

# Insiders, Outsiders, Side-by-Siders:

Adopting a normative and collaborative approach to the role of  
Aboriginal public servants in Indigenous community participatory  
evaluation

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### About the author



Tony Dreise (pronounced 'drice') is a proud descendant of the *Guumilaroi* and *Euahlayi* peoples of north-west New South Wales and south-west Queensland.

Tony is an independent researcher and policy analyst. He has been involved, at senior and executive levels, in Indigenous public policy, community development, research and education for over 20 years in a variety of regional, state and national settings.

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## Abstract

*Evaluation of Aboriginal<sup>1</sup> programs evokes a myriad of questions, such as the role of ‘outsiders’ versus ‘insiders’ and independent versus participatory research and evaluation methods, including the potential role of Aboriginal public servants to work side-by-side with public sector, academic and Aboriginal communities to help ascertain and consolidate ‘what works’. This paper explores these and related themes by seeking to examine the theoretical space between the role of Aboriginal public servants, the need for greater evaluation of Aboriginal-related public policies and programs, and an emergence of Indigenous community-led participatory research methodologies.*

*This paper grew out of a conversation that the author had with Aboriginal public servants to explore the challenges arising for them in supporting an independent evaluation of programs while being a member of the Aboriginal community where the program was operating. The issues arising from the conversation are significant and gave rise to further academic exploration. The paper has been developed in the context of a number of ‘forces for change’ in the evaluation of Aboriginal public policy and programs. Generally speaking and in summary, Aboriginal people continue to lament a lack of social justice in their communities (Huggins, 2016); public sector and research organisations are concerned with a lack of rigorous evidence about ‘what works’ in Indigenous contexts (Productivity Commission, 2012); and researchers are frustrated by unrealistic timeframes and expectations within the evaluation space (Scougall, 2006).*

*The paper investigates whether sufficient attention is currently being given to the role that Aboriginal public servants could potentially play in public policy evaluation and research and the benefits for Aboriginal communities that might accrue from it. To this end, the paper adopts a normative approach by considering the forms (both conceptual and practical) in which Aboriginal public servants could appropriately play, without compromising the cornerstone principles of evaluation including objectivity, impartiality, ethics, and independence. By adopting a normative approach (that is, what ought to be as opposed to what is), this paper examines the context, opportunities and challenges in situating Aboriginal public servants closer to more effective monitoring and evaluation of public sector programs in Aboriginal communities.*

*A further key consideration for the paper is the question of ‘how can evaluations of public programs become more empowering and meaningful for Aboriginal public servants working day-to-day with Aboriginal communities?’ The article considers these and related questions through a synthesis of diverse but possibly connected literature from the fields of Indigenous research methodology, public administration<sup>2</sup>, and evaluation and an analysis of a conversation with the Aboriginal public servants. It synthesises a number of design principles from both Indigenous-specific scholarly work, as well as broader research in public administration and evaluation including calls for stronger evidence-based policy, and resultant research and evaluation capabilities among public sector employees in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.*

*The paper concludes that there is significant potential in leveraging a pool of Aboriginal talent in the public sector in New South Wales and more generally, to play a heightened role in evaluations within public service administration. Achieving this will require attention to the tensions experienced by them in operating at the coalface of government-community relations. Data from the 2011 National Census shows that almost 20,000 Indigenous people are employed in the public sector. Along with health, education, and community services, public administration represents the largest employer by industry type of Indigenous Australians.<sup>3</sup> While this does not automatically mean that all 20,000 are employed in the portfolio of Indigenous affairs, it can reasonably be deduced that a sizeable number of Indigenous people are working in programs aimed at improving outcomes for Indigenous peoples and communities at local, state, and national levels.*

<sup>1</sup> The term ‘Aboriginal’ is principally used throughout this document in reference to the Aboriginal peoples of Australia. Where and as appropriate, the terms ‘Indigenous’ and ‘First Nations’ are used to refer to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia and First Nations peoples in other parts of the world respectively.

<sup>2</sup> Public administration encapsulates public policy development, service delivery, and evaluation

<sup>3</sup> Retrieved from <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4102.0Main+Features20Nov+2013>

## Introduction

The seemingly intractable socio-economic disadvantage that many Aboriginal communities encounter highlights the importance of ongoing research, rigorous monitoring, and robust evaluation. Not only do systems need to work out ‘what works’ but also ‘what’s worth trying’<sup>4</sup>, as well as conceding that what works in one place, may not work in another, along with the reasons why. A general lack of quality data, evaluation and monitoring is arguably an impediment to evidence-based policy making and service delivery in Indigenous affairs. Participants involved in the *Better Indigenous Policies: The Role of Evaluation Roundtable* convened by the Productivity Commission in 2012, agreed that:

*...as in social policy more generally, there is a lack of rigorous impact evaluation of Australian Indigenous policies and programs. Significant gaps exist in the Australian evidence base, due to lack of mandated evaluations. (p.6)*

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants working in Indigenous affairs hold a unique place in public sector administration and advocacy in Australia. They belong to a pool of approximately 20,000 Indigenous public sector employees, who not only seek to serve the wider Australian public via their support and advice to the government of the day, but are often highly motivated by an innate sense of service, obligation and duty to improve social, economic, environmental and cultural outcomes for Indigenous peoples. Their work, more often than not, is difficult. Indigenous affairs policy tends to be politically vexed, intellectually complex, emotionally and personally taxing for those working in it, and is therefore often referred to as a so-called ‘wicked’ public policy issue. Its inherent complexity (or so-called ‘wickedness’) is due to a myriad of complicating dimensions and interdependencies such as historical, cultural, geographical, demographical, and political factors. This complex work can take both time and energy and often requires Aboriginal public servants to negotiate between their public servant and community allegiances. Furthermore, Indigenous public sector employees are sometimes questioned as to whether their Indigeneity is an impediment to professional and evidence-based advice.

