study was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at Western Sydney University. The ethics reference number is as follows: H15091. Consent to participate Informed consent to participate and publish was obtained from participants.

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