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The Indigenous Experience of Work in a Health Research Organisation: Are There Wider Inferences?

Sharon K. Chirgwin
Menzies School of Health Research, sharon.chirgwin@menzies.edu.au

Adrienne Farago
Menzies School of Health Research

Heather d'Antione
Menzies School of Health Research

Trish Nagle
Menzies School of Health Research

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Abstract
The purpose of this study was to identify the factors that positively and negatively impacted on the employment experiences and trajectories of Indigenous Australians who are currently or were formerly employed by a research organisation in both remote and urban settings. The study design was an embedded mixed-methods approach. The first phase quantified staff uptake, continued employment, and attrition. Then interviews were conducted with 42 former and 51 current Indigenous staff members to obtain qualitative data. The results showed that the quality of supervision, the work flexibility to enable employees to respond to family and community priorities, and training and other forms of career support were all identified as important factors in the workplace. The most common reasons for leaving were that research projects ended, or to pursue a career change or further study. The authors use the findings to make recommendations pertinent to policy formation for both government and organisations seeking to attract and nurture Indigenous staff.

Keywords
Indigenous Australian, work satisfaction, culture of work, training and education

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The Indigenous Experience of Work in a Health Research Organisation: Are There Wider Inferences?

In colonised countries like Canada, New Zealand, and Australia, the employment rates for Indigenous citizens of working age are significantly lower than those of their non-Indigenous counterparts (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2014a; Employment and Social Development Canada, 2014; Ministry of Business, Innovation, and Employment, 2013). The national governments of all three countries, irrespective of their political ideologies, see this disparity along with differences in specific indicators of income, social welfare, education, and health as unacceptable "gaps" that not only perpetuate cycles of poverty and its attendant problems but also, in the case of employment, negatively impact on Gross Domestic Product (GDP), requiring greater government expenditure in areas such as social services and health and representing lost tax revenue (Calver, 2015; Deloitte Access Economics, 2014). In the 1990s, the New Zealand government introduced the term "closing the gaps" to refer to several programs that sought to address the identified disadvantages experienced by Māori and Pacific Islander groups. Though "statistical equality" in income, education, health, and quality of life (Collins et al., 2014) had previously been used to refer to the same issues (Altman, Biddle, & Hunter, 2008), the governments of Australia and Canada eventually adopted "closing the gaps." It is now commonly used in all three countries to describe both the intents of policies and strategies that seek to address the statistical differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous citizens with respect to various socio-economic indicators and the quantifiable targets that such policies and strategies seek to achieve within specific timeframes. However, none of the three countries have witnessed a narrowing of the employment gap, thus presenting an ongoing challenge to policy makers (Australian Government, 2016; Calver, 2015; Collins et al., 2014). For example, Calver (2015) has noted that the relative gap in employment in Canada was 17.5% in 2011, and the most recent report from Australia reveals that the employment rate for Indigenous Australians between 2014 and 2015 was 48.4% down from 53.8% in 2008 (Commonwealth of Australia, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2017).

In Australia, people who identify as Indigenous make up approximately 3% of the population (ABS, 2014b), but, like Indigenous Peoples in Canada, they are not a single, homogenous group. Instead, they live across a vast landmass, speak many different languages, and hold many different worldviews. Just like in Canada, many Indigenous Peoples now live in major cities or regional towns, while others prefer to live on their traditional territories, where there are variable and often limited opportunities for education and employment (Calver, 2015). In the more remote areas of Australia, 1 in 5 Indigenous adults of workforce age receive income support payments, which are generally accessed from a younger age and for a longer time than the non-Indigenous Australian population (Australian Government, 2016).

This heavy reliance on income support has created another gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous citizens similar to the one that exists in New Zealand (Collins et al., 2014). In Australia, some Indigenous leaders have identified that supported training can help those who can participate in the workforce so they no longer have to rely on these payments, which, in turn, is essential in order to address not only the economic and income gaps but also "the process of recovery and strengthening" within Indigenous communities (Collins et al., 2014, p. 133). Supported training has been considered a strategy to replace despair with hope, to remove fear of the unknown, and to build confidence, thereby helping people who have relied on income support for prolonged periods of time take their first, tentative steps up "the staircase of opportunity" (Pearson, 2008, p. 1). Although the need for both

education and training has been identified in employment policies of successive national governments since 1975 (Australian Government Commission of Inquiry into Poverty, 1975; Daly, 1993; Gray & Hunter, 2002; Hunter, 1977) and has been reinforced by some Indigenous leaders, the employment gap has neither narrowed nor closed. However, the most recent Australian Prime Minister's *Closing the Gap* report identified that for those Indigenous Australians with higher levels of education there is virtually no employment gap (Australian Government, 2016).

