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EXPLORING AND RESEARCHING THE INDIGENOUS LIFE COURSE

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NON-TECHNICAL SUMMARY

Research on Indigenous experiences is limited for a range of reasons. First many scholars compare Indigenous lives with non-Indigenous populations which always leads to conclusions that Indigeneity is a disadvantage. This ignores the perspectives of Indigenous peoples and assumes that Western standards are the ideal. Second we have very limited data on Indigenous peoples and what we do have ignores the wide variations in culture, customs, language and experiences within Indigenous populations. Third, life course approaches tend to preference a linear, standard life course view that does not apply to many Indigenous people's lives. This paper explains these issues and argues for a new approach that theorises Indigenous life courses as circular. It suggests the concept of lifeworld to explain the deep embedded nature of Indigenous experience in history and culture. And argues for the collection of new data that is relevant to Indigenous people.



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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the question of how the life course approach can be applied to understand the experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. A life course approach explains life trajectories within the structural, social, and cultural contexts in which lives are lived. One problem for life course researchers focused on Indigenous populations is data limitations. Available Indigenous data cannot, and do not, yield meaningful portraits of the embodied realities of Indigenous lives. A second problem is the tendency to a deficit approach which always constructs Indigeneity as the problem. One new approach is the concept of a lifeworld and an understanding of life course as circular, not linear and deeply embedded within a historical context of decolonisation, marginalisation and disadvantage. Going forward Indigenous life course research must be framed by Indigenous lived realities, which are distinct from non-Indigenous lived realities. And Indigenous life course research must be Indigenous led. It may also be the right time to successfully advocate for the creation and curation of more relevant Indigenous data sources in Australia, to support a new approach.

Keywords: Indigenous, life course, lifeworld, data, intersubjectivity

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Introduction

This briefing paper begins to answer the question of how the promise of life course research for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People/s can be achieved. This promise is centred on life course research's ambition of explaining life trajectories within the structural, social, and cultural contexts in which lives are lived. Or, as defined by Giele and Elder (1998:22) life course is 'a sequence of socially defined events and roles that the individual enacts over time'. But while the individual is the focus, it is the connection between individuals and the historical and socioeconomic context of their lived reality, and more particularly how these influence life events and outcomes, that is the object of life course research interest. Or as Mills (1959) might explain, to understand the social we must grasp the societally embedded intersections between biography and history.

Understanding and explaining social phenomena are sociology's core purpose. Life course research, however, is a relatively new social science endeavour, especially in Australia where the requisite for longitudinal data was a rarity until the 1990s. The contemporary hub of life course research in Australia is The Life Course Centre, begun in 2014. This centre has the stated primary aim of:

make a difference in the lives of Australia's most vulnerable, to take social science research to a new level, and to establish the social policy principles and foundations needed to ensure we achieve our vision and goals to make Australia a more equal and inclusive society (Life Course Centre 2018).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People/s, the most vulnerable Australian citizens across all spheres of life, deserve to benefit from the life course research aim of a more equal and inclusive society. Such potential is already identified by Indigenous Peoples overseas. Indeed Theodore et al. (2019) go so far as to state that the life course approach to health aligns with a Māori worldview. In Australia, the need for garnering a valid and rigorous evidence base with the capacity to improve Indigenous lives remains strong. The disaster of more than 200 years of Indigenous social policy, evidenced most recently by the decade long (2008-2018) failure of the Closing the Gap framework to meet its targets (Commonwealth of Australia 2020), suggests an urgent need for new and different research approaches to support the development of new and different social policies.

Enthusiasm for Indigenous life course research, however, needs to be tempered with a recognition, that the task is not a simple matter of including sufficient Indigenous participants in data collections. Rather,



life course research, as conceived and practiced with non-Indigenous populations does not translate easily to inquiring into or understanding the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander life course. This paper sets out some of the challenges and possibilities. These include the well reported scarcity of Indigenous population data and the lack of data that do not focus on deficit and disadvantage. Another issue is the related, but infinitely more important, disconnection between the lived reality of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People/s and non-Indigenous peoples' lives. In this paper, the theoretical lens of the Indigenous lifeworld (Walter & Suina 2018) is used to highlight the paper's central premise that valid Indigenous life course research is reliant on understanding the lived reality of those whose life trajectories are being examined. To ignore this approach risks serious errors in analysis and interpretation which, in turn, risks serious policy miscalculations and associated policy related harm to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People/s. The stakes are high.

