DECOLONISING INDIGENOUS SOCIAL IMPACT RESEARCH USING COMMUNITY-BASED METHODS

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Indigenous procurement policies encourage the construction sector to provide new training, employment and business opportunities for Indigenous people suffering from economic and social disadvantage. However, the success of these policies is often distorted by the failure of policy evaluations to account for Indigenous perceptions of social value. Since these often differ markedly from non-Indigenous values, this can distort the allocation of funds to Indigenous communities and exacerbate the marginalisation of the communities these policies are meant to help. Drawing on theories of community-based research, this methodological paper seeks to reconceptualise approaches to measuring Indigenous social value in an Indigenous social procurement policy context. Working in partnership with a peak body for Aboriginal business in Australia, we have co-designed a novel approach to Indigenous social impact research that recognises the legitimacy of Indigenous perspectives when investigating the social value Indigenous procurement policies create. We argue that culturally appropriate focus groups (yarning discussion groups) are appropriate in Indigenous social impact research because they prioritise Indigenous people's experiences of Indigenous procurement policies, rather than focusing on simplistic policy targets. As a method that promotes community involvement in social impact research to define how social value is perceived, yarning discussion groups have significant implications for future research seeking to represent Indigeonus perspectives of social value. It is concluded the approach developed here can be operationalised in the field to better understand the nature of Indigenous social value and the impact created by Indigenous procurement policies in Australia and other countries with disadvantaged Indigenous populations.

Keywords: community-based research, Indigenous, social procurement, social value

INTRODUCTION

This methodological paper responds to an urgent need for Indigenous social impact research that is inclusive, relevant and culturally safe and appropriate for Indigenous people and communities (Rogers *et al.,* 2018). In Australia, an Indigenous person is someone who is of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent who identifies as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and is accepted as such by their community (Department of Aboriginal Affairs 1981). The terms 'Indigenous', 'Aboriginal' and

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'Torres Strait Islander' are capitalised in Australia to reflect their use as proper nouns signifying the political sovereignty of these groups (Maddison 2019). Indigenous Australians are a culturally and geographically diverse population who have had vastly different experiences of colonisation, which has resulted in ongoing systemic disadvantage (DPMC 2019). This is not restricted to Australia; it is repeated in other colonised countries with large Indigenous populations such as Canada, New Zealand and the United States (Maddison 2019).

To address this continuing social inequity, governments in Australia and other countries are turning to social procurement through new Indigenous procurement policies (IPPs) to encourage contractors to deliver social benefits to the Indigenous communities they work in, in the form of work, jobs and training opportunities for Indigenous people and businesses (Australian Government 2015). Social procurement involves the use of existing purchasing practices to create direct and indirect outcomes in disadvantaged communities and IPPs contribute to these outcomes by establishing purchasing and employment targets from Indigenous businesses and people. Purchasers must be aware there are multiple forms of Indigenous businesses (Foley 2013). Some businesses may therefore be excluded from IPPs if practitioners apply strict definitions of what an Indigenous business is. The construction industry is a major contributor to the implementation and outcomes of IPPs because of its possible multiplier effects on other sectors of the economy and the fact it often operates in areas of disadvantage (Loosemore 2016). As the fastest growing industry for Indigenous employment and one of the largest contributors to IPP requirements (ABS 2017), the construction industry is an ideal lens to investigate the social impact IPPs create.

The Australian IPP is categorised under Australia's Indigenous Advancement Strategy that recommends high quality evaluation be integrated into Indigenous policy and be collaborative, timely and culturally inclusive (DPMC 2018). However, recent research has argued that IPP evaluations may not align with Indigenous perceptions of social value, because they rely too heavily on rational contract targets that do not reflect Indigenous perceptions of social value (Denny-Smith and Loosemore 2018). Evaluations are rarely, if ever, built into the design of Indigenous policies or programs, and they are too often undertaken as an afterthought, with insufficient time or resources set aside for quality evaluations, or not evaluated at all (Muir and Dean 2017). Where they do occur, Williams (2018) notes, they are unlikely to reflect Indigenous people's perspectives and experiences because Indigenous people are often not involved in evaluation design, implementation or reporting. Therefore, there is an urgent need to decolonise IPP assessments (Rogers *et al.,* 2018). Decolonised IPP assessments refers to social impact research approaches that are participatory and empowering and prioritise Indigenous perspectives and experiences (ibid.).

