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Coming to terms with the past?

Identifying barriers and enablers to truth-telling and strategies to promote historical acceptance

Summary of key findings

Anne Maree Payne and Heidi Norman
Indigenous Land and Justice Research Group
School of Humanities & Languages

Introduction

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have tirelessly advocated for truth-telling as a crucial step on Australia's path to recognition and reconciliation.

Broadly, truth-telling can be understood as activities that engage with a fuller account of Australia's history and its ongoing impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The 2022 Australian Reconciliation Barometer report indicates that while 84% of respondents from the general community believe that knowing about the histories of First Nations people is important, only 45% thought they had a high knowledge of these histories. Further, only 6% of non-Indigenous respondents had participated in a truth-telling activity in the previous 12 months.

These results highlight the gap between First Nations people's calls for truth-telling and participation in these activities by non-Indigenous people. While there has been incredible growth in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history field over the past 50 years, as well as dedicated efforts by community groups to correct the record, there is a gap in existing research about what encourages Australians to engage with and accept more balanced accounts of our shared history.

This document provides an overview of the findings from the pilot research project, ***Coming to terms with the past: Barriers and enablers to truth-telling and strategies to promote historical acceptance***. This research was undertaken for Reconciliation Australia between April and July 2023, with the aim of advancing our understanding of:

- what is truth-telling to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous Australians
- the key barriers to and enablers of engagement with truth-telling and First Nations histories
- the implications of these findings for progressing truth-telling in community settings.

This research sought answers to these questions through:

- **A literature review**: reviewing what had already been written about truth-telling in Australia and overseas in the academic literature and other reports
- **A media survey**: analysing what was said in the media about truth-telling over a six-week period in 2022
- **Online surveys**: surveys with 225 people (both First Nations and non-Indigenous)
- **Interviews**: in-depth interviews with 10 survey participants.

This document is a brief overview of our key findings. It gives a snapshot of what respondents think about truth-telling and the purpose it should serve; what motivates people to get involved; the things that can stop people from supporting truth-telling activities;¹ and what the implications are for the development of effective and engaging truth-telling activities. You can find more in-depth information and analysis of the research questions and findings in the **Summary Report**.

“What does truth-telling mean? Honesty. And I think honesty is the foundation of good relationships.”

¹ It is important to note that the people who opted into the survey and interviews tended to already be supportive of truth-telling and of advancing justice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Further research with a more diverse sample will help us to find out more about the views of people who are less likely to engage in or support truth-telling activities.

Findings: the 'what' and the 'why' of truth-telling

The first part of this research investigated common understandings of truth-telling through a literature and media review, and online surveys and interviews with First Nations and non-Indigenous people.

Primary research on truth-telling in Australia reveals a striking diversity in activities and approaches to the process. Regardless, our research found that there is an understanding that to be meaningful, truth-telling must:

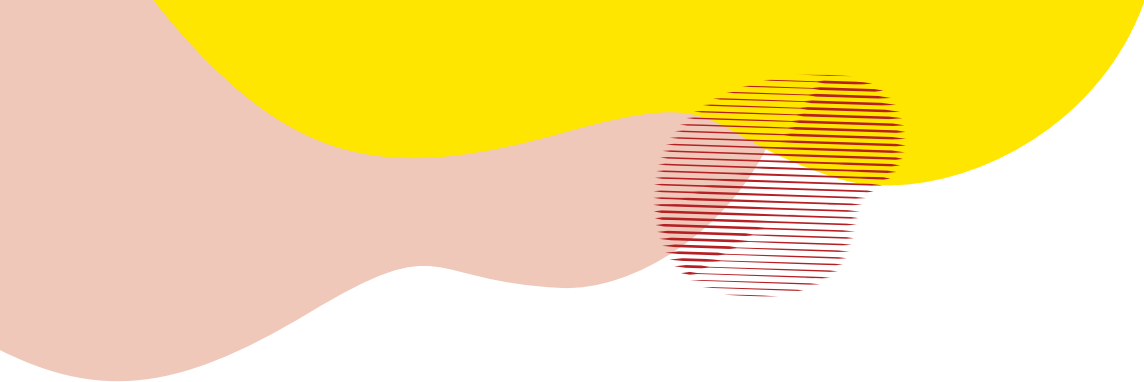
- aim to **achieve change**, whether at a structural, institutional, or personal level
- be an ongoing process of **dialogue and engagement**, not a 'one-off' event or activity.

But what did our research find on truth-telling and what it involves? Well, for First Nations and non-Indigenous people the 'what' of truth-telling seems to be connected to the 'why' of truth-telling, with findings suggesting that people's understanding of truth-telling is led by what they believe its broader purpose to be.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents, truth-telling is considered an **essential step in redefining the relationship between First Nations peoples and non-Indigenous people and institutions**. The research identified three main outcomes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people hope to achieve through truth-telling:

- truth-telling as a form of or pathway to justice
- truth-telling as healing and reconciliation
- truth-telling as a process of sharing First Nations cultures, histories and perspectives to balance the historical record.