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Over the past several decades, governments throughout the world have looked to assign a greater premium on evidence-based over ideology-based public policy making. Put simply, governments are keen to gain a firmer handle on ‘what works’. At the same time, proponents of emergence and complexity theories rightly point out that ‘what works’ in one place and one context, may not automatically be transferable to another. Whether it is a goal of consolidating ‘work works’ (evidence) or advancing ‘what’s worth trying’ (experimentation), Indigenous affairs policy is a policy area that requires a robust evidence base, meaning that robust research and evaluation will need to be a stronger feature on the Indigenous policy landscape for the foreseeable future and beyond.

On the face of it, evaluation of Aboriginal policy and service delivery might automatically preclude Aboriginal public servants given both their direct and/or in-direct roles in developing policy or delivering services with Aboriginal communities or advocating for Aboriginal communities. That is, one might reasonably argue that it could be a ‘conflict of interest’ for them to be ‘insiders’ in evaluation, given that Aboriginal public servants should not theoretically be in a position of self-assessing the very initiatives that are operating in their community or that they are involved in delivering. The literature in evaluation and interviews with Aboriginal public servants, however, suggests a re-think of such cut-and-dry conclusions. Numerous audits, studies and evaluations have found that a lack of an evaluation culture and practice in public sector settings too often impedes effective policy design, implementation and desired policy outcomes. And yet, the word ‘evaluation’ can be a ‘dirty word’ in Aboriginal communities. As with the word ‘research’, Aboriginal communities often baulk at evaluations given that they are often seen as things that are ‘done to’ or ‘on’ communities, as opposed to a more ideal situation of evaluation being done **with** or **by** Aboriginal people and communities.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, the ‘Cynefin’ framework which examines complexity concepts in more detail. Go to [www.cognitive-edge.com](http://www.cognitive-edge.com)

## Method

The method that underpins the development of this paper is recursive in nature. Heath and Street (2008) suggest that quality ethnography (or socio-cultural research) integrates observational data, intuition, theory and concepts drawn from literature. By adopting Heath and Street's recursive approach to methodology, the paper draws upon literature, field work, and the past experiences and intuition of the author. Having spent almost twenty years in Indigenous affairs policy and education, the author has a first-hand understanding and appreciation of the complexity and challenges faced by an Aboriginal person in the public sector.

Three principal methods have underpinned the development of this paper:

- i. A conversation with Aboriginal public servants working in community development;
- ii. A literature review traversing Indigenous affairs policy, public policy evaluation, and Indigenous research methodologies; and
- iii. A conceptual framework which seeks to synthesise the literature, conversations with Aboriginal people working in the field, and the professional and cultural experiences (and intuitions) of the author.

### *Conversation with Aboriginal public servants*

The development of this paper has stemmed from a conversation facilitated by the author involving 12 Aboriginal public sector employees working directly with Aboriginal communities across a large geographical footprint of urban, regional and remote New South Wales. The participants occupy mid-level management positions with responsibility for working at local and regional levels with Aboriginal communities to promote social, economic and cultural wellbeing through 'opportunity, choice, healing, responsibility and empowerment.'<sup>6</sup>

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The purpose of the workshop was to explore strategies to successfully navigate and balance the dual demands of being both a public servant and a member of the Aboriginal community, including with regard to evaluation. A focus group and narrative-based format was adopted which involved the following semi-structured questions:

*What does it mean to be an Aboriginal person in the public sector?*  
*How is Aboriginal affairs policy faring?*  
*How are you currently engaged in evaluation and monitoring programs?*  
*Is there potentially a greater role for Aboriginal public servants in evaluating and monitoring Aboriginal programs?*

In addition, the author facilitated a reflective exercise whereby participants were invited to share personal narratives about their job and the challenges, aspirations, and motivations that come with it, including in monitoring and evaluation spaces. Motivation (or 'mission valance' as it is referred to in public sector circles) among Aboriginal public sector workers and managers was also a point of discussion. This author's background (both cultural and professional) was shared with the participants at the outset of the conversation so as to engender an environment of cultural safety.

The issues stemming from the conversation are significant and gave rise to further academic exploration. An analysis of the findings of the conversation are embedded within this paper.