In responding to this need, the aim of this paper is to develop a new community-based participatory method for exploring the social value IPPs create in the context of a construction project. By social value we mean the economic, social, cultural, cognitive and health impacts of a construction project on the lives of the people in the community in which it is built (Raiden *et al.,* 2019). Working with a peak body for Aboriginal business in Australia a new decolonised approach to Indigenous social impact research is presented, that utilises a community-based participatory practice to conceptualise a culturally appropriate approach to IPP evaluations. In doing so, we address the present lack of insight on conducting decolonised research that continues to hinder Indigenous research generally (Rogers *et al.,* 2018). Thus, this paper makes

a significant contribution to this area of knowledge, by showing how social impact research can be decolonised to represent the impact IPPs have in Indigenous communities.

Decolonised Research

Indigenous social impact research is a culturally and ethically sensitive area, as research is a "life-changing ceremony" for Indigenous people (Wilson 2008: 61). Unfortunately, for Indigenous people, the term 'research' can be linked to colonial histories that extracted and claimed ownership over Indigenous knowledge, arts, and artefacts (Smith 1999), which could limit people's willingness to participate in an IPP evaluation. To address these historical practices, decolonised research is useful to represent Indigenous knowledge, perspectives and methods that resist current evaluation practices in IPPs (Nakata *et al.,* 2012). Given the lack of practical advice on conducting decolonised research, a community-based participatory approach is useful for engaging Indigenous people and developing social impact research methods that address community priorities (Halseth *et al.,* 2016).

Community-based participatory research

Community-based participatory research (Halseth *et al.,* 2016) is based on several basic principles: involving and consulting Indigenous people as legitimate stakeholders in research; developing shared understandings about the aims of research and methods to be used; and appropriately informing Indigenous people about the aims and objectives of a research project. Community-based participatory approaches are increasingly being accepted as an important process in decolonising research because of its collaborative and empowering nature (Simonds and Christopher 2013). This is important for Indigenous people who have historically been marginalised or excluded from the research process, which has resulted in research being treated sceptically and as another form of foreign colonialization and suppression (Halseth *et al.,* 2016). Thus, community-based participatory ensure Indigenous social impact research responds to Indigenous communities' concerns and minimise the risk of community backlash and non-participation (Nakata 2010).

Conducting Indigenous social impact research with community stakeholders provides several benefits. First, collaborative work like this brings together diverse actors to find common values and goals in Indigenous social impact research (Mandell *et al.,* 2016). Second, working with Indigenous stakeholders to design appropriate social impact research resists relegating Indigenous knowledge to the status of the 'other', which promotes Indigenous perceptions of social value in the research process (Smith 1999). Third, this approach involves Indigenous stakeholders from the outset to understand what is important to them, to provide some control over a social impact study with some investment in the results, and to utilise a flexible and project-specific methodology that responds to the key social value priorities to the community in which a project is being built (Price *et al.,* 2012). Wilson (2008) summarises the benefits of conducting research with Indigenous stakeholders, in that it: helps clarify and define research approaches and methods in Indigenous terms; helps researchers learn more about Indigenous research methods; and builds relationships with the Indigenous community, an important aspect of ethical Indigenous research.

