‘What…is the air-speed velocity of an unladen swallow?’ Exploring service provider and service recipient constructions of the Indigenous mental health arena.

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How do we encounter spaces that are unfamiliar, antagonistic or perceived as unsafe? What informs our decision to step into, approach or retreat from such unsettled and unsettling sites? What underpins the resilience necessary to move into them again and again, or conversely, what enables our hurried departure?

Research by Garvey (2015) sought to understand how Indigenous and non-Indigenous providers and recipients of mental health service navigate their way within what has been described as the ‘tensely contested arena of Indigenous mental health’. A Causal Layered Analysis of 46 interviews revealed complex movements towards, within, and away from the arena. Participants utilised a variety of myth/metaphor and discursive references to construct and explain the contexts within which their subsequent movements took place. It was revealed that the ‘arena’ extends beyond the walls of the clinic, and that service provision and acceptance involves grappling with both present day uncertainty and historical precedence - much of which acts as a repellent to entering the arena at all.

This presentation provides background to the research, explores several prominent constructions employed by providers and recipients of service, and outlines a framework developed to chart their movements. The presentation also speculates on preferred futures for providers and recipients of mental health service for Indigenous Australian people, and asks whether the metaphor of the ‘arena’ remains relevant to that aspiration.