Data Limitations

For many, the major problem for Indigenous life course research is small proportionality. With the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population making up just over three percent of the total Australian population most longitudinal data collections are unlikely to include a usable Indigenous sample. For example, the premier longitudinal Australian study, the Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) study has an Indigenous cohort (n= 259, 2.5% in Wave 1), but it is too small to meaningfully analyse. These Indigenous data shortcomings are identified as problematic and are common across the Anglo-settler colonizer world (Theodore et al. 2019). The advent of data linkage and big data technologies, however, provide an avenue to provide larger Indigenous samples. The Multi-Agency Data Integration Project (MADIP) developed by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), for instance, combines data sources to provide 'whole of life insights into various population groups in Australia, such as interactions between these characteristics, use of services like healthcare and education, and outcomes like improved health and employment' (ABS 2022). Within this, Indigenous data are identified as of particular interest.

But the generation of multi-source longitudinal datasets has (at least) two serious Indigenous data related problems; who the data are about; and what the data are about. The first problem centres on the tendency to aggregation. While there has been some movement to greater disaggregation, primarily at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander insistence (see Pillar 4, Refreshed Closing the Gap Agreement 2020), Indigenous data are still mostly presented as a binary category: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander; or not. The problem is that the population represented by the 'Indigenous' half of this dichotomy are diverse.



Peoples with very different social and cultural norms, living very different social and cultural settings are frequently collated into the one group for analysis. But bundling together data from Aboriginal Peoples living in remote communities such as the Yolgnu from Arnhem land with that from urban communities, such as the Wurundjeri people living in Naarm (Melbourne) raise the question of what the variable 'Indigenous' actually represents? Disaggregating to the state level, reduces, but does not necessarily eliminate, the problem of the category not actually representing similar things.

The second problem relates to what data are included and, as critically, what data are missing. The major sources are official statistics, much collected by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, either as the result of the Indigenous identifier in the Census of Population and Housing, or specific collections such as the repeat National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Survey (NATSISS) and the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey. The other major source, administrative data, are generated and held by government entities and include hospital data, health-centre data, schools' data, justice-system data, Centrelink and other welfare-agency data. But while the sources vary, the type of data are the same: a relentless descriptive tide of dire socio-economic and health inequalities. These data have been summarised by Walter (2016) as '5D Deficit Data': data that focus on Indigenous Difference, Disparity, Disadvantage, Dysfunction and Deprivation. The result is data which only reflect a very small slice of Indigenous. For example:

- Yes, much is recorded on levels of Indigenous disadvantage: poorer health, housing, educational and labour market outcomes, higher rates of incarceration, burden or disease etc. But there are almost no data that allows these indicators to be examined within the socio-cultural systems in which these measures occur and reoccur across generations. Socio-cultural data are a prerequisite for any valid answer on 'why' such patterns exist.
- Yes, it is known that many factors of Indigenous life disadvantage are linked, but very little data exists on how other factors in Indigenous lives, beyond markers of disadvantage, might operate to mitigate these. Such broader Indigenous life factor data are a prerequisite for any valid use of life course research as an evidence base is to support policy development.
- Yes, there is a longstanding anthropological literature framed around remote Indigenous communities but there is almost no data on the lives of the more than 80 percent of Aboriginal



and Torres Strait Islander peoples who live in regional and urban areas. Urban community data are a prerequisite for any valid representation of Indigenous lives.

In short, available Indigenous data cannot, and do not, yield meaningful portraits of the embodied realities of Indigenous lives. Rather, these data are better viewed as an artefact of colonisation which continue to reflect the interest and purposes of the state (Walter & Russo Carroll 2020).

The Indigenous Life Course: More than Being a Social Problem

More problematically, by the nature of their limited, aggregate, decontextualised, deficit format, any analysis on which they are based can only deliver one answer: that it is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are the problem. Indeed, the broader Indigenous critique is that these data are just a continuation of the data of surveillance: a pulse check on the continued success of the colonising settler state social structure. Still the sickest, check; still the most incarcerated, check; still the poorest, check. As argued by Indigenous scholars globally, such data have never delivered benefit to Indigenous lives (Walter 2018; Walter & Suina 2018; Rainie et al. 2019). That most Indigenous life course literature focus on Indigenous disadvantage, therefore, is unsurprising on two fronts. First, usable data predominantly measure developmental indicators. Second, the trope of Indigenous disadvantage as a social fact, accepted without wider inquiry into why Indigenous lives are so disadvantaged, has barely been disturbed in the last 200 years. The key Indigenous life course factor of colonisation, then and now, remains firmly, and persistently, out of sight.