Over the last three decades, the complex issue of Indigenous employment in Australia has been quantitatively audited and analysed using census data (Biddle, 2010), statistical modelling (Biddle, Taylor, & Yap, 2009) and comprehensive reviews of all available evaluations and analyses (Gray, Hunter, & Lohoar, 2012). However, as Gray et al. (2012) have noted, the bulk of available research has merely identified and quantified the reasons for low employment rates, exposed what is not known, and exposed what needs to be known.

In terms of what is qualitatively known about Indigenous employment, researchers have collected opinions from non-Indigenous employers in business and mining (Business Council of Australia, 2012; Sammartino, O'Flynn, & Nicholas, 2003). In addition, there is limited research indicating how traditional Indigenous Australians in remote areas perceive the Western construct of work (McCrae-Williams & Gerritsen, 2010). Qualitative feedback has also been regularly obtained from Indigenous Australians employed in the public service sector (Australian Public Service Commission [APSC], 2010, 2013), but feedback from other sectors, in which there are smaller proportions of Indigenous employees, is much more limited. As such, this article provides context regarding the limited success of mainstream government policies that have sought to encourage Indigenous employment in Australia. Specifically, by providing the perspectives of a group of Indigenous Australians who have been employed at an organisation specialising in Indigenous health research, this article adds to the existing pool of qualitative data on this topic.

Australian Policy Frameworks: A Brief Literature Review

When the first European colonists arrived in Australia between 1788 and 1850, they interacted with only a small portion of the many different Indigenous language groups living across the land. While each group had well-organised social structures, knowledges, and responsibilities that enabled them to survive in their traditional lands, the European colonists' first assessment was that their own ways of life were far superior to those of Indigenous Peoples (Broome, 2011). But as the theory of social Darwinism permeated the colonies, it resulted in a more racist attitude: Indigenous Australians were generally perceived as inferior, primitive peoples who did not engage in anything that equated to the European concept of work. The theory also led to the common belief that Indigenous Australians were doomed to die out because of their "inability to evolve into civilised people" (Norris, 2010, p. 37). Importantly, the European concept of "work" was rather alien to the ways of life that had sustained Indigenous Peoples for thousands of years (Kocka, 2010).

The next policy era, which relied on the false "doomed race" theory as justification, was the Protection or Missionary era, which ran from the 1890s to the 1950s and overlapped with several other approaches to policy. During the early period of this era, laws were passed in the colonies to force Indigenous Australians onto reserves and missions for their own "protection" (Elston & Dade Smith, 2016). Even

though the missions and reserves were supposed to be refuges of "protection," the need for labour in the developing colonies led to the coercive persuasion of Indigenous Australians to work as shepherds, stockmen, boundary riders, and domestics—particularly in areas where European labour was not available (Foster, 2000; Grimshaw, 2008). While the developing colony of South Australia eventually provided training and monetary compensation to Indigenous Australians for their European-style work, Indigenous Australians who were itinerant workers were paid in food rations (Foster, 2000). The result of this was that the introduction to the European concept of work that many Indigenous Australians received was one that bore a conceptual similarity to slavery (Thorpe, 1992). Irrespective of colony, legislation controlled what work Indigenous Australians could do, the duration of their employment, and what portion of their wages they would receive. It also required employers to obtain permits in order to employ Indigenous Australians. Such controlling legislation reflected government opinion at the time—Indigenous Australians were seen as inferior and had limited ability to look after their own affairs (Norris, 2010).

