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CHAPTER 23

*Mabu liyan*: The Yawuru way

Yap, M and Yu, E.¹

Abstract

Indigenous peoples around the world describe living well from a relational perspective. For the Yawuru, the traditional owners of Broome in Western Australia, that is *mabu liyan*. *Mabu liyan* or good *liyan* is centred on Yawuru’s sense of belonging and being, emotional strength and pride. Expressions of *liyan* are articulated based on collective structures and is based on a model of living well in connection with country, culture, others and with oneself. The narratives from Yawuru women and men show there is no one single conceptualisation of *mabu liyan*. Instead achieving and maintaining *mabu liyan* is related to having strong family relations, maintaining and fulfilling one’s responsibility to country and culture, feeling respected and valued by others and being able to be self-determining on matters concerning one’s self, one’s family, community and one’s country. Furthermore, conceptions and experiences of *mabu liyan* is intertwined with the interface of surviving in the modern world with Yawuru women and men negotiating the trade-offs in maintaining the various dimensions of living well. Starting with *mabu liyan* to understand Yawuru wellbeing ensures that the measures of cultural, spiritual and emotional wellbeing are grounded in Yawuru’s way of knowing, seeing and being in the world. Using mixed-methods approach, this chapter will explore how conceptions and measures of *mabu liyan* can lay the foundation for measuring wellbeing from a relational perspective. The stories will be interwoven with findings from the Yawuru wellbeing Survey to elucidate how *mabu liyan* conceptions overlap and differ from orthodox wellbeing frameworks and measures.

¹ The authors would like to acknowledge that this work was undertaken on Yawuru country and extend their gratitude to all the Yawuru women and men who have generously given their time to share their ideas, views and thoughts for advancing the research, in particular the Yawuru Reference and Guidance Committee who have been a guiding compass to ensure the research is fit for purpose for community needs and aspirations. We would also like to acknowledge the Yawuru Wellbeing Survey 2015 team of research assistants without whom the findings in Table 2 would not be possible. The research received both financial and in-kind support from the following organisations to which the authors are very grateful: Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (Australian National University), Kimberley Institute Limited, Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre, Nulungu Institute (University of Notre Dame), Nyamba Buru Yawuru, Nagula Jarndu, Bottles of Australia and Yawuru Prescribed Body Corporate.
Introduction

The literature on wellbeing has grown exponentially in the last four decades. Historically, interest in wellbeing was primarily contained within the fields of philosophy and theology; today it includes a wide range of disciplines such as psychology, politics, sociology, anthropology and economics (Frey and Stutzer 2002; Diener and Seligman 2004; Tiberius 2006; Mathews and Izquierdo 2009; Thin 2009; Graham 2012; Haybron 2015; Bache and Reardon 2016). Prima facie, it appears that the term wellbeing is often used synonymously with happiness, life satisfaction, health and quality of life. However, there are subtle and distinct ideological differences that stem from disciplinary, historical and philosophical underpinnings.

Nobel Prize winning economist Amartya Sen’s 1986 Stanner Lecture, Standard of Living is an important reference point for navigating through the commonalities and divergence in understandings of wellbeing. In the lecture, Sen made several notable points which demonstrate the challenges of measuring wellbeing. Sen (1987, p3) described the complexities of understanding and measuring standard of living when he stated:

You could be well off, without being well. You could be well, without being able to lead the life you wanted. You could have got the life you wanted, without being happy. You could be happy, without having much freedom. You could have a good deal of freedom without achieving much. We can go on [emphasis in original].

The inherent subjectivity and multidimensionality of conceptualising living standards captured in the quote above is further complicated by the operationalisation of these concepts into measures for evaluating wellbeing. Despite the widespread recognition that wellbeing is multidimensional, with both subjective and objective aspects, and also context- and population-specific, the tendency in development discourse has been to establish universal criteria and indicators for the measurement of progress towards wellbeing (OECD 2015). One problem with such universal application is that different peoples hold different meanings and understandings of what constitutes wellbeing, and these differences can sometimes be subsumed by the dominant, universalist paradigm (White 2016).

In tandem with this global agenda is a growing body of literature which serves to deconstruct the normative way in which wellbeing is conceptualised and characterised. There are two substantial bodies of literature in this space. The first is primarily driven from developing
countries or the global south (Escobar 1995; Gough et al. 2006; White et al. 2014; White and Blackmore 2016). The second, is occurring within the \textsuperscript{2}indigenous movement of conceptualising and measuring wellbeing according to the worldviews of indigenous peoples (Richmond et al. 2005; Adelson 2009; Heil 2009; Izquierdo 2009; Merino 2016; Watene 2016b; Yap and Yu 2016a).

In challenging the discourse of wellbeing, indigenous peoples have mobilised a self-determination movement which is centred on their worldviews and priorities from the international levels down to more localized levels (Grieves 2007; Taylor et al. 2012; Rigney and Hemming 2014; Taylor et al. 2014; Kukutai and Walter 2015; Kukutai and Taylor 2016a; Watene 2016a). This wellbeing agenda starts from a relational view where the centrality of a collective sense of wellbeing, not just individual wellbeing, and the importance of sustaining one’s relationship to the natural world and environment are promoted (Ruttenberg 2013; Waldmüller 2014; Merino 2016).

