First in Family, First for Family: Indigenous academic women's legacy motivation

Amy Thunig

School of Education, Macquarie University, North Ryde, Sydney, 2109, Australia
email: amy.thunig@mq.edu.au

Indigenous academics are a minority within the academy, with the disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous academics, staffing and student numbers well established. A growing body of literature examines the motivations of Indigenous peoples who enrol in and complete university degrees; however, there is a dearth of literature examining the journeys and motivations of those who, as well as graduating, also choose to be academics. A review of papers largely produced by Indigenous academics highlights that, though a paucity of literature directly centres their motivation in undertaking their initial studies or joining the academy, legacy, family and community motivations appear regularly, though often mentioned in incidental, backgrounded or de-centred ways. Drawing upon existing literature, interviews with 17 Indigenous academic women and Indigenous research methodologies, this article foregrounds and centres consideration of legacy motivations for academic women's professional work and initial journey into higher education study. It argues the implications of academic engagement for Indigenous women, in so-called Australia, include wider influences, impacts and outcomes for their immediate familial, extended kinship and broader Indigenous community groups. It posits that these are not secondary or incidental, but primary motivations and shaping influences on Indigenous women's academic careers and how they should be understood, valued and supported by institutions.

Keywords: Indigenous women, academic careers, first in family

Introduction: A journey in

Indigenous academics write on/are written on, speak of/are spoken of, and are thoroughly established as experiencing many challenges and obstacles. Research shows these are faced not only in entering the academy, but in attaining publication, promotion, and reasonable and respectful treatment once within the academy as academics (Behrendt et al., 2012; Fredericks, 2009a, 2009b; Fredericks & White, 2018; Fredericks et al., 2019; Green et al., 2018; Moreton-Robinson et al., 2011; Nakata, 2007a; Page et al., 2017; Thunig & Jones, 2020; Uink et al., 2021). Increasingly, the valuable work of Indigenous academics and staff in shaping, contributing to and improving academic spaces and how this relates to recruitment and retention, as well as to engage in research and curriculum development within the academy, is being acknowledged, studied and published (Coates et al., 2021; Fredericks et al., 2019; Page et al., 2017). Recent studies have considered the higher education aspiration of sub-sets of Indigenous school students (Patfield et al., 2019), adding to the growing literature which considers motivation and factors impacting on the success of Indigenous peoples who engage in tertiary education (DiGregorio et al., 2000; Jones, et al., 2016). However, in light of the established challenges Indigenous peoples experience within higher education institutions, and the significant value they bring as academics, there remains a dearth of

literature on how Indigenous academics journey into the academy, why they initially chose to engage in their higher education studies as students, and why they choose (ongoing) to be academics.

Understanding the motivations of those who have not only navigated higher education as students, but chosen to return to the space to undertake academic roles, can inform institutional practice and policy in relation to recruitment, support and retention of such staff. With Indigenous academics presently less than 1 per cent of staff in higher education institutions in so-called Australia, and universities performing speech acts committing to increasing Indigenous staffing, student support, and content creation, such information is of significant value to the academy broadly (Thunig & Jones, 2020). With consideration of the staffing data, and the way this contrasted with the speech acts of the universities when it comes to Indigenous academic employment, this Gamilaroi yinarr (woman) author questions why the Indigenous academic women , who are within the space, chose to be, and continue that choice ongoing. This was the catalyst for the project which this article reports from, but also led to the author recognising how often Indigenous academics referred to their personal and legacy connections, and to their reliance upon and accountability to their Indigenous communities within their work, though rarely if ever as the focus of the work itself.

I foreground Indigenous voices as "research conducted by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academics on Indigenous issues provid[ing] a means to privilege Indigenous voice" (Hogarth, 2017, p. 26). As such, I note that this author is a Gomeroi yinarr, each participant within the study this article reports on identifies as an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person, and throughout this study and this article the author has consciously, preferentially cited Indigenous academics. I therefore intentionally foreground the storying of the journey of Indigenous academics as they move into the academy, as well as their motivations for choosing and persisting within academia, by exploring the journeys that led Indigenous academic women into Australian higher education as students, and on to higher education roles as academics. As well as being of value to higher education institutions in attaining their recruitment, retention and development goals, these stories and knowledges are of value to the Indigenous academic community and Indigenous communities broadly. Such storying being formally recorded becomes documented history of these women who are often times the "first" in their family, and sometimes the first in their communities. These records can then be accessed widely, and be useful for role modelling and sharing the "what", "how" and "why" of academia from an Indigenous standpoint. In this way, they may then support informing and shaping both student and academic aspirations within Indigenous communities.

