



Yarning about water safety: Qualitative research about water safety with First Nations residents of Wiradjuri land



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Photo credits:

Front cover: Marrambidya Bila (Murrumbidgee River) by Jasmine Williams

Page 8: Flooding at Wagga Beach playground by Jasmine Williams

Page 10: Marrambidya Bila (Murrumbidgee River) by Jasmine Williams

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1. Background

Connection to Country, both land and water, are vitally important to Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (1, 2). Connection to, and ownership of water in particular, plays an important role in the cultural lives of salt water and fresh water Indigenous Australians (3). This connection and interaction with water for both recreation and activities of culture and daily life, highlight the importance of safety when engaging in aquatic activities.

However, despite these deep connections to waters, First Nations peoples in Australia are known to drown at rates that are 1.7 times that of the non-Indigenous population (4). This risk is particularly pronounced for inland waterways such as rivers, lakes and dams (5, 6), with alcohol and geographical remoteness commonly implicated risk factors (7). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children experience higher rates of drowning in portable swimming pools (8) and in Queensland, the only peer-reviewed study of non-fatal drowning among Aboriginal children has identified a fatal and non-fatal drowning rate 44% higher than the incidence rate of non-Indigenous children (9).

Although several water safety initiatives have been developed to improve safety and reduce drowning risk among First Nations Peoples in Australia, to date there has been limited qualitative research exploring First Nations Peoples' water safety beliefs and practices. This research aimed to address this gap by conducted qualitative research with First Nations Peoples in Wagga Wagga, New South Wales, the lands of the Wiradjuri people.

2. Approach and Method

2.1. Study design

This qualitative study used yarning circles to capture valuable insights from First Nations research participants. Yarning circles, broadly consist of storytelling within a respectful and deeply democratic space, where each participant takes turns in speaking, and in which the direction of discussion may meander, fixate, or take divergent and creative lines of flight (10). Yarning circles are an accepted, ethical and culturally appropriate means of conducting qualitative research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (10) and have been used in injury prevention research previously (11), but have not previously been used to conduct drowning prevention and water safety research.

2.2. Research setting

This research was conducted in Wagga Wagga, on the lands of the Wiradjuri people. Wagga Wagga has an estimated resident population of 65,770 (12). Wiradjuri Country is located on the land of the three rivers, Murrumbidgee (Marrambidya), Lachlan (Galari), and the Macquarie (Wambool). The Murrumbidgee River has been identified as one of the country's leading river drowning blackspots (13), so gaining insight into river usage and water safety beliefs and practices with respect to the river was deemed to be of value for future drowning prevention community interventions.

2.3. Formation of an Aboriginal Reference Group (ARG)

Prior to conduct of this research an Aboriginal Reference Group was formed. This group comprised First Nations Peoples representing several local groups including Murrumbidgee Local Area Health District, Playgroups NSW and the Wagga Aboriginal Women's Group. The ARG met prior to the research being conducted to discuss the proposed discussion guide and give their insights on local water safety issues impacting the First Nations community in Wagga Wagga. As a result of local



flooding in the area when the research was conducted (October, 2022), additional questions around flooding were added to the discussion guide. For their participation in the meeting, ARG representatives were given a \$60 retail gift card. See Appendix 1 for the revised discussion guide.

2.4. Discussion guide development

A wide-ranging discussion guide was developed prior to conduct of the research (see Appendix 1). This discussion guide was initially developed by researchers Peden, Williams and McMillan, and later refined with members of the Aboriginal Reference Group as previously described. The discussion guide was used as a basis for conversations, but was not rigidly applied.

2.5. Participant groups and recruitment of participants

The scope of research comprised 4 x yarning circles of the following number of participants across the following participant groups:

- Young people aged 18-30 years (2 participants, 1 male and 1 female)
- Parents of younger children (2 participants, 1 male and 1 female)
- Parents of adolescents (2 participants, 1 male and 1 female)
- Elders (3 participants, 3 females)

As the elders yarning circle did not feature male elder perspectives, a subsequent one-on-one interview was conducted in a hybrid format (in person and online via Microsoft Teams), with one male elder. Participation in the sessions was voluntary and participants provided their informed consent by reading and signing a Participant Information Statement and Consent Form (PISCF) prior to commencing participation. Sessions lasted on average 60 minutes in duration and participants were provided with a \$50 retail gift card as a thank you for volunteering their time.