Although the "doomed race" theory remained popular well into the 1930s (Mitchell, 2007), assimilation became the official national policy in 1937, some 36 years after federation and lasted until the late 1960s (Elston & Dade Smith, 2016). It is now widely believed that the intent of this policy was to transform Indigenous Australians into Europeans with black skin (Broome, 1982). However, in some states, such as Queensland, this promoted further segregation and control rather than gradual assimilation. It was not until the 1965 Northern Territory Cattle Industry Case that the exploitation of Indigenous Australians as a cheap source of largely unskilled labour was challenged and there was a move toward equality (Norris, 2010).

After the national referendum of 1967, Indigenous Australians were given similar human rights to those enjoyed by the rest of the population and responsibility for policies impacting on Indigenous Australians was transferred to the federal government, thereby marking the beginning of the "integration" policy era. This era ended in 1972 when the policy was changed to "self-determination," and the Department of Aboriginal Affairs was established to, theoretically, give Indigenous Australians the ability to make their own decisions about oversight and intervention in Indigenous affairs (Elston & Dade Smith, 2016). Since 1975, further policy changes have occurred with slightly different emphases, including "self-management," "shared responsibility," and "Indigenous advancement," each of which attempted to increase the involvement of Indigenous Australians in the policy making process (Elston & Dade Smith, 2016). The "Closing the Gap" approach was introduced by the Rudd federal government in 2007 (Altman et al., 2008) and has remained in the policies of successive governments (Australian Government, 2016). As noted above, this policy seeks to narrow and eliminate the statistical differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous citizens with respect to various socioeconomic indicators of health, education, employment, and income, while recognizing their interrelatedness and intractability.

The broader policies impacting the employment of Indigenous Australians have, like the policies that have determined education and health, been subject to considerable change over the last fifty years, such that some academics have noted a "cycle of endless consultation, policy and strategy formulation and measurement" that has contributed to widening gaps (Ring & Brown, 2002, p. 631). Though there have been attempts to redress past policy mistakes, the racist discrimination and economic disadvantages experienced by many older Indigenous Australians (who were employed pre-referendum) have no doubt left emotional scars that continue to impact recent generations of Indigenous Australians.

As Indigenous Australians have become more politically influential and aired their feelings about the wrongs done to them, it has been suggested by some that the more recent emphasis on closing gaps in areas such as employment is not a sound basis for developing policy and is reliant on symbolic attempts to atone for past wrongs (Altman et al., p. v). Echoing Norris' (2010) suggestion that little has changed in approaches to policy over the last 50 years, others have proposed that employment policy has been continually framed from an "Anglo-centric" view, with successive governments using Indigenous communities as policy "experiments" (Leroy-Dyer, 2015). The resulting policies have been failures at all "shades and levels of government" because they have been made far from the people they are intended to serve, with little attention to their economic circumstances (Cutliffe, 2006, p. 19).

Successive censuses since 1971 have indicated that the number of Australians identifying as Indigenous has gradually increased and will likely continue to increase (ABS, 2007). Beyond disproving the racist "doomed race" theory, this population growth highlights the need for employment policies that are flexible and realistic (Biddle et al., 2009).

What the Literature Reveals About Indigenous Australian Perspectives on Work

Anderson (2011) found that, relative to the overall total for the professional sector, Indigenous Australians are proportionally overrepresented in the public, health care, and social assistance sectors and to a lesser extent in mining, food and accommodation, arts, recreational, educational, and training sectors. These findings are supported by 2011 Census data, which showed that among Indigenous Australians who were employed 13% worked in clerical and administrative jobs, professionals (unspecified) represented 13.1%, and people working in the fields of health and welfare made up 16.6%, with 69.7% of workers in the latter category identifying as female (ABS, 2013). Therefore, it might be expected that these would be the sectors from which there has been considerable qualitative feedback. However, only the national public service has been consistent in its collection of employee feedback.

Since 2005, the Australian Public Service Commission (APSC, 2013) has conducted three audits. Its report, the *2009 Census Report: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander APS Employees*, identified that Indigenous Australian public servants ranked, in order of descending importance, positive working relationships, flexible working arrangements, salary, the chance to make a useful contribution to society and Indigenous Australians, and having a good supervisor as the factors affecting job satisfaction (APSC, 2010).

Two of the most commonly cited reasons for leaving or intending to leave their jobs were (a) lack of job satisfaction, and (b) feeling undervalued. The identified factors that could lead to workplace improvement were:

- Providing effective supervisors,
- Creating and sustaining an environment in which there is more sensitive and effective engagement with Indigenous Australians, and
- Creating and sustaining an environment in which discrimination, harassment, and/or bullying are reduced.