As Waters (2013) notes, across existing literature the term "Indigenous" is defined in more than 60 varying ways, and, as such, it is necessary to define the way this term is used here. The term "Indigenous", unless stated otherwise, will be used to refer to those who self-identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. Further, "academic" is defined as holding contracted academic roles within Australian higher education institutions; and women/woman is a term that is used to refer to those who self-identify as "female" or "woman". All participants in the study from which this article reports self-identified as "female" within the recruitment process. This article will firstly supply background information on the higher education systems in which it queries the journey of Indigenous peoples in to and through, initially as students and additionally as academics. It then, secondly, offers a literature review on publications which reference the journeys of Indigenous academic women in choosing to pursue higher education and/or careers within academia, noting and foregrounding the existing literature where it references first-person reporting of journeying and motivation, which I note often includes legacy, familial and/or community considerations. It thirdly reports on the theory, methodology and methods, and findings of a study of Indigenous academic women within Australia

designed to answer the key research questions on what the journey into academia looked like for participants. It finally offers discussion of the data in relation to the positionality that identifying and being identified as both Indigenous and a woman has on academics within Australian higher education institutions, and the ways in which their community belonging, accountability and legacy influences their journey in, position within and persistence through these settings.

Background: General representation problems in the "educational institution"

Whilst numerical representations of student enrolment, retention and completion rates are often presented alongside one another in data sets and reports, it must be understood that there is a world of difference between what it costs—in every sense of the word—to enrol in a degree, and what it costs to complete a degree. However, there are undeniably costs to both. Enrolling in and completing a university degree are not the same thing, and existing data shows that Indigenous students in so-called Australia often begin their journey within higher education having come via non-traditional pathways, holding less formal qualifications, and differing in terms of their age, socioeconomic status and geographical setting when compared to their non-Indigenous peers (Asmar & Page, 2008; Asmar et al., 2015). This impacts their experiences and likelihood of attrition and completion.

Indigenous women are statistically less likely to enter and complete higher education than their non-Indigenous peers, but more likely to enter and complete than their Indigenous male peers (Dudgeon et al., 2017; Fredericks et al., 2015; Uink et al., 2021). Indigenous peoples who do enrol are more likely to experience intersecting disadvantage during their higher education studies, including an increased likelihood of carer commitments and familial/community obligations which may conflict with their studies (Asmar et al., 2015). Over several decades Indigenous peoples, including women, have increasingly participated in and engaged in higher education, but remain significantly underrepresented (Coates et al., 2021; Fredericks et al., 2015; Fredericks & White, 2018; Fredericks et al., 2019). Attrition, completion and graduation numbers are of concern; parity across the student and collegiate population remains to be reached; and, among academics, too few are employed within the professoriate or executive level (Asmar & Page, 2008; Asmar et al., 2015; Coates et al., 2021; Fredericks & White, 2018; Thunig & Jones, 2020). Existing literature indicates that due to various factors, including systemic biases, universities are challenging and oftentimes violent spaces for Indigenous women. Simultaneously, it indicates that the presence of Indigenous women within universities challenges the systems and individuals who collectively are considered the university (Evans & Sinclair, 2016; Green et al., 2018; Thunig & Jones, 2020; Uink et al., 2021). As well as a lack of parity in employment figures, Indigenous women who are employed in academic roles are established as experiencing violence and discrimination from their non-Indigenous colleagues and lower levels of job security than their non-Indigenous peers (Fredericks, 2009a; Moreton-Robinson, 2000; Thunig & Jones, 2020). Higher education institutions are institutions which have studied, actively dehumanised and excluded Indigenous peoples, and entering them is established as being challenging for Indigenous peoples. However, over the past 60 years there has been significant work undertaken within these spaces, and, as demonstrated above, attainment of formal qualifications is linked to greater levels of employment.