To meaningfully embed wellbeing in policy requires an understanding of wellbeing concepts, measures and evaluation tools. The fundamental tasks include deciding ‘what objects (dimensions and indicators) are of value’ and the ‘importance attached to the object or objects’ (Sen 1987). These two questions are deceptively straightforward but are critically dependent on how wellbeing is conceptualised, by whom and through what process. In this paper, the current approaches to understanding and measuring indigenous wellbeing are outlined. Following that, an approach starting from Indigenous perspectives working with the Yawuru community in Broome, Western Australia is described. Using participatory sequential mixed-methods approach, this chapter will explore how conceptions and measures of \textit{mabu liyan} can lay the foundation for measuring wellbeing from a relational perspective. The stories will be interwoven with findings from the Yawuru wellbeing Survey to elucidate how \textit{mabu liyan} conceptions overlap and differ from orthodox wellbeing frameworks and measures.

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\textsuperscript{2} Throughout this paper, the use of an upper case 'Indigenous' refers to the First Peoples of Australia and the Torres Strait Islands, while a lower case 'indigenous' refers generally to the First Peoples, aboriginal peoples, native peoples, or autochthonous peoples of the world.
Wellbeing concepts and measurement

In the edited volume titled ‘Culture, Place and Methods’, the four faces of wellbeing—evaluative, substantive, subjective and objective—are introduced as a way of navigating the various wellbeing approaches in public policy across multiple schools of thought (White 2016, p6–7). Much of the literature on wellbeing can be broadly grouped into ‘substantive’ aspects of wellbeing and ‘evaluative’ aspects of wellbeing. Scholars interested in substantive wellbeing are primarily concerned with the complexity and diversity of wellbeing experiences and conceptions. The other body of literature attempts to cast a spotlight on the evaluative aspect of wellbeing using indicators or measures as the object of interest, and exploring what facilitates improvements in wellbeing across the objective and subjective domains (White 2016). In the rest of this paper, the literature on indigenous wellbeing will be summarised from these two perspectives.

Approaches to understanding indigenous wellbeing

In the substantive space, qualitative approaches have primarily been used to enable a more nuanced understanding of wellbeing across different locations. For example, ethnography has been employed to understand how wellbeing is conceptualized by Indigenous peoples in Peru and Canada (Adelson 2009; Izquierdo 2009). The use of interviews and focus groups to identify and generate themes of Indigenous wellbeing has also been employed in Australia. The relatedness between ‘country’ and wellbeing has been explored with the Nywaigi peoples in Queensland (Greiner et al. 2005) and with Aboriginal people living in Victoria (Kingsley et al. 2013). Grieves (2007) and Priest et al. (2012) respectively have looked at definitions and constructs of Indigenous wellbeing in urban settings, with the former undertaken in Sydney and the latter with child care workers and children in Victoria. More recently, Altman (2015) explored what is perceived as and constitutes a good life for the Kuninjku people in Maningrida in a remote living context using interviews.

The literature suggest that wellbeing is comprehensive, context-specific and culturally constructed, not dissimilar to the broader literature. There are however, specificities within those common themes which are unique and critical to the understanding and framing of indigenous wellbeing such as context, distinctiveness and the importance of the collective.
Indigenous context

Conceptualisations of wellbeing cannot be meaningfully separated from context and this includes ‘place’ as context. ‘Place’ extends beyond just the physical geographical space to include the deeper spiritual connection that many indigenous peoples have to their ancestral land (Panelli and Tipa 2007). From an indigenous perspective, context also requires understanding how a history of colonisation and marginalisation has impacted on the ways that Indigenous health and wellbeing is conceptualised and understood (Gee et al. 2014; Axelsson et al. 2016).

Context is also about recognising the social and political circumstances and struggle of indigenous peoples for recognition (Deneulin 2008). Many indigenous groups today remain invisible in official statistics and are located within nation states which may not be embracing the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) in their policies even if they are signatories. This has significant implications for how wellbeing is experienced, constructed and pursued within those contexts.

Distinctiveness

A recurring central theme in the literature is the importance of having strong identity. That in turn is tied to one’s connection to culture and country (Ganesharajah 2009; Biddle and Swee 2012; Willeto 2012; Watene 2016b; Nguyen and Cairney 2013 ). The understanding of country or land as an extension of the individual is something unique to indigenous populations worldwide (Panelli and Tipa 2007). This is a theme which has not featured prominently in the broader literature on wellbeing. The importance of the environment and sustainable development more broadly in the universal wellbeing frameworks do not reflect the spiritual connection between indigenous peoples and their land and sea country.

Connection to country is multidimensional in nature and permeates how Indigenous people manage, access and live, and learn through their connection to country, culture and their environment (Bird Rose 1996). The connection to country and culture for many indigenous people is strongly linked to other aspects of their wellbeing, including health, spirituality, identity, economic development and standard of living (McDermott et al. 1998; Jorgensen and Taylor 2000; Greiner et al. 2005; Hunt 2010; Altman and Kerins 2012). As such indigenous peoples have described the devastating spiritual impacts resulting from the misuse and disturbance of the health
and vitality of their land and waters to their sense of wellbeing (Richmond et al. 2005; Yawuru RNTBC 2013; Kerins and Green 2016).