Yet, the contemporary Indigenous lifeworld is also much more than marginalization. But the data needed to explore broader dimensions of Indigenous lives, within different levels of urbanity and within different settings, are scarce or non-existent. The mismatch between the data that exist and those that are needed is mapped across five categories of data failure, as per Table 1, labelled BADDR (Blaming, Aggregate, Decontextualised, Deficit and Restricted) data (Walter 2018).

Table 1: BADDR Data Versus Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Data Needs

Dominant BADDR Data	Indigenous Data Needs
Blaming Data	Lifeworld Data
Too much data contrasts Indigenous/non-Indigenous data, rating the problematic	We need data to inform a comprehensive, nuanced narrative of who we are as peoples, of



Indigene against the normed Australian as the ubiquitous pejorative standard	our culture, our communities, of our resilience, our goals and our successes
Aggregate Data	Disaggregated Data
Too much data are aggregated at the national and/or state level implying Indigenous cultural and geographic homogeneity	We need data that recognises our cultural and geographical diversity and can provide evidence for community-level planning and service delivery
Decontextualised Data	Contextualised Data
Too much data are simplistic and decontextualized focussing on individuals and families outside of their social/cultural context	We need data that are inclusive of the wider social structural context/complexities in which Indigenous disadvantage occurs
Deficit, Government Priority Data	Indigenous Priority Data
Too much (way too much) 5 D data: This data that focus on disadvantage, disparity, dysfunction, difference, deficit (Walter 2016) collected to service government priorities	We need data that measures not just our problems but data that address our priorities and agendas
Restricted Access Data	Available Amenable Data
Too much data are barricaded away by official statistical agencies and institutions	We need data that are accessible and amenable to our requirements

Adapted from Walter 2018

Exploring the Indigenous Life Course from an Indigenous LifeWorld Perspective

The life course approach describes the trajectories of life from birth to death, structured and shaped by social roles and historical and interpersonal contexts (Katz et al. 2012, cited in Lee et al. 2022). For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People/s both the age-graded social roles and the historical and interpersonal contexts differ markedly from those experienced by non-Indigenous Australians. Indigenous Peoples/s live in many of the same spaces and places as non-Indigenous Australians but do not experience the same life circumstances, or the same life trajectories.

The variation of the Indigenous life course is amply demonstrated by demographic patterns. The 2021 Census establishes that in every state and territory the Indigenous demographic pattern is both similar to each other, *and*, in stark contrast to that of the non-Indigenous population. The median age for the Indigenous population, in all states, varies between 23 and 26. Similarly, all Indigenous state populations



record low proportions of those aged over 75 years. In contrast the non-Indigenous median age is 38 years and the proportion aged over 75 is similarly high in every state and territory (ABS 2022). Some of these demographic distinctions may be related to inequality, but are equally likely to relate to differences in how life stages, such as partnering and parenthood, are understood and entered into by Indigenous people, across geographic locations. From birth to death, the Indigenous life trajectory in Australia is framed through Indigenous Peoplehood.

So, yes, many of the same life stages occur. But as Cooke and McWhirter (2011) assert in the Canadian context, Aboriginal life trajectories such as through marriage, family, health, work and education may be different to those taken by other Canadians. Yes, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People/s lives are also conducted through many of the same societal systems as non-Indigenous Australians: health systems; education systems; political and economic systems. Yet it is a mistake to assume that interactions with the same social systems indicate similarity of life course patterns. Rather, the embodied realities of Indigenous lives, and the life stages of which they are constituted, are negotiated within distinctive Indigenous circumstances. So, just as the differences among the more than 250 First Nations in Australia mean automatically including all in the same category is analytically flawed, so, equally, all First Nations exhibit culturally specific and social-positioning elements. Critically, these distinctive elements are as valid for the 80 percent living in regional and urban centres as they are for the 20 percent living in remote or very remote areas.