The 2012 Census reiterated the findings of the 2009 Census, but it highlighted that over half of all Indigenous employees had spent at least 3 days in formal training in the past 12 months, and 52% were satisfied with their access to learning and development opportunities (APSC, 2013).

While discrimination had been mentioned in the APSC 2009 Census, Larkin (2013), an Indigenous researcher who examined the importance of race in the public service, concluded that there was a "social distance" between Indigenous and White public servants—with many White executives demonstrating little if any knowledge about Indigenous Australians, their cultures, interests, and aspirations—and a "silent" type of racism prevalent in the public sector. Racism also emerged in the results of the most recent survey of 34 current and former Indigenous public servants (Biddle & Lahn, 2016): When asked what would compel them to leave their jobs, Indigenous employees indicated, albeit not consistently, that they expected to encounter racism in the workplace.

Indigenous Australian researcher Fredericks (2009) has provided one of the few sources of feedback from Indigenous health workers. She found that, although more Indigenous Australian women were being educated, trained, and employed, they felt that they were in danger of becoming marginalised and overworked because they were frequently required to assume responsibility for all Indigenous Australian clients. They also emphasized the importance of workforce support and identified clashes that could occur between what the employer and their fellow Indigenous Australians wanted—usually with respect to the wishes of the family of Indigenous Australians (Fredericks, 2009). Further, she noted that some of her participants perceived that Indigenous Australians who aligned themselves with the framework of "Whiteness," in both appearance and outlook, were more likely to be employed as health workers.

Many Indigenous Australians in remote areas—both with and without school certificates or higher education—have been employed in the mining industry, particularly when there is a mine near or on their traditional lands and government policy requires the mine to employ a certain number of locals. Although this workplace is quite different from the service sector, feedback, such as that gathered from the Argyle mine in Western Australia (Centre for Social Responsibility in Mining, 2007), has also highlighted the importance of cultural sensitivity and support. The report noted that Indigenous Australians considered learning new skills, meeting new people, and onsite services and facilities examples of positive aspects of work (Centre for Social Responsibility in Mining, 2007). Negative aspects of work included the high cost of commuting, problems with management, and workplace-related tensions. The primary reasons given for leaving their jobs at the Argyle mine were family reasons, high commuting expenses, lack of cultural awareness from managers and other employees, personnel management issues, and a general lack of prospects for further career development.

The importance of training, career pathway opportunities, and cultural awareness were also identified by McRae-Williams (2012) in an exploratory project that sought to identify positive aspects of the workplace among 50 employed Indigenous Australians living in urban areas of northern Australia. This study also highlighted the importance of personal relationships and socially comfortable environments.

In one of the few studies that tried to capture how remote Indigenous Australians viewed work, McRae-Williams and Gerritsen (2010) concluded that for the residents of Ngukurr, a small town east of Katherine in the Northern Territory, the Western concept of work was diametrically opposed to what the community members surveyed felt was most important in their lives, that is managing social

relatedness and autonomy. The implication of this finding was that these differing worldviews may "present a formidable challenge to well-meaning state employment and economic development agendas" (McRae-Williams & Gerritsen, 2010, p. 19).

From this limited literature review, it is clear that while Indigenous Australians may have many similar workplace issues to those of their non-Indigenous colleagues (such as flexibility to allow attending to family concerns and demands and the need for career development opportunities), some important differences are the need for more supportive relationships with managers and other employees, the need for cultural sensitivity, the opportunity for training, and the opportunity to develop a career pathway. While Indigenous Australians did not consistently identify racism and discrimination as barriers, both factors were mentioned either directly (Larkin, 2013) or indirectly (Fredericks, 2009) when the researchers were Indigenous.

Methods

The Characteristics of the Organisation With Which This Research Was Conducted

This research study was conducted with a not-for-profit organisation whose mandate is to improve the overall health and well-being of Indigenous Australians and other disadvantaged people. While its main centre of operations is in Darwin, the largest city in Australia's Northern Territory, it also has branches in Alice Springs and Brisbane, and it employs local staff for various projects in remote areas. It has a division of global health, as well as an education and training section, that provides both postgraduate training and a certificate level award, both of which are designed to build the skills and capacity of staff working in remote areas and the communities.