As a research project, and within this paper itself, the focus is not on the lack of parity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous women in enrolment and retention numbers, or on those who, for varying reasons, have not completed their studies. The state of disadvantage of Indigenous peoples is already consistently highlighted and lamented in a range of papers, reports, books, research papers and

opinion pieces (Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2022) and, though noted for the readers contextual understanding, is not the focus here. For Indigenous academics who do attain senior leadership roles, recent studies have shown that they are expected by their Indigenous academic colleagues to remain connected to, and be seen to speak up, advocate, and be visible for their Indigenous communities (Coates et al., 2021). This expectation sees their personal identity and community obligations interwoven with the expectations of their formal contracted role (Coates et al., 2021).

Reviewing literature largely by and for Indigenous academic women

When reviewing the literature on Indigenous academic women, this article foregrounds work produced by or contributed to by members of the group (Indigenous academic women). This is important because Indigenous peoples can be treated as peripheral to discussions concerning them (All Together Now, 2021; Green et al., 2018; Hogarth, 2017; Moreton-Robinson, 2000; Nakata, 2007a), when, from an Indigenous standpoint, they should be central to and leading the conversation (Moreton-Robinson, 2000; Nakata, 2007b). Indigenous academic women have themselves pointed out that expertise and ideas become "disembodied" when decoupled from knowers' standpoints, ontologies, and raced and gendered corporeal forms, severing accountability to community, ancestors and country (Moreton-Robinson, 1998, 2000, Moreton-Robinson et al., 2013; Tynan & Bishop, 2019). Tynan and Bishop (2019) proposed "refusal" as an everyday assertion of agency within systems that tend to privilege disembodied expertise. Here the literature review employs the tactic of refusing the automatic employment of dominant non-Indigenous academic narratives on Indigenous people in education, in favour of privileging and (re)centring accounts led and contributed to by Indigenous academic women, on Indigenous academic women. Intentionally limiting and focusing the literature review on Indigenous voice and experience within the academy highlighted the common themes of legacy and circular community obligation/accountability, as seen, experienced, and spoken of by Indigenous academics. I recognise that such preferential citation may potentially be criticised as nepotistic or as a sign that this work is lacking in criticality, but I also note that non-Indigenous scholars regularly cite only non-Indigenous scholars in their work and publications. The exclusion of certain communities within academic citation practices, and the need to challenge this, is highlighted by Tuck et al. (2015) in their "citation practices challenge". Further, this project was undertaken using a decolonising lens, and "decolonising research challenges dominant modern methods of knowing and reinforces indigenous identity and discourse" (Habashi, 2005, p. 771). Where focused on Indigenous women, our experiences and our voices, such preferential citation of Indigenous scholars is not only appropriate in terms of engaging the available and relevant scholarship, but also as an act of refusal and re-fusal (Green et al., 2018).

First in family

Globally there has been a push for inclusive and equitable universities, with these institutions generally seen as public spaces which should be more accessible to more of the "public". However, the majority of people who access tertiary education continue to come from families with financial means and/or have a legacy of generational access to and graduation from tertiary education (Fredericks et al., 2015). Indigenous women are generally the first in their families to undertake higher education studies, often later in life when compared to their non-Indigenous peers. Their obligations whilst undertaking study tend to include familial and work demands, complexifying university engagement (Fredericks & White, 2018). Among the rising number of Indigenous student enrolments, there is a small but growing number of students who are not first in family; and within the minuscule Indigenous academic workforce, there

are some examples of second-generation Indigenous academics. These are good signs, especially in light of the short history of Indigenous access to higher education, but nonetheless exceptions to dominant trends. For marginalised communities, higher education institutions can be seen as unwelcoming spaces, lacking connection and belonging (Fredericks et al., 2015).

Whilst familial and community obligations, financial demands and a range of other impacts may complicate and/or make untenable a student's initial attempt/s at higher education study completion, it is worth noting that "dropping out" does not mean never returning. Indeed, even within the small amount of literature which exists, this point is demonstrated well by Indigenous academic woman Professor Fredericks, who shares her own journey in:

> I started my first course at university *when I was 17 and dropped out* [emphasis added]. I went back at 21 and have been studying and writing ever since, but that doesn't mean that it was always easy. (Fredericks et al., 2019, p. 82)

There are numerous reasons why a person may need to stop their studies after initially enrolling, or pause progress. For the cohort of Indigenous people who do enrol and complete higher education studies, there are a range of benefits measured formally and informally. For example, income and employment rates for Indigenous graduates are shown to generally match and/or exceed those of non-Indigenous graduates (Universities Australia, 2017). The perceived value, reasons, motivations and opportunities for enrolling and completing higher education in adulthood may include both personal and altruistic benefits. Tertiary education is seen as a way to increase a person's career options and to further develop their knowledge and voice (Fredericks et al., 2015). Professor Nereda White shared her understanding of the challenges of working within higher education, whilst also noting the benefits of persisting:

> *This all comes with a great personal and collective cost* [emphasis added] … Daily struggles take their toll. For some it can be too much to cope with, and the result is often burn-out or drop-out. Partners can be left behind, relationships and marriages break down. *For those who get through there are the rewards of good jobs and successful lives* [emphasis added]. (Bin-Sallik, 2000, p. 105)

Whilst these challenges are well known, Indigenous women's participation within universities continues to increase, indicating that they "find a sense of meaning and purpose at university" (Uink et al., 2021, p. 179). Among the few existing texts which share collections of Indigenous graduates and/or academics journeys within academia, in their own voices, it is clear that, while there are commonalities, there is no singular prototype journey "in" for Indigenous academic women (Bin-Sallik, 2000; Dudgeon et al., 2017; Fredericks et al., 2019).

Bullen and Flavell (2017) argue that "transformational learning for students at the cultural interface is life and death" (p. 592). Both the treatment of Indigenous peoples and Indigenous knowledges within curriculum and formal education spaces have significant ramifications for the Indigenous community, and how they are treated and perceived by the non-Indigenous community.

Methodology and methods

The project reported on here centred the voices of Indigenous women in academia, used a decolonising lens, drew broadly on Indigenous research methodology, and was informed by and founded in story

telling (Kovach, 2010; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008). This study focuses on a very particular, powerful cohort: Indigenous academic women who have completed higher education studies and additionally chosen work within higher education in academic-specific roles. Their storying of how they came to journey into higher education is used to offer insights into factors and experiences which are linked with "success", as measured by retention and completion. Each of these women enrolled, remained (or left but then returned), attained, and then at some point chose to return and continue returning in formal academic roles. Understanding why and how Indigenous women journey into higher education, and hearing their storying as to how they perceive and experience these journeys and spaces, is valuable but rarely documented information. In an industry where funding is often focused on "solving" Indigenous issues, there is a dearth of Indigenous success stories documented within the academy. Considering we are still within the first six decades of Indigenous student engagement at Australian higher education institutions (Bunda et al., 2011), these stories hold value for historical purposes, and may inform student and academic recruitment and retention policy and approaches going forward. It also adds to the small but growing body of literature which carries the storying of Indigenous women graduates, which is also produced/written by an Indigenous yinarr (woman) graduate.

This paper draws on data from the study "Sovereign women: Why academia", collected in 2019 when the author travelled through six of a possible eight states and/or territories of this continent commonly referred to as Australia. The study used qualitative research methodology, specifically one-on-one, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with a total of 17 academics, all of whom identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. A moderated "snowball" approach led to formal invitations and information statements being sent to Australian higher education institutions, Indigenous centres, various scholars, community members, committees, and organisations, and was also shared widely across social media platforms. Whilst the goal was to engage 20 participants, and 20 participants were initially recruited, two left their academic roles before interviews could be conducted, and one became too unwell to proceed. Thus 17 participants remained, each of whom work across a diverse range of fields and faculties, hold varying levels of seniority and work at a broad range of higher education institutions located across so-called Australia; and all of whom identify as female. Participants were asked five questions in the interviews which inform this study, the first being "Can you please tell me about your journey in to higher education?". The answers to this question are primarily reported here. Each participant determined the starting point of their journey when answering this question; so, whilst these were semi-structured interviews, further prompts for this question were generally not given. Interviews were transcribed, deidentified thoroughly and analysed thematically.

The "journey in" question reported on in the following section of this paper resulted in the answers which were most likely to risk the anonymity of the participants, necessitating appropriate exchanges with participants in accordance with the rigorous ethical standard expected when engaging in research with Indigenous peoples. As Asmar and Page (2008) note, "In a small population where many people know, or are related to everyone else, confidentiality is a crucial research issue" (p. 111). Therefore, poetic transcription, which collates responses from various respondents, was used to present this data. As Manathunga et al. (2020) note, "poetry can be a powerful vehicle for Indigenous voices and knowledges" (p. 2). Poetic transcription was designed after identifying commonalities and significant patterns through an inductive process. Poetic transcription allows for key narratives and emotive moments to be presented in storied format, using direct quotes and sentences, without risking participant anonymity (Thunig & Jones, 2020). Further, as Behrendt (2019) explains, "Storytelling humanises. It gives voice to the people" (p. 180); that drive to centre the voice of each participant is also why poetic transcription of participant data is used here. Poetry is at home in Indigenous research methodology and is a valuable resource in

decolonising work within educational settings (Manathunga et al., 2020). After each of two themed poetic transcriptions provided, thematic analysis and discussion are supplied in integrated reflections.