**Collective wellbeing**

The central importance of family and kinship for the wellbeing of indigenous peoples is evident in the literature (Greiner et al. 2005; Durie 2006; Grieves 2007; Kral et al. 2011; Calestani 2013). As such, the importance of the collective and relational sense of wellbeing instead of just the individual is a recurring theme in the literature (Deneulin 2008; McCubbin et al. 2013; Cram 2014; Murphy 2014). The concept of family transcends the boundaries of immediate blood relations to those of skin group names\(^3\) and kinship and social structures. It is these structures which govern what social and cultural exchange occurs between the giver and receiver and these exchanges occur both in everyday living, reinforcing Indigenous peoples’ connection to country and culture (Martin 1995; Schwab 1995). The importance of family in indigenous wellbeing has resulted in many wellbeing frameworks using the family as the unit of analysis or the starting point of thinking about indigenous wellbeing policies and programs (McGregor et al. 2003; Lawson-Te 2010; Cram 2014).

**Self-determination and autonomy**

The importance of autonomy and self-determination for indigenous peoples overarches all aspects of indigenous wellbeing. A central aspect of autonomy relates to the collective right to self-determination and a collective sense of wellbeing, which are inextricably linked to the ability to be self-determining at the individual level. Indigenous autonomy and self-determination are basic human rights which carry intrinsic value in themselves but they are also instrumental in the pathways towards achieving other aspects of wellbeing (Tsey et al. 2003; Gooda 2010; Murphy 2014; Bainbridge et al. 2015).

Important for research relating to issues facing indigenous peoples is the value of self-determination that arises from the transforming of the power relations in research paradigms. This can enable indigenous peoples to fully participate in the research process, methodology and dissemination of findings to empower change and action in their communities. This has to occur alongside mutual capacity building and a co-production of knowledge where indigenous peoples

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\(^3\) Classificatory kinship systems
are not seen as passive recipients of research outcomes, but instead active co-producers of knowledge on their wellbeing and worldviews (Smith 1999; 2002; Gigler 2005; Cairney et al. 2015; Cairney et al. 2017).

**Evaluative wellbeing**

The literature on evaluative Indigenous wellbeing have primarily been through two avenues – the construction of composite measures to represent Indigenous wellbeing and looking at factors which enable Indigenous wellbeing.

**Composite measures of Indigenous wellbeing**

The Human Development Index has been calculated for indigenous populations in Canada, America, Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia to articulate the failure of country level measures such as the HDI in showing the heterogeneity within different subpopulation groups (Cooke et al. 2007; Yap and Biddle 2010; Mitrou et al. 2014). There have also been efforts toward constructing composite measures to better contextualise the variations within indigenous populations in these countries. In Canada, the HDI has been calculated for Registered Indians On- and Off-Reserve, for Aboriginal youth, by gender as well as for Inuit and Métis populations (Cooke 2007; Cooke and Beavon 2007; Sénécal et al. 2008). In the United States, HDI has been constructed for all sub-populations including Asian Americans, Native Americans, Latinos and African Americans (Lewis and Burds-Sharps 2010).

To highlight a greater level of geographical diversity within indigenous populations, composite indices have also been constructed at a more disaggregated spatial unit of analysis. In Canada, the Community Wellbeing Index (CWB) has been constructed at the census subdivisions level to compare how First Nations, non-Aboriginal and Inuit communities fare against a set of socioeconomic characteristics (O’Sullivan 2011; Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, 2015). Since 1986, composite measures summarising the social and economic outcomes of the Australian Indigenous population at the area level based on an Indigenous geographical framework have been constructed for every census (Tefsaghiorghis 1991; Altman and Liu 1994; Gray and Auld 2000; Biddle 2009; Yap and Biddle 2010; Biddle 2013).
What factors support Indigenous wellbeing

Several authors have examined determinants of subjective wellbeing in Australia more broadly and found that Indigenous Australians were more likely to report higher life satisfaction compared to non-Indigenous Australians (Shields et al. 2009; Ambrey and Fleming 2014). An alternative approach is to estimate an indigenous only sample and a non-indigenous sample using the same explanatory variables to investigate whether the relationships are different in varying contexts (e.g. whether the relationship between unemployment and subjective wellbeing is the same for both the indigenous and non-indigenous population). Building on the literature on life satisfaction determinations in Australia, Manning and colleagues (2015) found that the relationship between life satisfaction and age, unemployment, health and partnership status is similar across both population groups. However, there were some notable differences. Indigenous Australians who reported having poor spoken English skills were more likely to report higher life satisfaction and income was not positively associated with life satisfaction in the Indigenous context (Manning et al. 2015).