2.6. Data capture and analysis

With the exception of the one hybrid one-on-one interview conducted with a male elder, all sessions were held face-to-face at local community centres in Wagga Wagga. Sessions were jointly facilitated by researchers Williams and Peden. All sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were thematically analysed in an inductive process following the procedure outlined by Braun and Clarke (14). Researchers Williams and Peden familiarised themselves with the transcripts, produced initial coding framework and met to discuss. This coding framework was revised based on discussions and used to thematically code transcripts in NVivo. The resultant themes and exemplar quotes are detailed in the findings section of this report. Researcher McMillan provided oversight and guidance on cultural appropriateness of coding and academic practice, as well as local and cultural relevance of proposed recommendations.

2.7. Ethics approval

Ethics approval was granted by the Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council of NSW (Approval number: 1880/21).



3. Findings

In total 10 participants participated in the research across four yarning circles and one one-on-one interview. Key themes identified included 'Family as the key source of water safety knowledge, 'Story telling as an important component of water safety education', 'The river as being central to culture' and 'The power of experiential learning'.

3.1. Theme 1: Family as the key source of water safety knowledge

One of the most prominent themes was around family as being their main source of water safety. This was often discussed in the context of occurring from childhood and being handed down by family members across generations:

"So we were taught that, and we teach the boys that the importance of not jumping in to the river, you've got to check what's in there first. And we've also taken the boys, like, on a float in the kayaks and stuff like that. And as we're going, we teach them about what's underneath." (Family Group 2)

And

"I reckon everyone has their own understanding of the river. So it's really what you've been taught. So it comes down to that." (18-30 years age group)

And

"You're not only down there, you hear stories from everyone. Your kids are very close to the water. Don't do that. Wait till I'm in the water or why you don't just walk into the water by yourself. You don't do that. So sort of just telling them while they're young and then just showing them how to be in the water, to be around the river and also just around pools and stuff too. It's all the same job. And more pools, especially when they're young. (Family Group 1)

Many indicated water safety was innate to culture:

"See, we obviously have different understandings than non-indigenous people, so they wouldn't think of that sort of stuff. That's normally the first thing that we've been taught. Like, just because it looks calm, it's not calm type of thing." (18-30 years age group)



Another key view aligned to family as the key source of water safety knowledge was that its everyone's responsibility within the family to look after each other around the water:

"Now, I haven't had any experience with drowning, but I suppose that's because I've been aware of what can happen. And always supervise your children, your grandchildren, whatever. In our family, it's everybody's responsibility to look after the younger ones. They need to make sure everybody's safe." (Elders Group)

This includes at the river:

"But when you go to the river, there's next to no supervision except like, your family or whoever you're with." (18-30 years age group)

The influence of family via the power of elders in ensuring safe behaviours around the water was also clearly communicated:

"No, you're around the elders all the time and then you know not to muck up or anything because once your elders tell you something, then that's still upon you and you don't ever forget it really. Because you don't want to do wrong by elders either." (Family Group 1)

3.2. Theme 2: Story telling as an important component of water safety education

Linked to the first theme and the idea that families are the key source of water safety education for First Nations Peoples was the idea of water safety being communicated through storytelling. One such story, about the water dog, invoked fear in children to discourage going near water without an adult:

"There's other safety ones. Some of them can smell the kids if they're not with adults, so they get out of the water or whatever. They've generally without an accompanying adult. You put that respect, fear in them. But if they do go into the water without an adult, they can't get taken or pulled in." (Family Group 2)

As another participant noted:

"Old fellows talk about the water dog and he comes and collects you if you're too close to the water, if you're camping at night, he'll pull you in and you don't come back and I'm scared of that water dog even as an adult." (Family Group 2)

Elders reflected on stories about monsters under bridges as another storytelling mechanism to keep children out of danger:



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"So we were taught that, grown up, that it's everybody's responsibility to look after everybody in the family. And that's why they told the stories of the monster under the bridge, and that to keep you away from all that. And then when you went there, it was everybody's responsibility to look after everybody." (Elders Group)

Another participant shared the story about Bunyip's Corner, which aimed to highlight currents in the river:

"So you tell the story that you don't go around Bunyip Corner. That's up on Brungle mission. And so Bunyip Corner is where a rip comes, and it's not a corner. And so we teach the kids, that the bunyips in there, and he pulls you under. And I didn't know that it was actually just a rip, where you see this bunyip that lives in there. And that's our story, and it's not a myth. He's in there, and he only lives in that rip area. So that's how we teach our kids." (Family Group 2)

Many agreed stories are a good way to communicate water safety to First Nations Children while also keeping culture alive.

"I think it's how much that the family knows as well. I think that's why it's so important that we continue to share our culture with others."

"Yeah. That story has been around for tens of thousands of years. It'd be a shame for it to die out another 250, so keep it going as long as we can." (Family Group 2)

Community talks were also recommended to highlight the dangers of rivers to children:

"Teach them around what our waterways are like, you know what I mean? It ain't no dam, you jump in the current and it's strong, it's going to drag you away, then you're stuck in the willows and you're bugged. You can't get out of that, you know what I mean? So, yeah, so I reckon do any forums that do come have those courses for them, whether it's at a community centre wherever, and have elders come in to talk to them about the river." (Family Group 1)



3.3. Theme 3: The river as being central to culture, preferred but requiring respect

The importance of story telling in communicating water safety knowledge among First Nations Peoples in Wagga Wagga was linked strongly to another theme concerned with the river as being central to culture. One participant described a feeling of safety when connecting with country:

"Yeah, it's a feeling that it's hard to explain until you do it yourself. It's like getting your toes and just soaking it back into the dirt and take your shoes off and connect back with country again. Yeah, mother." (Family Group 1)

The river also played a central role in First Nation's culture as a meeting place and a place of natural resources for food gathering:

"I just think that's where most of the resources are, you know what I mean? That's where the food and it's just always probably been that meeting place. That's where you sort of find your way. You'd walk the river, walk along the river, follow the river banks, and you end up somewhere. But, yeah, where you'd find most of the resources, food." (Family Group 1)

Linked to this idea of the river being central to First Nations culture, was the local knowledge First Nations Peoples have of the river, and how this is contrasted with other cultures:

"Wagga Wagga is a very multi cultural centre, and if you go down the river, you see some cultures that haven't had access to that water that they just jump in and they don't realise they've got to know how to swim or how to save themselves. And it is pretty scary." (Elders Group)

Alongside this connection to culture and land was an overt preference for the river, over a public swimming pool, when choosing where to recreate:

"But our communities are all about connection. You go into environments like that [the pool], people lose connection. They lose connection with each other, they lose connection with that water, they lose connection with their kids. We still hold that connection when we're at river." (Family Group 2)

"It's a white institution for me. Because its people with money that go to the pool, all those kinds of things." (Young Persons Group 18-30 years).

Hand in hand with the cultural importance of the river, came the need for environmental maintenance. This environmental maintenance and care for country, in turn if believed to reduce hazards present in the river environment which could increase drowning risk:



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"Through my work, I've even known Aboriginal people tell farmers, like the current front of really hard on a bend, and it'll start taking banks away from that bend and everything. So you get fallen trees and everything and you chuck in that bend, so when the water hits it, it's hitting the trees and not so much taking all the erosion away from the bend. So it's all maintenance and everything like that on your river. It's just respecting it and giving back to the river." (Male Elder one-on-one interview)

However although the river represents a preferred choice to cool off and enjoy the water in and amongst nature, there remains a strong awareness that the river is a dangerous place which needs respecting as it cannot be controlled and is constantly changing:

"You only have to take your eyes off for a second and they're gone. And with the currents that runs in rivers, they just sweep your way." (Elders Group)