Findings

The journey in (participant data)

A journey into the academy as a student is unique to the journey into the academy as an academic. The motivations (why) and circumstances (how) of entering the academy for the first time as a student are not necessarily the same as the "why" and "how" of accepting a formal academic role, but, apart from those who enter the academy as industry professors, you cannot have one without the other, and so the journeys are connected. Whilst various participants spoke of their journey in as being "accidental" and "unfocused", this contrasts significantly when compared to the attitude and language used when discussing why they choose and accepted their roles as academics. This paper is explicitly looking at the "journey in", and that journey was often spoken of as motivated by legacy. The form of legacy varied, whether that was a desire to impact their own children's lives in immediate ways, such as alleviating poverty, or a broader desire to be a generational changemaker and to engage in social justice matters. No one spoke of ego or accolades.

The following is a poetic transcription of participant data.

> **_Where would you like to start? No, I'll tell you._**
>
> In one sense the journey to higher education really was just a part of growing up.
>
> You know, I went to school, I always had the expectation that I would go to university
>
> I knew exactly the course I wanted to do when I was in Year 10.
>
> I probably crystallized pretty early on,
>
>   probably before high school
>
>   I _knew_ that as a child, and that's what I did.
>
> For me, universities and higher education _have always been something on the horizon_
>
> which is not the case for a lot of other people in my family and our communities.

> **_Where would you like to start? No, I'll tell you._**
>
> I went to an Indigenous summer camp program when I was in Year 10,
>
> and it was basically like, "You can go to uni"
>
> and I got _super inspired_, I was like, "Alright, I'll go to uni!"

Where would you like to start? No, I'll tell you.

I come from a family, both sides, of a family that, that didn't know anything about

higher education, or education of any kind, in fact.

When I was growing up

I tried to get out of school as much as possible

I never thought about going to University.

Even though we were all quite bright at school,

hmm, you just didn't in our town …

And, I think mum would have wanted us to go, but even,

there just, there was just, *what would you be*?

I don't have no idea.

I left school in Year 11 and school just wasn't for me,

so (university), *it wasn't an option*

for me.

Where would you like to start? No, I'll tell you.

I guess that would have had to have started after school.

I found this (Indigenous education space) where my cousins were actually at,

so, I wanted to be there with them.

That year was quite a significant year for me,

being a young,

       very impressionable

          Aboriginal woman hearing stories of survival,

               resistance, resilience

                  and *all of that*.

And it was that year that I worked out *I need to be in this social justice space*.

Back then I *wanted* to be the first Aboriginal woman prime minister,

       but I found that, as I grew up, *government might not be the place for me*.

Well, it took me a long time to even get into uni.

It was hard to even get to a point that I thought *I was smart enough to go to uni*

and do that.

But then, I don't know, when you find the passion for something that you really love,

I think, you put yourself in it 100%

and I feel like I've kind of, grabbed that and *I love what I do*.

Where would you like to start? No, I'll tell you.

I didn't start university until I was in my late twenties

it wasn't because I was going to be an academic, or anything like that.

I'd applied for a professional role

when I came for my interview, that was

the first time that I'd ever stepped foot in a university.

When I started working at the university, my dad was just like,

"*what are you working there for?*"

I didn't have very high views of a university system at all.

I didn't know what else to do to be honest

but then, *I found I just loved everything* about it.

From a research perspective *I just needed a degree.*

I was in a role and at the end of that 12 months, I was just filling in for somebody, they said

"Look … we can't keep you, we'd love to keep you, you're doing a really good job,

but you haven't got a degree".

So, I finally thought okay, I can whinge about it or I can just do a degree.

Up to that point I didn't even really know what research was,

but, *I loved it*.

I realised, like, oh, wait a second!

I can help more than one person at a time if I go into research.

I went and lived in an Aboriginal hostel

and then I finished that degree, and I really liked being a student

and, it was great. It was great times.