The concept of the lifeworld provides a theoretical framework to unpack this seemingly contradictory claim of sameness and difference. The mainstream literature posits that the 'taken-for-grantedness' of everyday lives is not verifiable truth but a subjective reflection of the social and cultural conditions of life experience. The meaning we make of our lived realities is always contextual and inseparable from our social, cultural, and physical world – and from our relational positioning within that world (Husserl 1970). The underpinning rationale of the Western lifeworld concept has salience for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. But it does not have direct applicability. Sami scholar Porsanger (2004) frames this core premise. Indigenous lived reality, she argues, makes visible what is meaningful in the Indigenous social world via its axis of Indigenous world views, perspectives, values and lived experience. Such meaning making changes the way Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People perceive how society is organised and operationalised, its social hierarchies and social and cultural mores, and how they experience their own position in that society.



Largely happening under the notice of the dominant society, Indigenous Peoples live our lives as Indigenous Peoples. Everyday life is negotiated and understood within distinctive Indigenous circumstances, culture and worldviews. These vary across First Nations and urban, regional, or remote settings, but all reflect Indigenous ways of being. As such, any conceptualisation of the Indigenous lifeworld must incorporate shared social and cultural life circumstances, along with the shared on-going conflicted relationships with the nation states that now govern (and largely possess) our traditional lands (Walter & Suina 2018). The Indigenous lifeworld is, thus, encircled by dual intersubjectivities. These are:

- intersubjectivity within peoplehood and the ways of being and doing of those peoples, inclusive of traditional and ongoing culture, belief systems, practices, identity and ways of understanding the world and our place within it: and
- intersubjectivity as colonized, dispossessed marginalized peoples whose everyday life is framed through and directly impacted by our historical and ongoing relationship and interactions with the colonising nation state.

Exploring the Indigenous Life Course

Indigenous lifeworld intersubjectivities explain the context of Indigenous life trajectories and their essential differences vis-à-vis non-Indigenous life trajectories. As Indigenous peoples we retain our thousands of years of deep history of our lands, culture, traditions and ways of knowing, and being. These distinguish and shape our lives alongside the meanings embedded in their associated epistemologies, narratives and logics. But, as contemporary Indigenous peoples our embedded lived realities, and the social and cultural positioning in which they occur, are not the same as those of our pre-colonisation ancestors. In the words of renowned Kalkadoon Aboriginal activist Charles Perkins, whose words are now transcribed onto the wall of the Australian National Museum, *“We know we cannot live in the past but the past lives in us.”*

The dual Indigenous lifeworld intersubjectivities also explain why established Australian life course approaches which focus on the trajectories of individual life structures, do not work. The unique patterns in Indigenous life mean variables taken as given in non-Indigenous research cannot be presumed valid for Indigenous research. The individual focus of Western life course research also disallows the collective perspective: either as a way of understanding the life course or as way to inform policy planning for Indigenous collectives (Theodore et al. 2019).



Intersubjectivity 1: Lifecourse Within Peoplehood

Indigenous Peoplehood is structurally embedded within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander life trajectories. The culturally founded understandings of the shape and timing of life stages, for example, such as achieving adulthood, family formation or elder status, demonstrate these distinctive Indigenous patterns. As Quandamooka scholar, Martin (2005), points out the Aboriginal life course is not linear but circular. The passage of conception through birth and childhood is not just about a physical growing up, marked by birthdays and pathways through the education system. Rather, for Indigenous children growing up is marked by engaging with the world in ever-increasing circles of relatedness, not just to people, but also to land, waterways, skies, climate, animals, plants, and spirits. A child is grown up when they achieve adult levels of relatedness, regardless of their age in years. There are fundamental, culturally embedded differences in the Western and Indigenous concept of being ‘grown up’. Similarly, Martin (2005: 6) observes that to be an elder is not just to be older, but to have ‘grown up’ in the law.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples/s also live lives linked by Peoplehood. As Katz et al. (2012 cited in Lee et al. 2022) assert, relationships, relational obligations and connection and broad kinship ties have endured and endure despite the ravages of colonisation. Community life, with its interactions, obligations and norms, is central to, and characteristic of, everyday Indigenous experience and critically, not extinguished by urban living. Moreover, while the community social and cultural milieu vary, these interactions, obligations and norms are anomalous to those experienced by other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People/s in ways that are not reflected in non-Indigenous community life (Chino & DeBruyn 2006; Walter 2022).

