



# In order to change a culture you must first understand it. Lessons for for community engagement from the 'anthropologising' of Aboriginal Australia.

Stephen A Sutton<sup>1,3</sup>, Bev Sithole<sup>2,3</sup>, Hmalan Hunter-Xenie<sup>2,3</sup>, Otto Campion Bulmaniya<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> College of Health and Human Sciences, Charles Darwin University,

<sup>2</sup>ARPNet – the Aboriginal Research Practitioners Network, Charles Darwin University

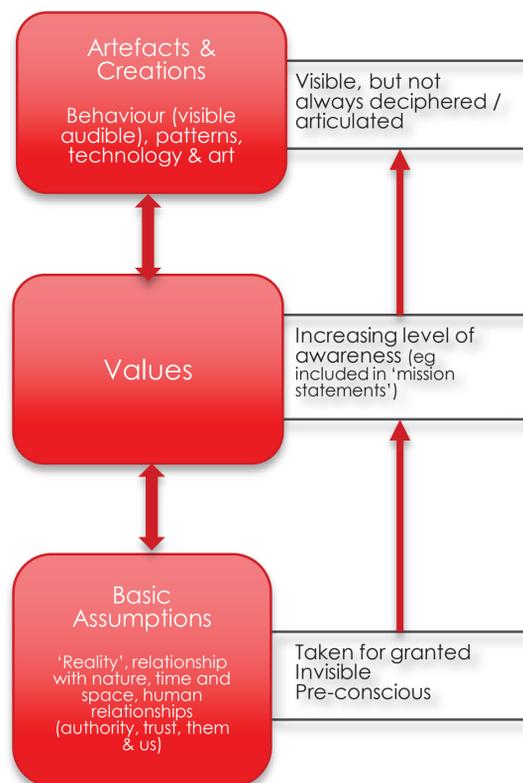
<sup>3</sup> Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC

Government agencies, NGOs and corporations often refer to 'changing culture' as a means to improving service delivery, remaining relevant, increasing profit or better reflecting the expectations and diversity of the community. But to change a culture it is necessary to actually understand what the culture is. This is a problem because having been born into a culture we tend to take its strictures for granted. A BNHCRC project in north Australia offers insights which are useful for all community engagement.

Most adult Aboriginal people in northern Australia have first-hand experience of anthropology – as subjects. They have been asked questions about their skin, kin, totems, diet, economy and spirituality and have consequently learned a great deal of meta-data about the anthropological process. This knowledge is used to pose questions of non-Aboriginal Australians that lead to a better understanding of the 'mutual incomprehension' that has characterized a great deal of interaction between agencies and Aboriginal people throughout the colonial period.

## CULTURE – HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT

What which we commonly think of as 'culture' is the 'tip of the iceberg'. Schein<sup>1</sup> portrays the levels of the components of culture and the extent to which they are readily understood. Most people give little thought to the 'basic assumptions' that influence their behavior.



Levels of culture & their 'visibility' (after Schein 1984)

## FROM VALUES TO BASIC ASSUMPTIONS

Many Australian's get that Yolngu people have very different social relations to the 'main stream'. Anthropologists have documented the 'Skin'<sup>2</sup> system. The system describes who you can marry. But a deeper understanding of that system can give insight into 'basic assumptions'

Skin relationships have a set of prescribed rules about responsibility, trust, formality (or not) and proximity. These rules are embedded into every day life. They lead to behaviors that may seem unusual to non-Aboriginal people.



Some Yolngu explain their family / land relationships

## UNDERSTANDING ENGAGEMENT

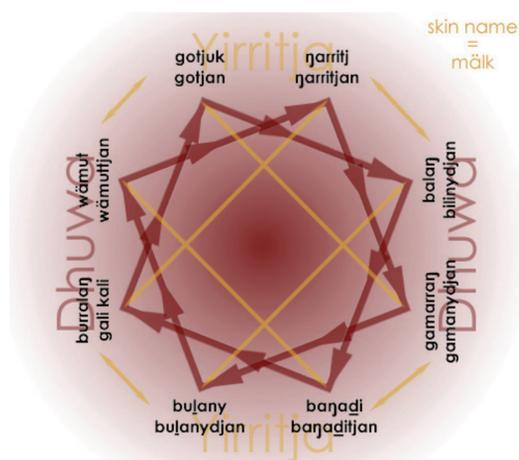
To get to 'square 1' the parties have to understand themselves and each other. This can take time and involve action as well as discussion.

## PRINCIPLES FOR ALL COMMUNITIES

Throughout the BNHCRC "North Australian Training project" community engagement protocols that must apply to ALL communities have arisen:

- Accept that cultures differ and yours is not 'right'
- Value diversity as a strength, not a problem.
- Interrogate 'misunderstandings': they're a clue to basic assumptions.
- Work with community to co-create knowledge
- Do things *with* communities, not *to* them.

References:  
 1. Schein, E. 1984. "Coming to a New Awareness of Organizational Culture." Sloan Management Review 25(2):3-16.  
 2. McConvell, Patrick, Piers Kelly and Sébastien Lacrampe. 2018. Skin, Kin and Clan: The Dynamics of Social Categories in Indigenous Australia. Australian National University.



Yolngu 'skin' system © 2000 Randy Graves