"But what people don't realise with the river is you might walk in for about 5ft and it's fine, and then all of a sudden there's nothing there and down you go. And they don't realise about the current or snags that are in the river." (Elders Group)

"Well, you go to the Wagga Beach and all of that, but when you go camping, you always check. It's like doing a health check when you're going out on a workshop. You just virtually check the water and all that. And you tell kids and people not to dive in the water. You always walk in the water first and see what's around, and you just do your safety checks and then it's all okay, touchwood. We've had no one drowning our family in that. You just got to respect the river and what it does, and it can change from one season to another. Got to do your checks all the time." (Male Elder one-on-one interview)





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3.4. Theme 4: The power of experiential learning

Although story telling was identified as an important theme of discussions concerning First Nations Peoples in Wagga Wagga and their practices around water safety, the experiential learning and the knowledge gained from physically observing the river was another clear theme:

"Oh, yeah, you do use stories and you respect those too. You're always learning from the river. Go out to the river all your life and you always learn something from the river because it's a dangerous place to go if you don't respect it." (Male Elder one-on-one)

Experiential learning to complement storytelling and other forms of water safety education were highlighted as being crucial, though maybe something that had not been prioritised to date:

"So family would tell you and you could actually look on the water and the water could tell you where there was a snag or where you could go in. Even if you just went out for the day fishing. It was fishing, only it's no swimming, it's just fishing. And the parts of the river which are fished, you couldn't swim there. Parts of the river we swim, but you didn't fish. So we grew up knowing all that. And you could tell by looking at the logs in the river if there was something there or nothing there, even if you're in a boat or something. So you were taught that. I don't know how I can explain it, but if I was at the river area, my mum, you could tell by the ripple in the water or the bank to the water. You were taught all that, but that's not taught today. No, that's my own fault, because I don't take my grandchildren fishing, because fishing doesn't interest me, so I don't go out the river, so I don't take them and I don't teach them, which is my fault." (Elders Group)

And

"For whatever reason, they're not taught about the rivers. They're not taught that the river is important and you've got to respect the river. And the river talks to you and tells you what's going on at this time of the day or that time of the day. It's not just water rushing and you can go and jump in, you need to be able to read it, you need to know when it's a good time to swim in the river. You need to know when it's not a good time to swim in the river. But because lots of people have got backyard pools and you've got access to the Oasis [local public pool], for families that can afford it, that's more easy for them to do, just take them in. They don't have to teach them any new ways at Oasis. What do they have to teach them? Our pools are the same, so that's why they're getting taught about pools, isn't it?" (Male elder one-on-one interview)



4. Recommendations

Based on the rich insights yielded from this research and the key themes that were identified via yarning circles, the authors make the following recommendations for improving water safety among First Nations Peoples, specifically relevant to Wiradjuri people of the Wagga Wagga area:

Recommendation #1: Via appropriate local consultation employ local stories and artists to provide water safety information relevant to the Wiradjuri community. This has the dual benefit of being culturally relevant while also keeping language and culture alive for the next generation. This could be in partnership with playgroups, Aboriginal Women's Groups, Men's Sheds and through the formal school system in partnership with Aboriginal Liaison Officers.

Recommendation #2: Explore the feasibility and community acceptability of incorporating local Indigenous art into water safety signage to combine culture and water safety education at key inland waterway sites such as Wagga Beach on the Murrumbidgee River.

Recommendation #3: Consider enhancing traditional water safety education with experiential learning via workshops or excursions conducted on country. Such workshops could also be conducted for new arrivals in town and serve as a bridge between First Nations and other cultures. Such education could also be delivered in connection with education around environmental practices.

Recommendation #4: Ensure opportunities for participation in existing water safety programs in the Wagga Wagga area are communicated and offered to First Nations Peoples, Families and Communities. Recommended avenues for communication to First Nations Peoples in Wagga Wagga include First Nations Community and Consultative Groups, Aboriginal Liaison Officers in Schools, First Nations Early Childhood Programs and Aboriginal Controlled Health Services such as the Wagga Wagga Aboriginal Medical Service.