Indigenous subjective wellbeing

The availability of a suite of questions around different aspects of Indigenous wellbeing in the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS) provided the beginnings of an examination of Indigenous wellbeing within the broader literature on wellbeing. More importantly, it also allowed for some aspects of Indigenous worldviews and experiences to be understood within broader wellbeing determinants. Dockery (2009) pioneered the examination of associations between culture and socioeconomic wellbeing in Australia. His findings established that there remained significant associations between cultural attachment and socioeconomic wellbeing after controlling for age, marital status, gender and whether the individual experienced the historical legacy of separation first hand or had members of their family who were separated from their natural family (Dockery 2009).

Biddle (2014) using the HILDA and NATSISS, found that Indigenous peoples were less likely to report frequent periods of happiness and more likely to report periods of extreme sadness than their non-Indigenous counterparts. However, Indigenous Australians were significantly more likely to report above average satisfaction with their life than non-Indigenous Australians. Using some of the previous correlates identified in the literature, the author found that age, geography,
mobility, labour force status and education were associated with self-reported happiness amongst the Indigenous population.

The release of the *Te Kupenga*, the first Māori social survey, in 2013 allows for the examination of Māori wellbeing within Māori worldviews and lived experiences. The survey design aimed to reflect Māori worldviews and conceptions of wellbeing. The analysis of life satisfaction of Māori using *Te Kupenga* demonstrated that relationships, health status, standard of living, and trust are important contributions to overall life satisfaction. Cultural attachments such as perceived importance of Māori culture and proficiency in Māori language were also important correlates, but had a much weaker association (Statistics NZ 2015).

**Indigenous social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB)**

The concept of social and emotional wellbeing recognises the Australian Aboriginal worldviews of health and wellbeing as being holistic and encompasses mental, health, cultural, spiritual and social wellbeing. It also acknowledges the trauma and grief resulting from colonisation. As such, it has particular resonance with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Garvey 2008; AIHW 2009; Kelly et al. 2009; Gee et al. 2014; Dudgeon and Walker 2015). Researchers have noted that the poor social and emotional wellbeing of Indigenous peoples stems from ongoing consequences of colonisation (Swan and Raphael 1995; Garvey 2008).

Psychological distress is one measure by which social and emotional wellbeing of Indigenous peoples can and have been evaluated. Many of the factors noted as enablers of subjective wellbeing more broadly are also noted in the literature on Indigenous SEWB in Australia. Health status, family breakdown, racism, substance abuse and socioeconomic status are some factors associated with Indigenous SEWB (Paradies et al. 2008). However, the themes canvassed as being central to indigenous wellbeing as a whole earlier in this chapter are also important factors. They include self-determination, community governance, connectedness to country, strength of identity, family relationships and cultural continuity (Chandler and Lalonde 2008; Sherwood 2013; Gee et al. 2014; Parker R and Milroy 2014; Zubrick et al. 2014; Dudgeon and Walker 2015).

Empirical research undertaken by Cunningham and Paradies (2012) using the 2004–05 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey demonstrated that food security, marital status, education, employment, income, home ownership and area-level disadvantage were
associated with psychological distress. However, the authors noted that findings related to traditional indicators of socioeconomic status were not statistically significant in remote areas for Indigenous Australians. More recently, Marwick and colleagues (2015) found that in Victoria, being female, unmarried or a lone parent was associated with higher psychological distress. Socioeconomic status, social support and contact and age were also important determinants of psychological distress.

**Challenges of understanding Indigenous wellbeing**

In an ideal world, conceptions of wellbeing would inform the development of measures used to evaluate wellbeing in an iterative and interactive process. However, evaluating wellbeing using quantitative methods are constrained by the use of existing secondary data which may not adequately capture the breadth and depth of wellbeing accounts. Scholars in the substantive domain argue for the importance of localised particularities and illuminate the power struggles occurring against the backdrop of indigenous affairs. Scholars in the evaluative domain highlight findings that are nationally representative and true on average. The substantive and evaluative literature appears to have developed in isolation, with little interaction, instead of conversing to enrich our understandings of indigenous wellbeing.

Despite the voluminous data on the ‘Indigenous population’ of Australia, there is a sense there is still a lack of knowledge on what living well means for ‘Indigenous people’. While useful at some level, the existing tools and datasets describe above are restricted in terms of their functionality for Indigenous communities and polities to understand and monitor their own wellbeing (Morphy 2007; 2016; Taylor 2008; Taylor 2009; Walter 2010; Prout 2011; Yu 2012; Walter and Andersen 2013; Kukutai and Walter 2015). There are several reasons for this state of affair – the usefulness of existing wellbeing concepts, the distinction between population and peoples and the importance of process in conceptualising wellbeing.

**Usefulness of existing wellbeing concepts**

Despite the growing consensus that wellbeing and happiness vary across cultures, there is still a tendency to use existing tools or surveys to reflect the reality of wellbeing cross-culturally rather than to question the appropriateness of these tools, despite their seeming inability to capture underlying cultural differences (Mathews 2012, p301). Much of the literature presented above on evaluating Indigenous wellbeing utilises existing tools such as happiness and life satisfaction.
While the usefulness of happiness as a metric for evaluating wellbeing has been debated on both philosophical grounds as well as in its conceptual operations (Mathews 2012; Stewart 2014), an important consideration here is whether these tools have cross-cultural validity and are appropriate for understanding and evaluating Indigenous wellbeing.