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<sup>6</sup> Refer to the Aboriginal Affairs, Department of Education Strategic Plan 2016-2019



## Literature Review

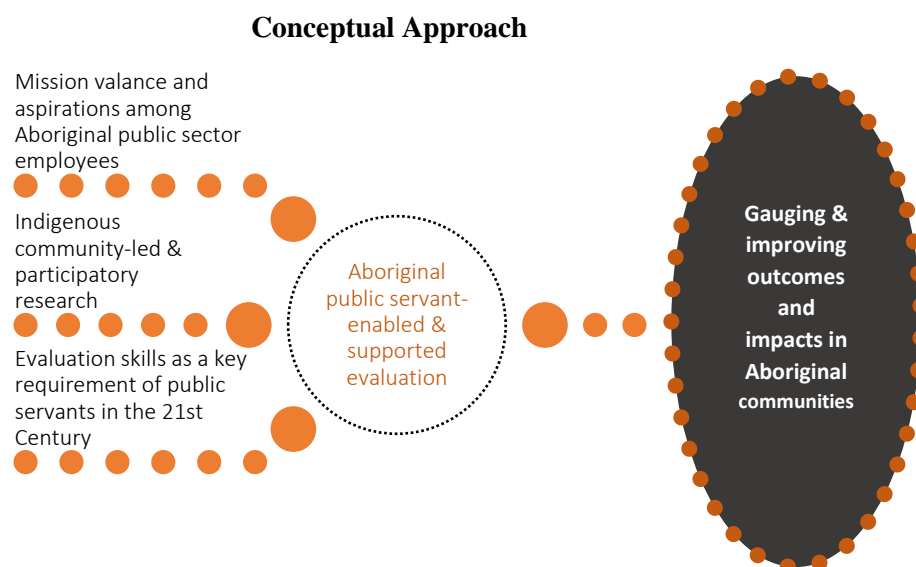
A desktop review of literature was undertaken which sought to appraise the evidence and theories across three diverse fields of prior research and inquiry, namely Indigenous affairs policy, public policy evaluation, and Indigenous research methodologies. Sub-themes such as participatory research, Indigenous research agendas, qualitative and quantitative methods, summative and formative assessment, and Indigenous employment in the public service were also explored. More significantly, the topic of ‘inside’ versus ‘outside’ evaluation was examined given the paper’s interest in the potential role of Aboriginal public servants in public policy and service delivery evaluation and monitoring.

The literature review drew upon published academic literature in evaluation and public administration journals; as well as the ‘grey’ literature from various government and non-government reports, monographs, opinion pieces and media articles on Indigenous affairs. The review involved analysis and interpretation of research from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars. This approach was necessary given the paucity of academic literature on the specific topic of Indigenous public servants and their role in evaluation.

## Conceptual framework

Working from the literature review and conversation with Aboriginal public servants, the following conceptual framework (*Figure 1*) was developed to organise the research findings and associated concepts:

*Figure 1*



These themes emerged as a reflection of a myriad of challenges inherent in Aboriginal public sector program evaluation across Australia and the potential for Aboriginal public servant-enabled and supported evaluation to help plug evidence gaps in Aboriginal affairs into the future.

## Capturing forces for change

A number of historical, cross-cultural, political, and structural factors make the task of positive change in Aboriginal affairs difficult. As seasoned evaluators working in Indigenous spaces have argued, satisfying expectations from a multitude of (government, community, and academic) stakeholders in Indigenous evaluation is a challenge. Scougall (2006), for example neatly captures the dimensions of the task:

*The expectations placed on an evaluator working in an Indigenous context are often great. The ideal is someone in close relationship with the community, employing culturally sensitive methods, fostering broad community involvement, transferring evaluation skills and contributing to a process of empowerment and positive and social change. (p. 49)*

Aboriginal public servants may not be in a position to entirely meet and fulfil these challenges; indeed, it may well be inappropriate for Aboriginal employees to assume a *driver's seat* role when external and independent evaluation is clearly warranted. However, that should not automatically cancel-out consideration of legitimate functions, carried out by Aboriginal employees, in facilitating, enabling and brokering evaluation that satisfies both ethical criteria in a public administration and academic sense, and cultural criteria in an Aboriginal sense. Therefore, envisaging appropriate roles in research and evaluation among Indigenous public sector employees is worthy of fuller and deeper consideration, especially when one considers the following 'forces for change'.

### *Force for Change #1: Turning the historical tide of mistrust of research around*

While evaluation and research are sorely needed in the Indigenous program space (as earlier noted), paradoxically 'research' can be a 'dirty' word in Indigenous communities, due primarily to an unfortunate history of it being 'done to' and without benefit to Indigenous communities (Taylor, 2003; Scougall, 2006). These concerns about research (and evaluation) extend to other First Nations peoples throughout the world who advocate for a 'decolonisation' of research, including in the United States (Cochran *et al.*, 2008), Canada (Kovach, 2010), and New Zealand (Smith, 1999). In Alaska, Cochran *et al.* (2008) cite the following First Nations' saying which graphically illustrates the extent of mistrust and scepticism:

*Researchers are like mosquitoes; they suck your blood and leave. (p.22)*

It is fair to say, however, that progress has been made over recent times in some First Nation contexts, such as in Australia, to overcome such deep suspicion, fuelled by a growth of Indigenous qualified researchers and culturally-competent non-Indigenous academics and evaluators. That said, it remains the case that against historical backdrops - both abroad and in Australia - researchers in general have much work to do in garnering trust from Indigenous communities. The idea of 'good faith' and trusted brokers to facilitate renewed relationships between public policy and program managers, Indigenous communities, and research and evaluation specialists warrants stronger consideration. This is particularly so when the responsibility for changing the relationship falls to Aboriginal public servants who themselves are members of the Aboriginal community and subject to considerable reputational risk should researchers or evaluators operate outside what would be expected of ethical practice.