That course really helped me to achieve my dream role,

and it also created the space

for me to go, "*okay, what's next?*"

And that, that was really exciting.

Analysis and discussion: Legacy as enjoyable passion

No academic in the study spoke of themselves as having existed in a vacuum. The intersecting identities, histories and relationships of being an Indigenous woman in so-called Australia meant that participants' examinations of a journey into the academy considered the histories and needs of their parents, grandparents and relations with these spaces. For Indigenous students, "community responsibilities are additional considerations" (Asmar & Page, 2009, p. 111); this was also true for participants of this study. Participants referred to accessing supports such as "summer camp", "Indigenous education spaces" and "scholarships", as well as positive relationships with Indigenous supervisors. Each are examples of scaffolding within higher education which has been created by and/or contributed to by Indigenous peoples (Behrendt et al., 2012; Frawley et al., 2015). Further, participants spoke of being motivated generationally throughout their engagement as student and academic, with one stating, "I would lift my family out of poverty ... I would start by setting them an example". As Fredericks and White (2018) successfully argue, entering or aspiring to enter the academy means that, as Indigenous women, participants were inevitably then conversing with that work and utilising scaffolding primarily built by other Indigenous peoples, particularly women, whose work preceded their own.

The catalyst and point of knowing they would enrol in a degree varied greatly among participants, but once they had an understanding of what research and academia was, and what they might achieve in such roles, the commonalities of participants' journeys increased. Impassioned language, with references to "loving" being a student, and the work of attaining their degrees, and an appreciation of the work of research itself was common, regardless of the field in which the participant worked. Participants spoke of discovering skills within themselves, feeling "good" at what they did, experiencing passionate engagement, the development of personal voice and a sense of empowerment through their studies. Additionally, numerous participants spoke of loving the journey and some linked attaining their qualifications to attaining a dream role. These themes continued as their storying shifted from undergraduate to postgraduate, and was spoken of as firmly connected to positive support networks, employers/supervisors and familial obligations. The importance of being the "bread winner" and being

able to meet their financial and familial obligations—"if I can still, you know, pay the rent and feed my child kind of thing"—while studying, were noted simultaneously as potential barriers and as a motivating factor for the journey itself. Numerous participants specified that as passionate and determined as they were, successful engagement in their role as students, especially as postgraduate students, relied on their having scholarships and other forms of financial and network supports. In this way, whilst academic work may at times be spoken of as isolating, participants in this study spoke of the "journey in" as fulfilling, exciting, self-discovering, and interwoven with family and community engagement. For various participants the journey was not "for" themselves, it was for their children, to alleviate poverty and to support their communities; but they also discovered they loved the work and were passionate about it once they commenced.

The journey continues: Postgraduate study (participant data)

The following is a poetic transcription of participant data.

My first boss was a very strong Aboriginal woman, who was deeply intellectual

but absolutely pragmatic, sensible.

She also, I think, you know, saw my potential.

She gave me, well, she gave me opportunities when I put my hand up,

she gave me opportunities when I didn't put my hand up.

She was a great leadership role model.

And then, she's like "Okay, now do you want to do a masters by research?"

and I'm like "well, yeah!"

    I can do this, if I get …

        like it mattered, the main thing is

            if I can still, you know, pay the rent and feed my child kind of thing.

I was working, I was always the only breadwinner for the family,

I was working to support the family

So, I thought, oh, the next thing is to do a masters

And I did my masters, *almost by accident*

I studied at night and on weekends.

That environment at University helped me find my voice

then opportunity came up to become a level A academic and

I absolutely grabbed it with both hands.

And I thought making money would be, like, a really, really amazing thing

to not have to be poor anymore.

A year later they offered me a PhD Scholarship

I remember at the time thinking carefully about the financial trade-off

of going back to do more study for another, you know, few years.

I mean, I didn't know how long the PhD would take me at that time

and then *it was people*, people who were supportive.

I did my PhD in pretty quick turn-around,

I was working full time for the whole time of it

And, *I had a ball*

Loved every single minute of it.

I *needed the people* I had around me for the PhD and

had I not had them,

I probably wouldn't have finished.

I just *loved it*. I loved the freedom of it.

It wasn't a focused career plan,

but I did find that when I started studying (in my field),

I found that I could do it,

and I was good at it.