Even when there are surveys specifically designed to capture Indigenous worldviews such as the NATSISS, a large part of these surveys is still intended for comparative purposes with the general population and to meet government needs (Taylor 2008; Walter 2013). The defined spatial and geographical classifications mask the diversity of the hundreds of language groups and nations that make up Australia’s First Peoples, and as a result limit the usability of the data to inform the wellbeing and aspirations of collective groups such as the Ngunnawal, Noongar, Torres Strait, or the Yawuru, just to name a few. This brings us to the second issue, the distinction between peoples and population.

**Population versus peoples**

In Australia, a survey of the literature, information databases and national statistical collection agencies points to a common thread of the production of population binaries of indigenous and non-indigenous through the inclusion of indigenous self-identification questions (Rowse 2012; Taylor 2013; Walter and Andersen 2013). However, these population binaries collected through a post-colonial framework is not of geographical, social or cultural relevancy to indigenous people and communities on the ground (Morphy 2007; Kukutai 2011b; Kukutai and Taylor 2013; Yu 2012).

Furthermore, the production and representation of the lives of Indigenous peoples through the binary of Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations reduces Indigenous peoples, their unique history, affiliation to country, and cultural identity to a statistical creation based on aggregated individual level data (Walter, 2013; Rowse, 2012). The distinction between ‘peoples’ and ‘population’ is a significant one. As Rowse (2012 p4-5) notes, when we refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as a ‘peoples’, we are thinking about them as collectives with self-governing capabilities and rights as opposed to referring them as a ‘population’.
Conceptualizing wellbeing – a process and outcome of wellbeing

The 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) provides an international standard to support Indigenous peoples’ right for development. Specifically, articles 3, 43 and 44 of the UNDRIP assert that Indigenous peoples want to become agents of their own development and to determine and develop priorities and strategies for development (UN 2007). The principles of self-determination, participation, cultural rights, land rights, ownership, and free prior and informed consent all form the basis for supporting Indigenous groups in their efforts to set an agenda for improving their wellbeing (UN 2007).

Whilst achieving Indigenous wellbeing is a goal in itself, involving Indigenous peoples to achieve a better understanding of what defines “wellbeing” is also crucial to the development of frameworks used to measure progress towards wellbeing goals (Gooda 2010). This brings us to the last key issue relating to methodologies, in particular, the recognition that to date, there have been few attempts at developing appropriate methodologies for understanding and measuring Indigenous wellbeing which prioritises indigenous worldviews, highlight local priorities and represent Indigenous collectives (Walter 2013; 2016).

Mabu liyan - Indigenising wellbeing from the group up

Yawuru’s participation – a necessary and critical element

Kukutai and Walter (2015) identify five research principles that should inform the conduct of research involving Indigenous peoples – recognizing geographical diversity, recognizing cultural diversity, recognising other ways of knowing, mutual capability building and indigenous decision making. The case study in this chapter demonstrates how these research principles are invoked to ensure that Yawuru participate meaningfully in the research process by bringing Yawuru notions of wellbeing into the measurement space and co-producing knowledge on Yawuru wellbeing. Yawuru’s own agenda to measure wellbeing according to their worldviews, together with a PhD research proposal which aimed to develop a methodology for deriving culturally relevant measures

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4 Article 3 states that Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development. Article 43 and 44 states the rights recognised herein constitute the minimum standards for the survival, dignity and well-being of the Indigenous peoples of the world and that the rights and freedom are equally guaranteed to male and female individuals.
of wellbeing, provided common ground for this collaborative partnership between the two authors (Yap and Yu 2016a:b). Yawuru’s participation is interwoven throughout the process, from research content to survey design and collection. The grounding of the measures of wellbeing from the community voices serves to increase statistical functionality of the measures and associated data generated for the community on the ground, but also to aid in the development of a more policy-relevant concept of wellbeing (Kukutai and Walter 2015; McGregor 2015).

**Who and what perspectives matter?**

Working with the Yawuru community as opposed to working broadly with Indigenous peoples living in remote areas is recognising the importance of Yawuru as a collective but also the importance that Yawuru attaches to ‘place’. Following Yawuru practice, this includes the relational aspect of community, one that is premised on Yawuru’s connection to country and the *bugarrigarra*, yet it is also locational as the connection is tied to the physical locality of Broome in remote Western Australia. Composition of community also includes Yawuru individuals who may not be living in Broome but are still part of the Yawuru community through their relational, historical and cultural ties to Broome and to Yawuru families. The definition of the Yawuru community also recognises Yawuru as native title holders, with rights, interest and responsibilities over Broome and the surroundings. The purpose of developing and constructing indicators of wellbeing for Yawuru therefore is to determine how Yawuru are faring according to their own benchmarks and standards.

*Mabu liyan – a different way of knowing Yawuru’s philosophy of wellbeing*

Understanding wellbeing requires the use of multiple knowledge systems which can capture the complexity and diversity of human experience. Starting with *liyan* as the philosophy of how Yawuru relate to, understand and define wellbeing is recognising there are different ways of understanding Indigenous wellbeing. Following that, the framing of questions around Yawuru ways of knowing, being and doing reflects the cultural specificities of wellbeing within the

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5 *Bugarrigarra* is the core of Yawuru cosmology. *Bugarrigarra* is the time before time, when the creative forces shaped and gave meaning and form to the landscape, putting the languages to the people within those landscapes and creating the protocol and laws for living within this environment Yawuru RNTBC. (2011, p13)
Indigenous context, and can further validate the appropriateness of existing measures of Indigenous wellbeing.