## *Force for Change # 2: Building evaluation culture and practice in Indigenous affairs programs*

The *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage (OID) 2016 Report*<sup>7</sup> by the Productivity Commission is one of the latest reports in Indigenous affairs lamenting a lack of rigorously evaluated programs in the Indigenous policy area. The OID Report draws similar conclusions to a 'Strategic Review of Indigenous Expenditure' six years earlier undertaken by the Department of Finance (2010) for the Australian Government, which observed that:

*Robust evidence is lacking on the performance and effectiveness of many Indigenous programs. Program evaluation activity in this area has been patchy at best, and many of the evaluations which have been conducted have lacked a suitable measure of rigour and independence. More robust evaluation arrangements are needed for the future...Data improvements are also needed, both for evaluation and reporting purposes: the lack of robust baseline data, for example, has been a key weakness in many evaluation studies. (p.12)*

Similarly, in New South Wales, a performance audit of the former *Two Ways Together: NSW Aboriginal Affairs Plan* found that of a review of Aboriginal specific program evaluations in 2008, the majority of program evaluations showed little to no evidence of value for money. The NSW Auditor-General (2011), who undertook the audit, further noted that:

*If more rigorous evaluations were undertaken there would be a better evidence base of what contributes to program success. Without that it is difficult to say whether:*

- *funding is going where it can be most effective*
- *funding is properly allocated*
- *funding is spent on the programs it is allocated to, and*
- *government services are being used. (p. 18)*

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These observations are broadly consistent with the views of participants at the Productivity Commission's Roundtable (2012) on *Better Indigenous Policies: The Role of Evaluation*. Further, in the Indigenous education, as a more specific example, Purdie and Buckley (2010) express concern about the lack of Indigenous education programs that are subjected to independent evaluation and scrutiny given that millions of dollars have been allocated to them.

Stewart and Jarvie (2015) identify a number of impediments and corresponding enhancements to Indigenous policy evaluation. The authors identify four impediments:

- i. highly politicised and contested policy environments;
- ii. entrenched ways of working;
- iii. lack of systematic processes for policy learning; and
- iv. inter-agency competition.

To overcome these obstacles, Stewart and Jarvie (2015) recommend that bureaucracies invest more in systematic processes for evaluation findings, by elaborating on 'what works', and moving into a consensual approach to change.

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.pc.gov.au/research/ongoing/overcoming-indigenous-disadvantage/2016>



### *Force for Change #3: Coupling cultural regard with professional regard*

Aboriginal public sector workers who participated in the conversation spoke at length about the importance of being held in high 'cultural regard' when working with Aboriginal communities, especially for those who are working 'on Country'.<sup>8</sup> The participants spoke of the challenges in being an Aboriginal person in the public service who are simultaneously striving for high professional regard, cultural respect, and community trust. With respect to 'professional regard', some of the participants felt it was difficult to prosecute and advance their work when colleagues from other government departments were either unwilling to listen or unable to understand the Aboriginal affairs agenda. One possible explanation for this resistance or ignorance, as identified by the literature, is the issue of 'client capture'.

'Client capture' is a term used in the public service to describe public servants who may become too attached and sympathetic to the clients that they are working with. It is a phenomenon that senior public servants can frown upon, and sometimes serves as a trigger to rotate public servants regularly in order to overcome it. As Larkin (2013) observes, Indigenous public servants' impartiality and probity can be drawn into question by non-Indigenous managers. Larkin describes the 'dual accountability' that Indigenous public servants often encounter, that is a duty to both the public service and the Indigenous community. Larkin also explains the issue of 'capture' in Indigenous public sector contexts:

*At one level, there was a view that Indigenous staff possessed the cultural repertoire of knowledge, skills and experience to effectively communicate with 'their own people'. This was regarded as a valuable asset for the APS (Australian Public Service) in effectively implementing a range of Indigenous-specific programs. At another level, however, the risk of 'capture' of Indigenous staff sympathies by interests within the community led a number of white executives to consider alternative liaison approaches. (p.276)*

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Larkin challenges the notion that Indigenous public servants are incapable of 'transcending Indigeneity' so as to meet 'white professional attributes' of probity, detachment and objectivity (pp.12-13), and offers the following conclusion:

*As was demonstrated in this study, white senior executives displayed bureaucratic detachment and objectivity when attending to Indigenous issues by embodying of the 'race neutral' and 'colour-blind' attributes of the consummate civil servant. This enabled them to occupy the high moral ground, by assuming that this embodiment insulated them from situations where they were expressing a subjective view. For example, they deployed passivity in their responses to the issue of dismantling ATSIC by offering a qualified, but detached, sympathy for affected Indigenous employees. (p.272)*

Biddle and Lahn (2016) also highlight some of the particular challenges for Indigenous public sector employees in fulfilling and sustaining their goals to support community:

*The literature about Indigenous people and work consistently emphasised the significance of cultural obligations to family and community...These obligations also emerged as relevant to understanding Indigenous experiences of employment in the public service. The Australian Public Service Commission's (APSC's) Indigenous Census for 2012 found that contributing to the community was more important to Indigenous than to non-Indigenous employees. (p.2)*

<sup>8</sup> The term 'on Country' refers to Aboriginal people living and/or working in the Aboriginal nation from which they descend and have kinship connection.