While there was some variation in responses between First Nations and non-Indigenous respondents, overwhelmingly participants in our research felt that it was important that **truth-telling was led by First Nations peoples** and that **truth-telling should bring First Nations and non-Indigenous Australians together**.



All respondents agreed that truth-telling should involve First Nations people's perspectives on the past being presented, and most believed that participating in truth-telling represents an opportunity for them to **show their personal support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.**

This research reveals a high degree of agreement between First Nations and non-Indigenous people about the main benefits that would emerge from truth-telling:

- the development of a shared understanding of Australian history
- the hope that truth-telling would advance healing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
- the potential of truth-telling to help improve relations between First Nations and non-Indigenous peoples.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people reported being highly committed to truth-telling, although less likely than non-Indigenous people to agree that truth-telling might lead to justice for First Nations peoples.

So, while Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous respondents are united on some fronts about truth-telling, crucially our research suggests that what motivates them to participate is quite different.

In the research survey First Nations respondents reported being motivated to participate in truth-telling to:

- learn more about the resilience and survival of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (91%)
- share their own personal family history / perspective (89%)
- focus on truth-telling about their local community (87%).

Non-Indigenous people reported being motivated to participate in truth-telling to learn about:

- the ongoing impacts of the past on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples today (94%)
- the resilience and survival of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (93%)
- the past treatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (89%).

Non-Indigenous respondents were also more likely to be motivated to participate in truth-telling to learn more about how they could contribute to reconciliation than First Nations respondents (87% vs 74%).

Findings: barriers to participating in truth-telling

The second part of this research was to understand what gets in the way of people participating in truth-telling – which revealed different responses from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous participants.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants barriers revolved around emotional safety and wellbeing in the process. The main barriers to participation in truth-telling they reported were:

- **Trauma and the need for cultural safety**

53% of First Nations respondents indicated that the fear of experiencing distress or trauma might be a barrier to their participation in truth-telling. Cultural safety concerns were another significant barrier, with 35% indicating this might stop them from participating.

- **Lack of trust**

Trust between participants is an essential part of truth-telling. 60% of First Nations respondents indicated that truth-telling might emphasise divisions and differences between First Nations and non-Indigenous Australians. Many did not trust non-Indigenous participants to respond sensitively or respectfully to the histories shared. Nearly half were worried that participants might question or challenge the accuracy of the perspectives being shared (41%).

For non-Indigenous Australians the main barriers to participation related to uncertainty about how to participate and what their role in truth-telling might appropriately be. The main barriers reported to participating in truth-telling for non-Indigenous people were:

- **Lack of opportunity**

Lack of knowledge about how to get involved in truth-telling was a significant barrier for non-Indigenous respondents: 38% indicated that this would stop their participation.

- **Uncertainty about the role of non-Indigenous people**

There was a degree of uncertainty among non-Indigenous people about what truth-telling involves and the right way to be involved. The process was described as ‘tricky to navigate’ and fear was expressed about doing the wrong thing or being disrespectful.

“In my experience, Aboriginal people own truth very well... We say our truth. It’s how that is received and judged again... It’s hard for an Aboriginal person when everybody is putting their perceptions and discourse on to us.”

Implications

The findings of our research highlight some useful considerations for the planning and delivery of effective truth-telling initiatives.

Importantly, trauma-informed, culturally safe protocols need to be established at the outset of truth-telling processes. Initiatives also need to include public education about what truth-telling involves, as well as practical information about where, when and how truth-telling will be taking place.

Our research findings highlight that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non-Indigenous people do not always have a shared understanding of what truth-telling involves, what it might achieve or how to go about it. These different understandings and assumptions will need to be carefully navigated by those organising community-based truth-telling.

Effective truth-telling practice ought to:

- Be realistic about the benefits of truth-telling
- Acknowledge that truth-telling takes time
- Address cultural safety concerns and knowledge protocols
- Recognise diversity among and between First Nations and non-Indigenous participants
- Recognise systemic disadvantages experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians
- Centre First Nations self-determination and sovereignty
- Build both truth-telling and truth-listening capacity
- Deal with difficult emotions and the potential for conflict
- Maintain optimism and hope for a better future.

Despite some differences, the strong consensus emerging from our research was that **truth-telling in Australia must:**

- Be led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities
- Engage with First Nations perspectives
- Recognise the ongoing impacts of the past on First Nations people's lives today
- Be ongoing and understood as a process rather than a 'one-off' event
- Aim to achieve change and improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

"I try to get people to understand that it's coming from the heart, what I'm telling, and I charge non-Aboriginal people with a responsibility of listening and learning... We don't make this stuff up."