I was on this journey of trying to sift through this mud,

of being pulled in one direction by the white system,

but maintaining, like my people in my community,

and *my ancestors grounding me*

in the type of research that I wanted to do

and *what I had to do.*

I remember back then, even though it was just really hard

juggling a family and a *backbreaking* job and studying.

Even though it was really hard, everything I learned I, I thought, well …

this is a way of understanding the world

that makes sense to me.

This is amazing.

Why have I lived my whole life, so far, and not known about this?

And so that kept me going through some pretty dark times …

So, I got in there, got that done, did that.

And I just, *fell in love* with research

I didn't mean to.

And I was not, I wasn't …

I wasn't motivated for, for myself

I was motivated for the children.

I made a resolution then that I would educate my children

that I would send my children to university,

and lift the family out of poverty,

and all that implies.

I would lift my family out of poverty

permanently down the *generations*, and

I would start by setting them an example

by educating myself.

And, yeah, haven't looked back since.

So, to me I sort of feel like academia's been part of a broader career.

It's not been *just* that.

And I certainly have never thought I *just* wanted to be an academic.

Analysis and discussion: Support as circular

The complexities of entering higher education as an Indigenous woman, as well as the sheer time commitment that undertaking a degree (undergraduate and/or postgraduate) requires, means that enrolment does not guarantee completion. The forms of support that participants recalled accessing and benefiting from are therefore of value to note. Participant awareness of not only benefiting from the work of those who came before them, but being responsible for those who will come behind them, is a common theme in the data that echoes the existing writing of Indigenous women within the academy. For example, Fredericks et al. (2019) argue, "In our writing together, we are conscious of the generations that went before us and also of the paths and tracks we are forming for those Indigenous people that will follow us" (p. 87). The "journey in" stories lead to discussions of the "journey through" those degrees that then, in part, provide the basis for the academic roles these participants now hold. Further to being mindful of the legacy they are part of and would contribute to, Indigenous academic women spoke of the importance of active support—that which they received, and that which they gave and must give in ongoing ways. This includes the basics of financial support for those with carer responsibilities and aspiring to shift from ends-meeting to actually "making money" as an academic—"and I thought making money would be, like, a really, really amazing thing to not have to be poor anymore". The support of Indigenous academics and community "turning up" was noted as of deep importance, reflecting existing literature such as Locke's (2018) reflection of the support they felt in having Indigenous academics attend their graduation. However, giving such support is also acknowledged within this data and within the existing literature as one of the many "invisible" workloads which Indigenous academics carry (Asmar & Page, 2009; Thunig & Jones, 2020): the mentorship, presence, cups of tea, and listening ear that is vital to retention, but overlooked within formal workloads.

Support is reciprocal from a legacy community standpoint; Indigenous academic women gave laterally and to one another, in part, because they knew they would not be here if other mob had not done it to and for them. Thus, this is a community-centred way of being within the academy; whilst the reciprocity will not likely come back directly from the individuals we support, they as individuals will hopefully grow to be able to then support others, and, in this way, we collectively return our support to one another and grow our collective within this space.

The relationality and support are not linear, but circular. This fits what Waters terms First Nation Aboriginal Australian pedagogy's "circular and nonlinear notion of life" (Waters, 2013, p. 177), which is a community and cultural obligation that we benefit from, and which also costs us. As Asmar and Page (2009) note, for Indigenous academics, "a complex set of student demands is being met by a very small

cohort of staff" (p. 110). At some point, most of the existing Indigenous academics were themselves students who were requiring support, and this support within the academy primarily comes from Indigenous academics and professional staff. Such relationships—existing both inside and outside of formal networks—are clearly of deep significance and importance.