In addition to various academic studies, recent media reporting also captures some of the frustrations that Indigenous people working in the public sector are forced to endure. For instance, *NITV News* aired a story in April 2016, about alleged bullying in the public service in Western Australia. One Indigenous public sector employee, interviewed by the program, observed that:

*... one of the most bizarre concepts to me was being told that my Aboriginality didn't matter, I was a public servant and that Aboriginality needed to be left at the door when I came to work.*<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, in another media piece, Donaldson (2016) quotes an Indigenous public servant who made the following stinging observation:

*It's like you're a servant of a lesser public.*<sup>10</sup>

Donaldson's article reported that Indigenous public servants felt that non-Indigenous public servants saw their Aboriginal colleagues as lower in the public service hierarchy. In the Northern Territory, Ganter (2016) explores in depth the inherent pressures that Aboriginal bureaucrats face in serving Aboriginal communities and the government of the day. Ganter (2016) identifies a number of challenges for Aboriginal public servants including being pigeon-holed into certain kinds of roles and being overlooked for promotion.

Many of the sentiments expressed through the research of Larkin (2013), Ganter (2010 & 2016), Biddle and Lahn (2016) as well as the media reporting above, were reflected in this author's conversation with Aboriginal public sector employees in NSW. The participants offered insights into the mindsets of Aboriginal public servants, including the difficulty in wearing 'two hats' (community member and public servant). Nonetheless, participants spoke proudly of their work with community and their high levels of motivation in helping bring positive change. They identified several times their deep sense of duty to community. Here are some of the comments participants made:

*This (my work) is 24-7.*

*I'm not a 9 to 5 black.*

*It's a passion not a pay cheque.*

*It's beyond a job and never a chore.*

Participants felt that working in Aboriginal affairs came with 'heavy responsibility' to community and family, along with a deep-seated obligation to protect and honour the legacy and hard-fought gains of 'old people' (ancestors and Elders), including those who 'fought for us before we came along'. 'Passion and pride' was a term that one participant used to capture the nature of their work. Participants also felt that they were responsible for providing 'cultural care', that is, helping preserve Aboriginal cultures of Australia, as the oldest continuing cultures on Earth.

The participants also felt that being an Aboriginal public servant required a constant 'balancing act' between community and government drivers. The group expressed frustrations including the fear of being the 'token blackfella'. Some felt that their professional and cultural skills and experiences were inferior to their non-Indigenous peers from other departments; therefore, making it difficult for them

<sup>9</sup> WA Whistleblower 1: Allegations of Bullying, Intimidation in WA Dept of Aboriginal Affairs retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S7n-4eg1ysy>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.themandarin.com.au/60536-indigenous-recruitment-bums-seats-mentality-decried/>

to gain attention and ‘holding their own’ in forums. They felt it was extremely difficult to ‘break through’ with their messages or their points of view. ‘Always a battle’, one noted. Another expressed disappointment that others (meaning from other agencies) were not listening and that there was a lack of reciprocity in professional relationships.

On the community side of their work, participants expressed frustration with community ‘push-back’ or ‘lack of community buy-in’ in pursuing positive change together. They noted that ‘community politics’ (including those driven by ‘lateral violence’) made progress difficult. While recognising that their work is politically complex and personally taxing, the participants overwhelmingly felt that positive change could only come from the ‘bottom up’, by community being listened to and government responses being both timely and to scale. The participants were firmly of a view that ‘community empowerment’ is the way forward in Aboriginal affairs, including a devolution of responsibility in monitoring and tracking progress on the ground. They argued that this will take time and that all government departments need to be held to account.

#### *Force for Change #4: Customer focus as a key tenet of public service in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

It is difficult to measure the degree to which negative attitudes among public sector managers toward Aboriginal public servants (as earlier discussed) are common or not. What is clearer is that the sentiments about ‘client capture’ above do not reflect the general emphasis that governments - both in Australia and internationally - are attaching to public service work, especially given mounting community mistrust in institutions. For instance, as with other public sector employees in New South Wales, Aboriginal employees are expected to deliver on the *NSW Public Sector Capability Framework*. The Framework codifies a number of attributes and skills that public servants will ideally demonstrate in their work. For example, in the area of ‘relationships’, employees working at a level of *adeptness* will:

- *Connect and collaborate with relevant stakeholders within the community;*
- *Understand customer perspectives and ensure responsiveness to their needs;*
- *Identify customer service needs and implement solutions;*
- *Find opportunities to co-operate with internal and external parties to improve outcomes for customers; and*
- *Maintain relationships with key customers in area of expertise.*<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, for senior managers and executives operating at a ‘highly advanced’ stage, the expectation is that they will:

*Ensure that responsiveness to customer needs is central to the organisation’s strategic planning processes.*<sup>12</sup>

A heightened and renewed focus on the needs of clients, customers, citizens, and indeed people in general is likely to remain – if not, grow in importance – as a key tenet and aspiration of public service thinking and delivery across the world in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (Needham & Mangan 2014; Dickinson & Sullivan, 2014). As with other public sector employees, Aboriginal public servants will need to be equipped to meet growing expectations among the public in terms of their ability to help satisfy community needs; notwithstanding cautionary notes that all people’s expectations of government in Australia are likely be too high and unlikely to be entirely fulfilled (Tingle, 2012). The findings from the conversation with Aboriginal public servants suggest that achieving this is a balancing action that requires considerable knowledge and skill.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.psc.nsw.gov.au/workforce-management/capability-framework/nsw-public-sector-capability-framework>