*Liyan* is a Yawuru philosophy of being which is shared with other Indigenous groups using variant words for the same idea. *mabu liyan* (good *liyan*) reflects Yawuru’s sense of belonging and being, emotional strength, dignity and pride. Expressions of *liyan* are articulated based on collective structures: it is a model of living well in connection with country, culture, others and with oneself (Yap and Yu 2016a:b). McKenna and Anderson (2011, p4) explains that

*Liyan* is the center of our being and emotions. It is a very important characteristic that forms our wellbeing, keeping us grounded in our identity and our connection to country, to our family, our community and it is linked to the way we care for ourselves and our emotions.

**How – conceptualising and measuring Yawuru wellbeing**

In the Yawuru case study, process is a priority. A process where wellbeing measures are created, from the bottom up in partnership with those who are experts on their own lives and acknowledges. As Smith (2012, p196) argues ‘When indigenous peoples become the researchers and not merely the researched, the activity of research is transformed. Questions are framed differently, priorities are ranked differently, problems are defined differently and people participate on different terms’. This necessitates a fundamentally different starting point from what is considered the norm in the academy, to one that privileges Indigenous worldviews, recognises the existence of a different way of understanding Indigenous wellbeing and reveals the cultural, geographical and context diversity of Indigenous conceptions of wellbeing. This requires Yawuru’s participation to be interwoven throughout the entire process.

There are several ways in which Yawuru’s participation has been exercised beyond the collaborative partnership between the authors of this chapter. A Yawuru Guidance and Reference Committee was formed consisting of Yawuru women and men to ensure that the information generated through the research reflected local aspirations and values, and more importantly, was functional for community purposes. The Committee provided and continues to provide cultural and local knowledge to facilitate the conduct of the research and ensure that the information was relevant for community purposes and for the service delivery organisations based in Broome more broadly. Most importantly, Yawuru’s participation was embedded throughout the process, from research content to survey design and collection as evident in the next section of this chapter (Yap
Mutual capacity building is a critical and necessary component of research with a transformative agenda. For example, the preparation and management of the project itself provided for mutual capacity building between the two authors, particularly in terms of communication and relationship building in this cross-cultural space. There was also a larger capacity building component built in at the quantitative phase of the research. To enable this to be undertaken, additional funds were obtained through the Bankwest Research Grants Stream 2014 to employ ten local research assistants during the data collection process and for the purchase of iPads for data collection (Yap and Yu 2016a).

**From stories to indicators, from indicators to survey questions**

A participatory mixed-methods approach in a sequential manner through two interconnected phases was used to conceptualise and measure Yawuru wellbeing. The first phase of the study is qualitative in nature, exploring how wellbeing is understood, experienced and defined by the Yawuru community through semi-structured interviews and focus group exercises and discussions. The qualitative information in the first phase of the research was transformed in a manner which helps guide the quantitative phase. The qualitative phase therefore provided the foundation for the development of the Yawuru Wellbeing Survey and provided a pool of potential attributes for inclusion in an exercise to determine Yawuru priorities and weights. For a more detailed description of both phases, please see (Yap and Yu 2016a:b).

Underpinning Yawuru’s wellbeing is the notion of *liyan*. There were several key themes arising from narratives of *mabu liyan* by Yawuru. They include relatedness, holism and balance. These concepts lay the foundation of grounding of indicators and survey question according to Yawuru’s worldviews. The grounding of the indicators from the stories by Yawuru women and men further created a sense of ‘ownership’ in what measures of wellbeing should be constructed allowing for expressions of self-determination by Yawuru (See Table 1).

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6 The research activities received formal approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee at the Australian National University (Protocol Number: 2013/249) for the first stage. A variation was submitted and accepted in May 2015 for the quantitative phase.
Table 1: The development of indicators relating to sense of *liyan*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Examples of interview</th>
<th>Indicators</th>
<th>Selected/Not Selected by Focus Groups</th>
<th>Translated to Survey Question or statement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Liyan has many components to it such as the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual elements. All these elements have to be balanced in order to have a good, strong liyan. To many Yawuru people, it is a spiritual word</em></td>
<td>Having a strong balanced spiritual centre knowing how to return to centre when things are difficult</td>
<td>Picked by Yawuru women Picked by Yawuru men</td>
<td>My inner spirit felt strong, balanced and clear most or all of the time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>I try and get back into country in the afternoons. With my liyan I go back and I sit down on the rocks, get out on country and go fishing and that makes my liyan good</em></td>
<td>Spending time on country</td>
<td>Picked by Yawuru women Picked by Yawuru men</td>
<td>I felt deeply connected to my country and surrounds</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The many dimensions of *mabu liyan*

**Liyan as holistic wellbeing**

Yawuru women and men describe *liyan* as a *feeling*, not just in one sense but all senses. Yawuru derive good *liyan* from feeling, being, doing and relating. As such, *liyan* as a sense is linked strongly with one’s way of being. As this Yawuru male describes:
It’s [Liyan] not just a description of emotions. It is a state of being. It influences not just your day, it influences your life. Liyan for country, strong liyan for country, that connectedness, the strength, the spirituality. (Yawuru male 49 years).