As Simonds and Christopher (2013: 2186) state, community-based participatory practices are an "orientation to research that advances the development of culturally cantered research designs…as well as the integration of Indigenous research methods". From a social value perspective, The Urban Aboriginal Knowledge

Network (2015) indicates that such research should be: grounded in community priorities of what constitutes social value; constructed and co-designed between Indigenous stakeholders and social impact researchers; respectful of Indigenous languages, cultural protocols, values, lifecycles and gender(s); beneficial to Indigenous people and organisations who are active participants in social impact research at the level of their choosing; supportive of principles of utility, self-voicing, access and inter-relationality, ownership, control, access and possession of social impact research outcomes; and respectful of Indigenous people's research approaches and protocols, including the methods used to conduct research like story-telling and yarning (Drawson *et al.,* 2017). Drawing on these principles, the following section shows how community-based participatory research has been conducted to develop a culturally appropriate Indigenous social impact research method.

Research Design

Following the principles of community-based participatory research above, the authors worked with the New South Wales Indigenous Chamber of Commerce (NSWICC) to co-design a method for investigating the social value IPPs create. NSWICC is the peak body for Aboriginal business in New South Wales. NSWICC supports the development of Aboriginal businesses and employment in partnership with the NSW Government (NSWICC and NSW Government 2014). Adopting collaborative yarning (Bessarab and Ng'andu 2010), we have co-designed a new method that guides the conduct of social impact research with Indigenous communities. As such, the research design is also consistent with recommendations that community-based and Indigenous research be collaboratively designed (Muir and Dean 2017). Assuming a relational constructionist ontology, which recognises the cultural, relational and community-based nature of social value (Grandy 2018), it adopts a relational epistemology that draws attention to the role of relationships with people and things in helping to construct and understand how social value is perceived (Thayer-Bacon 2010). This is important in community-based and Indigenous research, where undertaking consultation and collaboration with community members prior to designing research requires authentic relationships that allow the researcher to discuss and understand community issues and promotes familiarity between researchers and communities, which enhances the rigour and outcomes of community research (Halseth *et al.,* 2016).

Founded in social constructionism and recommended for being theoretically rigorous, decolonised social impact research designs can provide an intrinsic perspective on Indigenous social value that can result in positive social change (Phillips 2011). Social constructionism privileges the role of communication in the development of jointly constructed meaning. Social constructionist assumptions, therefore, have been developed to understand Indigeonus social reality is based on the relations and connections humans have with the living and non-living world (Chilisa 2012). Thus, Nakata *et al.,* (2012) recommend that decolonised social impact research design must not be a simple framework and must address complex Indigenous knowledge spaces to understand Indigenous worldviews, colonial experiences, contemporary dilemmas, and future goals. The value of a decolonised Indigenous social impact research design is that it actively subverts colonially derived research approaches, requires researchers to reflexively theorise about how knowledge is generated, and incorporates methods that resist colonisation and prioritise people's lived experiences of Indigenous social procurement (Weston and Imas 2018). This research adopts Weston and Imas' (2018) hybrid-liminal decolonised approach, which is reflexively constructed and where

colonially derived methods are subverted and combined productively with the engagement of local Indigenous people. The result of this is the yarning discussion group method that will be employed in the research.

Co-Designed Research

In co-designing this research with NSWICC, to effectively evaluate the social value created by IPPs within the principles of community-based participatory research, we used collaborative yarning to reached shared understandings about the research methods and processes that will be used in the field. Yarning is an Indigenous cultural form of conversation and in this case, collaborative yarning involves researchers and stakeholders exploring and discussing similar and different ideas and explaining concepts to each other that are relevant to Indigenous social impact research, including how social impact research should be conducted and the methods used to collect data (Bessarab and Ng'andu 2010). As a mode of inquiry, yarning is gaining increasing prominence as a rigorous tool for decolonised research (Leeson *et al.,* 2016). Our initial yarns highlighted NSWICC's concerns with the current state of Indigenous procurement policies, including the sustainability of Indigenous businesses who may become dependent on Indigenous procurement policies for continuing work. Face-to-face workshops then provided a chance to properly develop a researcher/stakeholder relationship that helped clarify the research objectives and methodological approach. The researcher is not Indigenous but having childhood friends who are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people drives their interest in this space. This has taught them that respectful Indigenous research must be guided by Indigenous stakeholders, which was integral to developing the relationship with NSWICC that has respectfully interfaced Indigenous perspectives with western modes of research (Leeson *et al.,* 2016).