The veracity of the impact of Indigenous Peoplehood is hard to establish given the paucity of Indigenous specific life course research and in particular the dearth of disaggregated data. What research does exist, however, supports the salience of Indigenous Peoplehood. Analysis of data from the Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children, delivered via an edited collection of work from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors (Walter, Martin and Bodkin-Andrews: 2017), demonstrates a number of these. For example, wanting your child to grow up to know their culture was prominent in responses to a question asking for parent’s aspirations for their child (Martin & Walter 2017). In other analysis, more than two thirds of the LSIC parents rated ‘being Indigenous’ as most important, or very important, to who they are. Relatedly: family history; how to show respect; pride in identity; and knowing Country were the top four items that parents wanted to pass to their children (Martin 2017). Similarly, obligations to community, especially the sharing of resources, remain current practice. Living in a metro area, even for generations,



do not diminish these. For example, Walter (2017) found that regardless of geographical location families share Indigenous specific traits. These include high levels of extended family interaction, even when families live in separate households, and the regular sharing of food and meals with community members.

The importance of culture in Indigenous life also has significant implications for the Indigenous life course. Lovett (2017) for example, also using LSIC data, found that while around three quarters of the Study Children had normal levels of resilience, regardless of geographic location, being involved with cultural events, was positively significant in children's resilience levels. First Peoples' interactions also, remain consistent. For example, respect for, and deference to, Elders is a part of Indigenous life regardless of where people live. Moreover, there are benefits of such interactions. Walter (2017) found that the amount of time that parents reported that their children spent with community elders, was positively correlated with parents' rating of their own parental skills. Obligations towards, and respect for, traditional owners of Country and the way you care for Country, your own and that of others, is also a live aspect of Indigenous life in Australia (Walter 2022).

Intersubjectivity 2. Life course as colonized, dispossessed marginalized peoples

Life course research seeks to understand the actions, behaviour and experiences of individuals by combining insights about individual circumstances and the broader social circumstances surrounding these (Lee et al. 2022). For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people those broader social circumstances are riven through, and shaped by, the continuing legacy of colonisation.

Yet this foundational life course factor is elided within the limited mainstream Australian research. Much of this literature is found in an edited collection *Demographic and Socioeconomic Outcomes Across the Indigenous Australian Life course* (Biddle & Yap 2010) published by ANU Press. Using data from the 5% sample file from the 2006 Census the authors of different chapters cover the usable variables found within the census: education, marital status, age, gender, housing tenure, parenthood status, family type etc. The authors point to the diversity of Indigenous populations, but then go on to explore Indigenous/non-Indigenous population differences across 19 variables. The findings replicate other population comparisons: more likely to be poor; live in a single parent household; less likely to be in a de jure marriage; less likely to be in education; and less likely to be in employment. From this standard fare the authors were, however, able to extract some new life course relevant findings including that high levels of human capital garnered through education led to better outcomes in labour market achievement.



Another contribution from this collection was the authors proposal for a rolling plan for collecting longitudinal Indigenous data.

Other literature primarily, but not exclusively, from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers provides a more nuanced look at the interaction of individual outcomes with broader social circumstances. For example, research has determined that poverty is not only a common life course Indigenous factor, but also experienced differently from non-Indigenous poverty. Hunter (2012) established that for Indigenous households, income is not necessarily an indicator of advantage, or even advantage from now on. Events such as negative interactions with the justice system and living in overcrowded conditions remained prevalent among relatively high-income Indigenous households. Such findings can be linked into other research. For example, Indigenous parents are not dissimilar to non-Indigenous parents in what they want for their children. Martin and Walter (2017), using data from the (LSIC) study, found that the most common answers to an open-ended question relating to parents' aspirations for their child were (in order of frequency): to go to school and get a good education; to be successful in whatever they want to be; and to be safe. There were also distinctive Indigenous framed responses. The fifth most common response was a wish that their child would have everything that they didn't have. The authors conclude that this aspiration expresses a desire by Indigenous parents that their child not have their life chances circumscribed by their own experience of inequality and socio-economic deprivation (Martin & Walter 2017).

Poor health, linked to poverty and disadvantage also has Indigenous dimensions. Lovett and Thurber (2017), using LSIC data, found that study children, while reporting high levels of health and well-being, also experienced a high burden of health conditions, especially dental problems, respiratory problems, ear problems and skin conditions. Similarly, the low median age of the Indigenous population across Australia is, in part, related to the relatively small proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who make it to old age. Ageing prematurely via earlier onset of chronic disease is a common experience for Indigenous people (Broe & Jackson-Pulver et al. 2010; Cotter, Anderson & Len 2007). The well-established and longstanding likelihood of premature aging and/or dying younger underpins a current legal case being pursued in the Federal Court to lower the pension age for Indigenous Australians (Visontay 2022). This reality is harshly underscored by further findings from LSIC, where 'going to a funeral' was the most common life event reported (Martin & Walter 2017). Parents also frequently reported that their child had two sets of shoes; one for school and another for funerals.