It is also important to note that student relationship is not only about connection and engagement with people, but extends to experience and relationship with country, research, campus, food, content and systems (Fredericks & Brien, 2014; Tynan, 2020). Relationships also extend beyond individual institutions, due to the precarity of the work and to the limited number of Indigenous academics, and are further impacted by Indigenous peoples' families and community affiliations due to cultural obligations and accountability. Amongst the cohort of Indigenous academics, the value of being networked and connected with one another extended to being able to have "informal" conversations that may act as emotional, psychological and logistical supports. Such informal engagements allowed them to establish the nature, value, cultural safety, and potential harm/exploitation of events and programs which we are invited to be part of, hopefully before having committed to those which will result in harm to them and/or their communities. It also created safe spaces to work through the feelings that inevitably emerge when faced with the epistemic violence of the higher education systems. Professor Bronwyn Fredericks (2009b) detailed this phenomenon in a paper on discussing and sharing feelings on a panel invitation with another Indigenous academic woman, wherein they came to understand that not only was the work unpaid, it carried a significant cost, was exploitative and problematic. If not for other Indigenous academics, particularly Indigenous academic women, the participants and Indigenous academic women broadly would have few/no systems to be able to yarn up, work through and formulate responses to the violence inevitably experienced within the academy. Though communities and families are often great wells of support and encouragement, in terms of working out and working through the costs, and formulating strategic and appropriate responses to moments such as those described in the data and detailed by Fredericks, without a direct understanding of the higher education systems, their contributing to navigating a path forward within that system may be comparatively limited.

Conclusion

Whilst the academy itself is established as violent for Indigenous women, these findings highlight that to be an Indigenous academic woman is to also be part of a community of peoples connected through ancient bloodlines and intentional support. Participants referred to drawing on the strength of their ancestors and communities, indicating the value of their ongoing connection to their cultures as well as how such connection grounds them within their academic roles. Additionally, legacy motivations which brought them in to higher education often led to a longer-term passion (though with some costs) where they found they "fell in love with research" indicating both joy and deep satisfaction within the work itself.

Indigenous academic women's experiences of support are spoken of within existing literature and within these findings as being circular. The legacies of others contribute to their success, just as their own success is motivated by a desire to contribute generationally to the success of others, namely their own family and/or community. "This circular and non-linear notion of life as never ending and all things inter-related is what retains our separation and uniqueness from non-Aboriginal approaches to learning" (Waters, 2013, p. 186). Indigenous ways of being, knowing and doing are community centric, rather than individual centric; thus, circular approaches to support and legacy motivations among Indigenous

academics are an outworking of this. Additionally, there is solidarity in the shared experiences and connections of Indigenous academic women, which is of deep value when it comes to resisting the sense of being pushed out by systems and people whom your very presence unsettles (Evans & Sinclair, 2016; Green et al., 2018; Uink et al., 2021). Storying shared here details how supports from people and formal structures available to them not only inspired, but helped participants to continue through hard times. Even within the tensions and institutional violence of the academy, Indigenous women persist, and those who do remain in academia note that there has been growth over the past 25 years (Fredericks et al., 2019. p. 83).

As Indigenous peoples, supporting our communities as they exist within and beyond the academy, and undertaking efforts to ensure academic work becomes and/or remains accessible to our communities beyond the academy, is rarely formally work loaded. The tension of the expectations and pressures which Indigenous academics experience (Nakata, 2004) is further impacted by the community perception that they be a voice and activist for Indigenous peoples, knowledges and more within their contracted role (Coates et al., 2021). Additionally, the ways in which, as individuals, their identity and community obligations oftentimes clashes with the entrenched, often endemic racism and structural oppression of their institutions impacts their experiences as academics (Asmar & Page, 2009). The continuous support that Indigenous academics provide, within the academy and outward to their communities, is considered a unique element of Indigenous academic work impacted by being positioned at the intersection of endemic institutional pressures and societal disadvantage, within identities as Indigenous peoples (Asmar & Page, 2009).

Indigenous academic women enact and persist with our ways of being, knowing and doing throughout and within our journeying of higher education institutions. The value of this work and of circular support and the ways in which these impact the recruitment and retention of Indigenous students and staff has been noted throughout. Yet, as has been previously noted by Asmar and Page (2008), "informal support provided by academics (as distinct from designated support staff) has rarely been systematically documented and thus tends to be invisible" (p. 116). Findings here reveal the power of legacy motivation for Indigenous academic women, and additionally make a strong contribution to the argument that "informal" supports should not remain invisible within academic workloads.

Acknowledgements

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About the author

Amy Thunig is an academic in the School of Education at Macquarie University. A Gomeroi woman, Amy has a Bachelor of Arts, a Masters degree in Teaching (Primary) and recently submitted her PhD in education with a focus on Indigenous women in academia. In 2019 Amy was invited to give her TEDx talk "Disruption is not a dirty word" and was named Emerging Leader in the Public Sector. Amy has a forthcoming book of personal essays titled *Tell Me Again* due for publication with UQP in 2022 and hosts the podcast *Blacademia: Yarns with First Nations/Indigenous academics*.

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