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*

Thought leaders in public administration are forecasting what attributes and skills-sets will be required among public servants in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century; not just in Australia, but internationally. A number of these forecasts align well with cultural values and professional preferences among Aboriginal people working in public sectors. For starters, Needham and Mangan (2014) recognise the importance of working co-productively, or in partnership with citizens. In their paper they note:

*Valued outcomes in public services are not things that can be delivered, they are always co-produced (p.6).*

Needham *et al.* appear to challenge the idea that people should be labelled as ‘clients’ or ‘customers’ as this may dehumanise the ‘shared humanity’ and ‘pool expertise’ among communities (p.6). The authors further argue that public services need to recognise the role of ‘place’. Services, therefore, may need to be ‘rooted in a locality which frames a sense of loyalty and identity’ (p.7). Moreover, they make the following observation:

*Public service workers often have a strong loyalty to the neighbourhoods and town/cities in which they work as well as an organisational loyalty (p.7).*

These observations are strikingly at odds with the types of attitudes that Indigenous public servants encounter in the aforementioned research and media reports from Australia.

As with Needham and Mangan’s work in the United Kingdom, Dickinson and Sullivan (2014) in Australia have also embarked upon work which forecasts future demands in public service work in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Dickinson *et al.* note:

*Evidence from both academic and ‘grey literature’ literature suggests there will be significant changes in what public services do in the future as demographics shift, new technologies emerge and citizen expectations change. Questions of ethics, emotional labour and relational exchanges between public servants and citizens will inform the desired attributes of the public service workforce. (p.3)*

Dickinson *et al.* go on to describe existing roles (such as *expert, regulator, engager, reticulist*) that will remain important in the public service, as well as describe emergent roles that will be increasingly important in the future (such as *curator, foresighter, storyteller*) (p.4). The authors further note that the role of public service sits ‘somewhere between the political executive on the one hand and the community on the other and working to represent the interests of both in terms of the resultant activities of the government’ (p.14). Dickinson *et al.* cite the following quote from a participant in their research which neatly sums up the challenges facing many public servants:

*...the public service is ... a custodian of the public good. It’s partly about the long term view. Not making short term trade-offs today to political expediency...I’m talking about doing that not from a normative understanding about the public good... it goes back to the evidence-based public good, if that makes sense, as opposed to a conception of the public good, from a set of value propositions. (p.15)*

Dickinson *et al.* considered that this quote neatly aligned to their idea of public servants as curators of public good, by working from evidence over ideology. They added that qualities such as ‘accuracy, ethical behaviour, personal responsibility, accountability and impartiality’ are important in fulfilling a curatorial role (p.15). Moreover, the authors contend that in order to meet complex challenges (such as Indigenous disadvantage), then the public service will need to look at issues in a ‘kind of fresh, creative, multidisciplinary way’ (p.17).

A number of roles that Dickinson *et al.* envisage among future public sector employees, fit neatly with the kinds of motivations and mission valance among Indigenous public sector workers. For

instance, the ‘engager’ role requires collaboration and working across boundaries and working with communities to confront challenges that they meet. (p.26) While the ‘reticulist’, they suggest, focuses on:

*... the development and use of networking skills to identify new sources of expertise and support and/or to bring together agents who together can achieve desired outcomes. This role has become increasingly important in recent years given the gradual disaggregation of public services and the rise of wicked and complex policy issues. The industrial models of public services of the past will no longer satisfy the aims of the 21<sup>st</sup> century public service.* (p.27)

Dickinson et al. describe the ‘curator’ as responsible for ‘cultural heritage’<sup>13</sup> by keeping and interpreting heritage for a broader audience and supporting the stewardship of the system. (p.29) The ‘foresighter’ role is explained as someone who applies ‘vision and imagination to strategic thinking and anticipating future shifts in the operating environment’ (p.30). The ‘storyteller’ role, meanwhile, has responsibility for authoring stories of ‘how new worlds of public services might be envisioned, but also goes beyond this to communicating these to a variety of different audiences’ (p.31).

While each of these roles envisaged by Dickinson and Sullivan are highly creative in their branding, there are people currently operating in the public sector that already undertake such roles. Nevertheless, the creative descriptions and visionary forecasts offered by Dickinson *et al.* are timely in an Aboriginal context given the earlier discussion in this article about how Aboriginal public servants are not being valued to the extent that they arguably deserve.

## A potential way forward: Strategically positioning Aboriginal public servants in evaluation and research

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As with other public sector employees, Aboriginal public servants are invariably contributing to policy advice to governments through briefing papers and verbal briefings to Ministers, local Members of Parliaments, and senior managers on a regular basis. Moreover, they can also be involved in the delivery of public programs and services, ranging from health and education to infrastructure and economic development, and supporting community led governance, economic development and cultural expression. This means that Indigenous public sector employees will ideally be monitoring the performance of programs as an ‘inbuilt’ feature of their work, as opposed to it being ‘bolted on’. That is, they will be constantly considering the effectiveness and outcomes of the services and programs and in which they are involved. These activities might be referred to as ‘insider’ evaluation; in that, they represent an ongoing *process* rather than a semi-detached, isolated, or one-off *event*. On the other hand, external, specialist, independent and discrete bodies of evaluation and research are also required in public administration, especially in areas of complexity and contestability. ‘Outsider’ evaluations can help ensure impartiality, objectivity, and holding agencies and governments to account.