Racism is another differentiator of the Indigenous life course. Analysis of LSIC data by Bodkin-Andrews et al. (2017) demonstrated that parents from cities and towns were more likely to report experiencing racism than parents from more remote areas. Controlling for relative disadvantage and level of isolation, all levels of racism were associated with lower levels of global health and increased levels of worry, anger, and depression for the primary parent (Bodkin-Andrews et al. 2017). Data from the Reconciliation Barometer indicate that the Indigenous experience of racism in Australia is not only high but increasing (Reconciliation Australia 2022). More critically, longitudinal studies such as the Indigenous led Mayu Kuwayu Study from the ANU are now showing the link between racism and ill health and poor wellbeing (Thurber et al. 2021). And attitudes and behaviours do not even need to be racist in intent to have a negative impact on children's life course. For example, Trudgett et al. (2017), using LSIC data, found that the likelihood of the child liking school was correlated with whether the primary parent thought that the child's teacher understood the needs of Indigenous families. The opposite is of course also the case: when schools' or teachers do not demonstrate an understanding of Indigenous families, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are less likely to like school.

Literature from Other Colonised Settler States

Other learnings can be garnered from the life course literature relating to other Indigenous peoples living in Anglo-colonised settler states. Indeed, it is likely that this literature is more relevant than non-Indigenous framed studies from Australia. The synergies can also be explained by the 2nd Indigenous lifeworld intersubjectivity. While Māori, Native American and First Nation, Métis and Inuit identity, traditions, belief systems and everyday practices are geographically and culturally unique (Peoplehood), our shared positioning as dispossessed, politically marginalised peoples, experiencing intergenerational and embedded social, economic and health inequalities and the similarity of our relationships with our colonising nation states, results in shared lived realities. (Walter and Russo Carroll 2020). This common positioning is summarised in Noel Dyck's (1985) definition of fourth world peoples as those who: are Indigenous but have had their sovereignty appropriated; are minorities within their traditional lands; are culturally stigmatized as well as economically and politically marginalized; and are struggling for social justice.

International Indigenous life course literature is also scarce, but the scholarship of Māori researchers (e.g. Theodore et al 2019:16) has strong Australian resonance. These authors highlight historical trauma, defined as the 'cumulative emotional and psychological wounding over the lifespan and across generations' as central to Māori life course approaches. They also draw on the positives of life course



research in its interconnectedness of past, present and future and intergenerational factors. Citing the work of Pihama et al. (2014), the authors posit historical trauma as a key generational determinant of Māori health and wellbeing, noting that historical trauma, from colonisation onwards, is increasingly theorised as an important factor in Māori life trajectories. The authors also point to the deficiencies in current approaches, using the well-known inequalities in Indigenous birth outcomes common to all Anglo-settler colonized societies, as an example. While these inequalities are regularly reported, they argue, there is a lack of research on the lifelong consequences of these factors for Māori babies. Similarly, they argue, there is a paucity of Māori-led life course research following young people from childhood to adulthood. More positively, Theodore et al (2019) perceive the utility of life course research on positive ageing for Māori and its Indigenous aligned focus on the cumulative impacts of life events and experiences across the lifespan. To make their point, the authors cite work investigating positive ageing through Māori eyes (Edwards 2010 cited in Theodore et al. 2019). As well as the usual set of variables: adequate housing, good health, secure income, being active etc., the study located Māori specific factors such as security in cultural identity, whānau cohesion and well-being and a sense of connection to one's tribal region. These results would likely be replicated in any study of positive aging for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