Most of the participants saw a link between liyan and wellbeing although they are not one and the same. Many Yawuru individuals noted that how one’s liyan was feeling very much related to one’s interaction with others. It is therefore important for the Indigenous and non-Indigenous people that Yawuru individuals interact with to understand the importance of liyan to Yawuru wellbeing.

Bad liyan can spread from bad to worse. It might start with two person and they bring more people and family get involved. Your liyan is connected to other people’s liyan. It catches and it spreads. (Yawuru female 70 years)

Liyan has always been there. Like the soul when you are born… I get pain in my belly then I know someone is affecting my liyan. I have to make that right first before communicating with others. (Yawuru female 56 years)

Absolutely liyan has to do with a good life. Doesn’t matter where we are, and it doesn’t matter even in the non-Indigenous context, if we are talking to people, if our liyan is not good, or if we don’t feel right, we explain that. (Yawuru female 32 years)

**Liyan as balance**

*Mabu liyan*, is in essence a balance of all the emotions and is achieved when one is in balance with one’s self, one’s relationship with others and one’s relationship to country. The importance of balance is also about one’s feelings and spiritual centre, which consist of not only the body and the mind but the spirit. Wellbeing therefore is seen as being interconnected consisting of cultural, spiritual, physical and emotional wellbeing. As this Yawuru female eloquently describes:

*Liyan* is the connection between your emotional and spiritual centre rolled into one. That spiritual centre is linked to identity and identity is linked to kinship, family. *Liyan* has many components to it such as the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual elements. All these elements have to be balanced in order to have a good, strong liyan. To many Yawuru people, it is a spiritual word. (Yawuru female 34 years).
Perhaps unsurprisingly, some Yawuru individuals described happiness as one of the ways in which *liyan* is expressed. This is not unexpected given that linguistically, *liyan* is feelings. However, the descriptions and stories arising from a Yawuru’s conception of *liyan* and wellbeing did not always signify positive feelings. More often than not, *liyan* is described as finding that balance in feelings and negotiating the positive and negative events. There are instances, such as disruptions to country, where *liyan* will be bad as this Yawuru male notes:

To see the landscape cleared from what it previously was...a lot of Yawuru people feel...we feel...our *liyan* no good. Yawuru people and the land are intrinsically connected...and wellbeing are intrinsically connected. Anything done to the land, it’s like hurting them because of that connection to the land. (Yawuru male 41 years)

However, a comfortable medium might be achieved, not necessarily positive or happy feelings, but a balance if there are actions taken to counter the bad *liyan* as described below:

Others have their own ideas of how to live and we need to enforce our way and through education, get into good government areas so that they can push those issues and make it balance. (Yawuru male 63 years)

**Liyan as relatedness**

Relatedness or connectedness is a strong foundation for Yawuru wellbeing. The stories in this chapter alongside the literature on indigenous wellbeing highlight the relational wellbeing of Indigenous peoples to their country and culture, the reciprocity of that relatedness and how it is shaped by the *bugarrigarra* and with that the obligations and responsibilities as Yawuru.

A major source of attaining good *liyan* is relatedness with family. The importance of family includes being a source of support and giving one a sense of belonging. The kinship structures which underpin the social and cultural exchanges in many Indigenous communities including Yawuru serve to fulfil a person’s sense of belonging and affirm their identity and place within the family. As a Yawuru female articulates:

Usually being around family. Being at a family gathering, on country with family, at my grandmother’s house with family. Times like that make my *liyan* feel good. When it doesn’t feel good, I resort to those things to make it better. (Yawuru female 28 years)
How one relates and connects to country and culture is a further element of *liyan*. Relatedness to country and culture is both physical and spiritual relatedness. Several Yawuru individuals, both younger and older, highlighted the importance of being on country not just spiritually but physically as well:

Part of that connection to country that contributes to *liyan* is actually being physically here not just about speaking the language. Mind you, if I am away from Broome and I am finding it difficult, if I see family or see something that resembles Broome… that makes me connect… remind me… it is still a sense. (Yawuru female 28 years)

Relatedness and sense of *liyan* also manifests through the practice of traditional culture, the transmission of knowledge, and mutual reciprocity and obligation to the broader kinship system. In addition,

I try and get back into country in the afternoons. With my *liyan* I go back and I sit down on the rocks, get out on country and go fishing and that makes my *liyan* good. (Yawuru female, 52 years old)

My *liyan* feels good when I link in with country, when I feel the breeze, feel the fire. I find a spot and feel cleansed and I feel good. The more times I do that, the more times I feel good… when I am getting out fishing and practising cultural things that I have learnt. (Yawuru Male, 49 years)

A strong sense of connection means that interruptions and interferences to country are often seen and described by Yawuru individuals as not only affecting them physically but also spiritually, thereby contributing to the loss of *mabu liyan* as described by the Yawuru male in the previous section.