Conley-Tyler (2005) provides an excellent conceptual framework to consider the respective merits of insider (internal) and outsider (external) evaluation. She draws upon two streams of literature which indicate that internal evaluation features heavily in ‘management literature (aimed at business and organisational audiences) and evaluation literature (aimed at professional evaluators)’ (p.3). Conley-Tyler notes on one hand that middle managers in organisations are regularly involved in evaluating internal performance, through the use of performance criteria, measuring results, and comparing

<sup>13</sup> Meaning wider cultural heritage not only Indigenous cultural heritage



results with expectations. On the other hand, Conley-Tyler notes that ‘evaluation literature’ points heavily to a preference for external evaluators.

The framing of external *versus* internal evaluation is perhaps too binary in its nature. As with many decisions, ultimately it be determined in large part by ‘context’. This means that evaluation decisions may not be a case of ‘either-or’. Conley-Tyler offers a number of factors that might influence the choice between (or a hybrid of) the models, including:

- Cost
- Knowledge of context, programs and operations
- Ability to collect information
- Specialist skills and expertise
- Objectivity and perceived objectivity
- Accountability for use of government funds
- Willingness to criticise, and
- Ethical issues. (p.5)

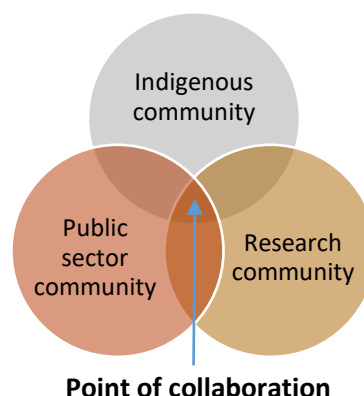
Conley-Tyler’s weighs-up the merits of internal and external evaluation. She distinguishes, for example, the nuanced difference between ‘objectivity’ and ‘perceived objectivity’ (p.5). This difference is vitally important in contexts of high political sensitivity. Conley-Tyler also notes flawed assumptions where it comes to objectivity and impartiality. She writes:

*No matter how ‘neutral’ or ‘impartial’ an evaluator attempts to be, he or she will harbour implicit values – many of which are unconscious. (p.7)*

Conley-Tyler further notes that one of the strengths of external evaluation is that it can open organisations up to new and wider perspectives. External evaluators can also be more ‘forthright’ in their recommendations (p.8). Equally, her article cautions against ‘organisations only being impressed by the credentials of academic researchers, ignoring valuable internal expertise’ (p.7). It is from this final caution of overlooking valuable internal expertise that consideration is now given to the potential for a heightened role of Aboriginal public servants in evaluation. Beside their involvement in day-to-day monitoring of programs and associated data, there are a number of ways in which Aboriginal public sector employees might add more weight to public sector evaluation and research in the future. The first is through an enabling and brokering function. That is, by adopting a ‘side-by-side’ function (as illustrated in *Figure 2*), where the parties are forging stronger and collaborative relationships by negotiating and coordinating their evidence-gathering and pursuing research in a context-sensitive and culturally-appropriate fashion.

*Figure 2*

### Working Side-by-Side



In practical terms, the literature and the findings of the conversations with Aboriginal public servants that triggered this paper, this could mean that Aboriginal public sector employees are:

- Helping establish relationships on the ground with Aboriginal communities, by building understanding and trust;
- Enabling community capacity building and information exchange;
- Translating between Aboriginal and western ways of knowing and doing;
- Developing appropriate cross-cultural language and communication strategies;
- Legitimising the views of Aboriginal community in government agencies;
- Facilitating access to administrative data within government and non-government organisations;
- Providing background cultural, political and socio-economic context about communities under study; and
- Facilitating introductions and forums between respective parties.

Furthermore, consideration could be given to the role of Aboriginal public sector employees in working with Indigenous researchers and culturally-competent non-Indigenous evaluators in building capacity in community-led participatory research. Within this body of work, parties could collaboratively pursue an agenda of ‘triangulation’, meaning that they are jointly committed to gathering and understanding multiple and diverse data sources and collection techniques to advance a complex phenomenon or research question (Lennie, p.31).

In addition to these kinds of approaches aimed at building a constructive intersection between Aboriginal, public sector, and research/evaluation communities, consideration could also be given to an ‘Indigenisation’ of models aimed at bridging research-policy divides. For instance, Van der Arend and Bell (2013) from the University of Queensland have undertaken work aimed at stronger links between the work of social policy actors<sup>14</sup> and researchers. Van der Arend *et al.* promote a model of ‘knowledge brokering’ by drawing upon earlier work by Lomas (2007), suggesting that:

*...all activities that link decision makers with researchers, facilitating their interaction so they are able to better understand each other’s goals and professional cultures, influence each other’s work, forge new partnerships and promote the research based evidence in decision making (Lomas, p.131).*

Van Der Arend *et al.* (2013) advocate that ‘knowledge brokering domains’ can:

- Highlight particular research evidence amongst a vast backdrop of information ‘noise’;
- Help address questions of values and credibility;
- Support ‘learning’ by tailoring new knowledge to existing knowledge bases and perspectives on policy issues;
- Create links between academics and policy-makers so that a range of relationships can be formed and sustained over time; and
- Support the creation of common research priorities and perspectives – and a common language for communicating around these. (p.15)

In order for such domains to operate effectively in Aboriginal policy-research spaces, then they will need to extend beyond relationships between research and policy actors alone, to include Aboriginal community stakeholders. This can be done by adopting research approaches that are community-led, participatory in nature, and build research and evaluation cultures and practices along the way.