In developing and designing the methodology for the project, the issue of IPP evaluation was initially raised with NSWICC, suggesting that existing assessment frameworks can be too restrictive or too general, thus not reflecting the changes that people experience as they interact with Indigeonus procurement policies. In response, it was suggested by NSWICC the project needs to work with community to find out what is important, to them, to be investigated in an IPP evaluation. NSWICC advised the author that focus groups could be a culturally appropriate way to involve community in this process and learn more about what indicators of social value should be measure and the appropriate ways to measure those indicators. As a method that allows participant stakeholders to talk about objects and events, thus constructing their own perspectives using their own categorisations and associations, the focus group method is particularly relevant for investigating Indigenous social value (Stewart and Shamdasani 1999). Focus groups are particularly important in community-based research, where community members can contribute to the design, implementation and reporting of data collection processes (Viswanathan *et al.,* 2004). However, focus groups risk dominant voices restricting others from freely participating in the discussion, and therefore must be adapted to be culturally familiar to promote an open discussion allowing attendees a chance to speak uninterrupted (Schneider and Kayseas 2018).

For the above reasons, it was decided a more culturally appropriate method of conducting focus group discussions was required, called a yarning discussion group. Yarning is a culturally safe Indigenous style of conversation and story-telling that is a valid method for gathering qualitative data (Bessarab and Ng'andu 2010).

Storytelling is also a deeply embedded tradition to Indigenous people around the world, which allows people to explain their past and future, celebrate their achievements, organises and gives meaning to their experiences, and motivates their actions (Nakata 2010). Stories are inseparable from theory because they make up theory and are therefore real and legitimate sources of data and ways of being (Gabriel 2018). Furthermore, when used in community-based participatory research, yarning is effective for embedding Indigenous perspectives and methods in the research process (Drawson *et al.,* 2017). Yarning methods, then, are a culturally respectful alternative for traditional focus group discussions (Wilson 2008). Yarning methods are therefore a novel approach to investigate the nature of Indigenous social value that acknowledges and respects Indigenous cultural practices.

As a method for gathering oral knowledge central to Indigenous cultures, Bessarab and Ng'andu (2010) argue yarning is a valid and rigorous method for conducting research with Indigenous people. Chilisa (2012: 131) links the growing acceptance of yarning as a valid research method to theories of ethnophilosophy, that recognise Indigenous people's experiences are encoded in language, folklore, stories, songs, artefacts, culture, and values, that provide "other ways of data collection, analysis, and interpretation of the worldviews of postcolonial and Indigenous societies". Yarning discussion groups are a hybrid-liminal decolonised method because they incorporate Indigenous cultural practices, protocols and forms of knowledge sharing, while subverting the colonial connotations associated with formal focus group discussions and research generally. Therefore, yarning discussion groups create a more comfortable setting for exploring Indigenous social value than traditional focus groups and is consistent with Indigenous cultural knowledge and protocols.

Yarning Discussion Groups

Implementing the yarning discussion groups will involve appending yarning group sessions to several business seminars and workshops NSWICC will hold in 2019. Obtaining ethics clearance to undertake the yarning groups was a complex process requiring ongoing discussion with a University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) (HC180886). For example, HREC preferred the research to be conducted from a critical arms-length distance. However, Weston and Imas (2018) assert that engaging participant stakeholders from a distance inhibits learning of new knowledge and continues to marginalise Indigenous perspectives and knowledges. To overcome this dichotomy, we have allowed provision in yarning discussion groups for 'telling space', a culturally appropriate form of self-identification reflecting Indigenous cultural practices that assist in building the researcher's credibility in the yarns (Williams 2007). At the beginning of each yarn, the researcher will tell space by introducing themselves and explaining their motivation for conducting the research, to build rapport with attendees.