**What we measure matters**

At this juncture, it is perhaps useful to consider whether the different conceptions and approaches of understanding wellbeing give rise to different conclusion. Using the more common measures of subjective wellbeing in the literature, we find that of the total sampled 156 Yawuru women and men aged 18 years and over, almost 75 per cent reported feeling satisfied or very satisfied with their life on a whole most or all of the time. On the other hand, 67.5 per cent of Yawuru women and men reported feeling happy most or all of the time in the last 4 weeks. Taking a broader health perspective to consider social and emotional wellbeing using the Kessler Psychological Distress...
Scale (K5), we find that about three in every four Yawuru men and women reported experiencing low psychological distress.

In an attempt to capture a more nuanced understanding of wellbeing through Yawuru’s philosophy of liyan, a series of statement drawing on narratives from Yawuru women and men were developed including ‘My inner spirit felt strong, balanced and clear’ (Yap and Yu 2016a). In the survey, Yawuru women and men were asked how often their inner spirit felt strong, balanced and clear. Using that measure as one way of capturing Yawuru’s wellbeing, the results suggest that a lower share of Yawuru women and men reporting strong wellbeing (62.5%).

**Table 2: Overlap and differences between the different measures of Yawuru wellbeing**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measures of wellbeing</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feeling happy most or all of the time (a)</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>67.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfied or very satisfied with life as a whole most or all of the time (b)</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>73.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiencing low psychological distress as measured by the K5 (c)</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>72.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inner spirit felt strong, balanced and clear most or all of the time (d)</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>62.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For those who reported feeling happy most or all of the time (n=102)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happy but not satisfied</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>happy but high psychological distress</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>12.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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7 For a list of other statements developed by Yawuru, please see Yap and Yu 2016a.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Happy but inner spirit felt weak, unbalanced</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>22.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For those who reported feeling satisfied or very satisfied with life as a whole most or all of the time (n=111)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Satisfied but not happy</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>20.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfied but high psychological distress</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>17.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfied but inner spirit felt weak, unbalanced</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>27.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For those who reported experiencing low psychological distress (n=106)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low psychological distress but not happy</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>25.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low psychological distress but not satisfied</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>16.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low psychological distress but inner spirit felt weak, unbalanced</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>21.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For those who reported their inner spirit felt strong balanced and clear most or all of the time (n=95)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spirit felt strong, balanced and clear but not happy</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirit felt strong, balanced and clear but not satisfied</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirit felt strong, balanced and clear but high psychological distress</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Source: Yawuru Wellbeing Survey 2015. The total sample of the survey was 156 individuals. Non-response or refusal to answer is not included in the calculation. Non response for questions on life satisfaction, feeling happy and spirit feeling strong and balanced (n=4). Non-response for question on psychological distress (n=10).

Table 2 shows the share of Yawuru women and men who may report having positive and high wellbeing on a particular measure or concept while also reporting negative or low wellbeing on a separate measure. About 22 per cent of Yawuru women and men reported being happy most or all of the time yet their inner spirit did not feel strong, balanced and clear all or most of the time. Similarly, one quarter of those experiencing low psychological distress reported not feeling happy all or most of the time.

Concluding remarks

The question of universality in conceptions of wellbeing has implications for both the selection of dimensions of wellbeing, and the associated indicators to quantify and measure wellbeing. The narratives by Yawuru women and men suggest that Yawuru conceptions of wellbeing both intersect with and diverge from the broader wellbeing literature. Conceptions of liyan suggest that subjective measures such as happiness is one aspect of wellbeing for Yawuru. However, the broader themes of connectedness, holism and balance are all key characteristics of Yawuru wellbeing too.

The narratives by Yawuru provide evidence of socio-historical circumstances being a significant aspect of the evaluative space for achieving wellbeing from Yawuru perspectives. The intergenerational impacts of colonization means that social and emotional wellbeing is an important aspect of Indigenous health and wellbeing. The use of K-5 rather than the K-10 pointed to an approach of ensuring cultural appropriateness in assessing social and emotional wellbeing for Indigenous Australians (Jorm et al. 2012). However, the use of K-5 does not go far enough to capture the spiritual and cultural aspects of SEWB.

The innovative use of a participatory sequential mixed-methods approach starting with a different way of knowing, challenges existing paradigms in relation to what matters for Indigenous wellbeing, moving from a deficit discourse to one of strength and cultural relevance. The Yawuru case study demonstrates how qualitative and quantitative methods can be brought together to develop potential measures of wellbeing. Staring with mabu liyan, and interweaving Yawuru
articulations in to the process of developing and validating wellbeing measures ensured that the measures that were developed in the quantitative phase was strengthened. The capacity building component of employing Yawuru women as research assistants in the quantitative phase further ensured that knowledge was co-produced from the ground up, bringing together different ways of knowing. This has the potential to transform the way that measures and information on Indigenous wellbeing is represented and collected, by actively involving those who know their lives best.
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Lawson-Te, A. (2010). *Definitions of whānau: a review of selected literature*