Cochran *et al.* (2008) describe participatory research as:

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<sup>14</sup> NB Not Indigenous specific but social policy actors more broadly

*Collective self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve...their own social practices. (p.22)*

In practical terms, Orr *et. al.* suggests that research in Indigenous contexts needs to connect...

*...in a variety of ways that (are) important for relationship building...A central objective [of the project that Orr and others studied] was for the research outcomes to belong to the people who participated in the research. Informal lunches and evening meals, visits to local services and discussions about the things that mattered to participants in their everyday lives were vital. Letting participants know that the research team are also parents and children and members of communities that face similar challenges was critical to being authentic. Here we draw on our training in community development, action research, social case-work and the importance of 'appropriate self-disclosure' in research and community work as well as our knowledge as Aboriginal people.*

Building capacity among Aboriginal public servants to work with experienced Indigenous researchers in Indigenous research methodologies presents one way in which to advance an Indigenous-customised knowledge brokering domain. Such work could focus on consolidating Indigenous methods from Australia and other First Nations settings, such as:

- *Yarnin Circles* (Bessarab *et al.*, 2010);
- *Dadirri* or deep listening (West *et al.*, 2012); and
- Narrative capture, storytelling, and conversational method (Kovach, 2010; Catellano, 2000).

Creating theoretical, policy and practical 'spaces' that allow Aboriginal public servants, Indigenous or non-Indigenous researchers, public sector managers, academics and community leaders to jointly co-design and co-produce research and evaluation methods that are fit-for-purpose clearly warrants greater consideration and stronger public investment. Whilst such work will take time, resources and capacity-building, rapid 'quick and dirty' external evaluations are unlikely to be productive in areas of high complexity. In achieving this, it would be a mistake to lose sight of potential impacts and challenges for Aboriginal public servants.

## Conclusion

This paper has sought to advance thinking to simultaneously and conceptually tackle a number of parallel frustrations; via a presentation of four 'forces for change'. That is, Aboriginal people are frustrated by a lack of social justice in their communities; public sector and research organisations are concerned with a lack of rigorous evidence in Indigenous policy and program contexts; and researchers are frustrated by unrealistic timeframes and expectations within research and evaluation spaces. Furthermore, future public services throughout Australia and internationally will inevitably be subjected to disruption (or upheaval) to business-as-usual models; driven by changes to technology, demographics, economic-restructuring, multiculturalism, environmental sustainability, and other global and political forces. Sitting on top of this for Aboriginal public servants is the requirement to successfully navigate government and Aboriginal community expectations.

The paper posits that within the understanding of the challenges inherent in dual roles of Aboriginal public servants, Aboriginal public servants across Australia could play a more constructive and enabling role in positive disruption – particularly through cross-cultural and cross-sectoral knowledge brokering. For this to occur, current biases about the perceived impartiality and professionalism of Aboriginal public servants need to be overcome. This could be achieved through a concession within public policy circles that 'Indigenous good' need not be incompatible with wider 'public good'.

Furthermore, public sector agency leaders are encouraged to support Aboriginal public servants, through professional recognition and development programs, which enables them to successfully balance the dual demands and expectations that are placed upon them by public sector agencies and Aboriginal communities. This could be achieved, as a starting point, by an initial public investment in professional development programs that empowers Aboriginal public sector employees by providing the fundamental skills and foundational understandings that couples ethical research with culturally-nuanced evaluation methods, without overlooking the realities of their dual role. Moreover, by actively creating and sustaining shared spaces and communities-of-practice for knowledge-exchange and skills-matching, government, Aboriginal communities and researchers are more likely to overcome shared frustrations about a lack of evidence and a lack of culturally-appropriate research practice in public sector settings. In practical terms, public sector agencies and research institutions could create opportunities for Aboriginal public servants and researchers to undertake knowledge-exchange placements within government agencies, as well as opportunities for Aboriginal public servants to serve in visiting fellow positions in Indigenous-related academic environments. In addition, planning and investing in community-led participatory research agendas in public administration environments is worth pursuing, but it will require both time and resources to build capacity where it is needed most – ‘on the ground’ and at the point of interface between Aboriginal community, research, and public administration stakeholders.

Finally, respective parties of any Aboriginal evaluation may need to collectively re-think old biases about ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’. Such binary approaches are unlikely to yield the shared pool of expertise so sorely needed in the Aboriginal public evaluation environment, especially over the longer term. Thinking and acting in a *side-by-side* manner is more likely to overcome historical and current frustrations faced by the respective parties, as well as meet the emerging challenges confronting all public services in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, including the unique challenges encountered by Aboriginal public sector employees. This paper suggests that rigorous, culturally appropriate, community empowering, and collaborative research and evaluation opportunities would represent an ideal restarting point.

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