Overall, five yarning discussions will be held in various locations across NSW. The sample size of each yarning group will be five to fifteen participant stakeholders. Smaller groups for yarning discussions are a more practical approach to setting up and managing a group that presents greater opportunity for people to talk, allowing deeper discussion of the complex subject of Indigenous social value (Krueger 1994). In total, the sample size will involve between 25-75 participant stakeholders. A smaller sample size (e.g. c. 25) means a study can achieve more depth and significance while a larger sample size (c. 75) can maximise the importance of the project (Charmaz 2012). Yarning discussions will be semi-structured in a way that allows researcher

and participant stakeholders to converse together in a relaxed manner and explore topics of interest relevant to the study of Indigenous social value (Bessarab and Ng'andu 2010). We draw on recent research on 'cultural counterfactuals', and their influence on Indigenous social value creation (Denny-Smith and Loosemore 2018), for the semi-structured framework of yarning discussion groups.

The research team will use an electronic audio recording device to record the discussions and physical notes will be taken on butcher's paper in view of all attendees, to promote transparency of recorded information. Electronic recordings will be transcribed and de-identified to prevent stakeholders from being identified, unless they indicate specifically it is ok to retain their personal information, as a way of promoting Indigenous ownership of research outcomes (Drawson *et al.,* 2017). The purpose of visible notes is twofold. First, it promotes transparency in data collection, as attendees will witness notes being taken down. Second, it allows co-analysis of the initial data, where the research team can ask summary questions of participant stakeholders to confirm the knowledge that has been shared (ibid.). This will ensure the research team gathers relevant data, improving the accuracy and reliability of the gathered data. Thus, the data will be initially thematically analysed based on emergent themes in the handwritten notes. Emergent themes will be summarised and confirmed with participant stakeholders, supporting a constructionist paradigm and providing a rich and detailed account of data (Braun and Clarke 2006).

Inductive thematic data analysis will be conducted in three stages. First, concept maps (Wheeldon and Faubert 2009) developed during yarning groups will highlight key concepts and themes that arise from the yarns and allow participant stakeholders to better frame their perspectives of what should be included in Indigenous social impact research. Concept maps are suited to Indigenous social impact research because they can inform narratives about aspects of Indigenous social procurement and the impact it has on people's lives and communities (Chilisa 2012). At the conclusion of the yarns, the researcher will summarise concept maps with all participant stakeholders in attendance. This co-analysis ensures the data represents the contributions of stakeholders and that no data had been forgotten. Second, electronic transcripts will be analysed using Flick's (2006) coding strategy to inductively identify emergent themes and relationships that illustrate how Indigenous people perceive and make sense of social value. Third, in keeping with the principles of community-based and decolonised research, analysed transcripts will also be distributed to stakeholders for their assistance in ensuring the analysis represents their contributions and remains relevant to topics important to them.

CONCLUSION

This paper proposed a decolonised approach to evaluating the social impact of Indigenous procurement policies in Australia. Guided by principles of community-based participatory research, we have engaged in a decolonising process with NSWICC to co-design a new approach to Indigenous social impact measurement in Australia. Our yarning discussion group method embeds Indigenous cultural practices and forms of knowledge transmission to effectively understand the nature of Indigenous social value. This new contribution to social impact research recognises the importance of Indigenous perspectives in evaluating Indigenous procurement policies and demonstrates how academia can effectively engage with the people and community's Indigenous procurement policies impact. Moreover, it demonstrates that, to evaluate whether social procurement has its intended effects on disadvantaged

groups, beneficiaries must be involved in evaluation design, operation and reporting. We are currently finalising dates for holding yarning discussion groups and recognise that empirical validation will substantially improve the validity of this method. This research benefits social impact researchers and policy evaluators, who can operationalise our method and conduct Indigenous social impact research. The philosophy behind our method, that embedding cultural practices into social impact research is a valid way of evaluating social procurement initiatives, could be applied to other disadvantaged populations globally to produce research outcomes that accurately reflect how they are impacted by social procurement initiatives.

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