Recommendation #5: Alongside community, examine ways to make public swimming pools more culturally safe and welcoming of First Nations Peoples. This may be through schemes to recruit and train First Nations Swim Instructors and Lifeguards and ensure retention of this workforce.

Recommendation #6: Further enhance the First Nations Drowning Prevention Workforce via recruitment and training for First Nations instructors in the delivery of First Aid and cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR).



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6. Appendix 1: Discussion Guide: Exploring water safety and drowning prevention beliefs and practices among First Nations Peoples

Welcome

- Introduce moderator(s)
 - Name, UNSW Sydney
 - Name, LikeMind Wagga
- Introduce topic
 - Water safety and drowning prevention, including pool and river safety
 - What do we mean by this?
 - Why is this important?
- This discussion is for a research project
 - This discussion is part of a larger research project that is trying to improve water safety programs and campaigns for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in Wagga Wagga, your input is very valuable
 - The project is being led by Dr. Amy Peden, Ms Jasmine Williams and Associate Professor Faye McMillan

Obtain Completed PISCF

- Ensure we have obtained completed PISCF

Guidelines

- No right or wrong answers, only different points of views
 - Please feel free to share your perspective, even if it is different than someone else's
 - You don't have to agree with other people, but please be respectful as other people share
- We are audio recording this session
 - We are recording because people often say helpful things and it is difficult to write everything down quickly
 - We will write everything from the recordings down later, and we will not use your name in any part
- Our roles as moderators
 - Help guide the discussion
- We are on a first name basis
 - We will use first names during our discussion
 - Please use your name tag we have provided
- Icebreaker:
 - Have participants share:
 - First name
 - If they have ever participated in a yarning circle before
 - How often are you in, on, or near the water?



Opening Questions

- So, this research is all about water safety and drowning prevention beliefs and practices including at the river and the swimming pool and any other water bodies you may use.
 - To begin with, what role does water plays in your life?
 - Do you know how to swim?
 - How would you describe your swimming ability?
 - What aquatic locations do you visit?
 - What do you do while you're there?
 - Who do you visit with?
 - What does water safety mean to you?
 - What does drowning prevention mean to you?
 - What water safety practices do you yourself do?
 - Do these differ depending on where you are or what activities you are doing?
 - How often do you visit the public swimming pool in Wagga Wagga?

Participant group specific questions – Young people aged 18-30 years

- Specifically, as young people, how has your use of the water changed since you were a child?
 - In particular, thinking about your use of the river, how has this changed, if it has?
- What water safety information is most relevant for you and your friends?
 - Is this different for a swimming pool as compared to a river?
- What do you think is well-understood by you and your peers with respect to water safety?
 - What do you think is not well understood or could be improved?

Participant group specific questions – Parents and caregivers of children (~0-17 years)

- Specifically, as a parent or caregiver of children, how often do you visit the water with the children in your care?
 - What do you do?
 - Where do you go?
- What do you do to keep children safe around the water?
 - Do you do things differently for children of different ages or have these practices changed as your children grew? (if relevant)
- What is well understood about keeping children safe around the water in your community?
 - What do you think could be improved?
- Do the children in your care attend or have they attended swimming lessons in the past?
 - How important do you think swimming lessons are for children?

Participant group specific questions – Elders

- Do you have any caring responsibilities for grandchildren or young children?
 - If yes, what does this look like around the water?
- Do you think the way water is used by your community is different now to when you were younger?
 - Why, why not?
- What do you think is done well in this community in the sense of water safety for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people?
 - What do you think is not done well or could be improved?
- What do you think the community needs with respect to water safety and/or drowning prevention?



Flooding

- Have you experienced flooding?
- How do periods of flood and drought impact how you use the river?
- How do you keep yourself and your loved ones safe during periods of flood and drought?
- Have you ever driven into floodwaters?

Closing question

- Out of everything we have discussed today, what advice would you give to water safety and drowning prevention organisations if wanting to improve initiatives and campaigns for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in Wagga Wagga?
- Have we missed anything? Is there anything else you would like to add?

Close off recording and provide voucher