A paper by Canadian (non-Indigenous) scholars, Cooke and McWhirter (2011) further support the key argument that a life course approach must be framed from Indigenous perspectives. Exploring the value of life course research, the authors state that there are Indigenous specific considerations in relation to individual trajectories and the impact of public policy. These differences lead to differences in the life course, including the possibility of cumulative disadvantage, different timing of life events and different interactions between events in the different life course domains. The authors also note that public policy itself can shape the life course if it fails to meet the needs of the distinctive Indigenous life course. They cite cumulative and intergenerational impacts of policies such as residential schools. In Australia, policies that have taken and continue to take Indigenous children into state care at increasing rates have similar negative impacts (Walter 2017). Cooke and McWhirter (2011) also stress the risks of applying a life course perspective to policy development. The most critical of these is that policy attempts to fix the 'Indigenous problem' may just try to make Aboriginal life course patterns more like non-Indigenous ones. A better approach, they suggest, is a policy understanding of life course differences and institutional flexibility so that Aboriginal life course patterns do not necessarily result in the accumulation of disadvantage.



Implications for Indigenous Lifecourse Research: Conclusion

In conclusion, life course research holds considerable promise for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People/s as a mechanism to achieve a better understanding of the trajectory of Indigenous lives and subsequently, to inform the development of better public policy levers. But this conclusion comes with two very strong caveats, without which such research will lack validity, and worse, do harm. Both caveats are identified in a recent paper by Edwards et al. (2022) relating to Māori life course research.

First Indigenous life course research must be framed by Indigenous lived realities, which are distinct from non-Indigenous lived realities. To repeat, as Husserl (1970) argued, everyday life is imbued with meaning making which is always contextual and always inseparable from our relational positioning in our world. In Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People/s lives are lived within specific Indigenous contexts and within a relational positioning in respect to wider Australian society. We are distinctive as Peoples *and* have a distinctive relationship with the nation state and the majority population framed through colonisation (then and now). As such, the Indigenous and non-Indigenous lifeworld, and by necessity, the Indigenous life course, is not, and will not, be the same.

This dual distinctiveness is currently not recognised within most data that might conceivably be used to investigate the Indigenous life course. The standard trope of such data, with its long list of developmental items, maintains a settler state fixation on the Indigene as the problem. Analyses of these data can only lead to results framed through the lens of deficit (Walter 2018). Other data sources and different foci are needed. For example, how do Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, within their families and within their communities, negotiate the transitions from childhood, through puberty into and through adolescence? Or how do Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People/s interact with key social systems (health, education, justice) and how do these interactions impact life trajectories? The answer is that we do not know, and cannot know, because the data that could answer these questions are not collected. Rare exceptions are Indigenous led surveys such as the Longitudinal Study of Indigenous children (LSIC) (DSS 2022) or the Mayu Kuwayu Study (2022). Additionally, there needs to be an Indigenous informed development of new and alternate data standards, measurement tools and variable constructions as a prerequisite for efficacious analysis of the Indigenous life course in Australia (see Brinkley et al 2021 for example).

Second, Indigenous life course research must be Indigenous led. Indigenous research leadership ensures that Indigenous worldviews are both understood and prioritised. Non-Indigenous researchers, because



of their own lifeworld, cannot, despite the best of intentions, and even long experience in Indigenous related research, truly understand, that combination of biography and history that is encapsulated in the Indigenous life course. Again, research validity is at risk. As per Māori researchers Theodore et al. (2019), the time when Indigenous Peoples will accept non-Indigenous leadership in the planning, collection and use of data about them are gone. The powerful Indigenous Data Sovereignty movement demands that Indigenous data rights and leadership are a fundamental prerequisite to Indigenous life course research. This Indigenous centring is reinforced in the AIATSIS Code of Ethics (2020:19) where Indigenous leadership is one of the four principles of ethical Indigenous research, stating in part,

Research is considered Indigenous-led in Australia when Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people have genuine decision-making responsibility and the research is informed by Indigenous priorities, values, perspectives and voices. Indigenous leadership should be evident both in the 'why' as well as the 'how' of research, from conceptualisation to communication of research.

More broadly, Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Indigenous Data governance have entered the lexicon and expectations of Indigenous organisations and communities (Maim nayri Wingara 2018). As such, the rights and practices of data sovereignty and governance are being actively and successfully pursued across the Australian data ecosystem. For example, the refreshed Closing the Gap Policy Framework Reform Pillar 4 has as its objective that:

'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have access to, and the capability to use, locally-relevant data and information to set and monitor the implementation of efforts to close the gap, their priorities and drive their own development.'

Regardless, the time is right to initiate valid, Indigenous led, Indigenous life course research. It may also be the right time to successfully advocate for the creation and curation of more relevant Indigenous data sources in Australia, to support these endeavours.



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