Approximately half of the Indigenous staff members employed by this organisation work in an urban setting where they have a variety of roles from laboratory technicians to principal researchers. The rest of the Indigenous staff members are employed as community-based researchers in remote communities and/or small towns according to specific project needs. In remote communities, there are very few employment opportunities and, even though the employment offered by the organisation may be part-time and of limited tenure, the skills obtained during the project can be of benefit to employees because they are useful to and desired by other prospective employers, such as health services, other research organisations, and the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

Within the organisation, there is a small section specifically dedicated to building the capacity of its own Indigenous staff and the Indigenous communities with which it interacts. Accordingly, one might expect the workplace culture that this organisation seeks to engender to be quite different from those of profit-seeking businesses (such as those in the mining industry), which employ Indigenous Australians solely because of memoranda of understanding with the government or because they seek to present an image of good corporate citizenship.

As part of its work, research is conducted across a range of Indigenous Australian clinical and public health issues so to minimise cultural misunderstandings and stress, optimise results, and ensure that resulting research meets the highest ethical standards incorporating respect, responsible conduct, and reciprocity, Indigenous people manage, participate in, and advise on relevant projects.

Research Aims

As indicated above, policies seeking to improve Indigenous Australians' participation in the workforce have developed from racist, controlling beginnings and, while current national employment policy seeks to address statistically demonstrable inequities, the lack of qualitative evidence from Indigenous Australians to inform that policy is in and of itself a definite "gap."

The broad aims of this study were to find out what factors were impacting, both positively and negatively, current and former Indigenous Australians employed by this not-for-profit organisation. The specific research questions were:

- What work factors were most and least liked within the work environment?
- What impact did employment in the organization have on work opportunities and practices?
- What strategies might lead to the recruitment of more Indigenous Australians?
- What could be done to ensure retention of Indigenous employees?
- What form of workplace support would best meet the needs of Indigenous Australian staff?

Examining workplace likes and dislikes from the perspective of Indigenous employees may help narrow this knowledge gap, even though the findings were procured from a specialised workplace. The reason the research was carried out in a specialised workplace was due to the organisation's need to devise an employment and retention strategy for their Indigenous Australian staff, which prompted them to seek evidence that could provide direction for such a strategy. After the analysis, the findings were evaluated in terms of their implications for devising more effective employment policies in the broader context.

Research Design

The need for the research was identified at the executive level of the organization and a small research committee was formed to develop the research protocol. The organisation's associate director of Aboriginal programs, a Bard[1] woman from Northwestern Australia, guided the committee. The research used embedded mixed-methods[2] (Creswell, 2014). Participants agreed to participate in semi-structured interviews intended to gather their opinions and perceptions. Following the completion of the qualitative questions, specific demographic data was collected and crosschecked where possible (and

[1] The Bard (or Bardi) people are the traditional owners of a small peninsular (the Dampier Peninsular) north of the Western Australian pearling and tourist town of Broome. Since their traditional lands are nearly surrounded by the sea, the sea has always been an integral part of their culture.

[2] As the name suggests, in embedded mixed-methods a particular, often smaller, research design is embedded in another larger overarching piece of research. While the larger piece of research can be either qualitative or quantitative, in an embedded design if the original research is quantitative, the researcher may add a qualitative strand within it. If the original larger piece of research is qualitative, the researcher may add a quantitative strand (Creswell, 2014).

with the permission of the those involved) against records kept by the institution. The participants—current and former Indigenous Australian staff members of the organization—were initially identified either through word of mouth or from previous annual reports, and then as many as possible were contacted for participation in interviews. Once a participant identified that he or she was willing to participate, semi-structured interviews were organised and then conducted face-to -ace, via email, or over the telephone (depending on the interviewee's location).

To ensure that interview techniques were consistent and referenced the organisation's interview guide, the interviewers were both Indigenous and non-Indigenous employees of the organization who had been trained by the principal researcher. After first contacting the participants, the average time spent with each interviewee was 1 hour. Interviewees' responses were manually recorded on a response form specifically designed for the study.

After the interviews, the raw data was transferred to large spreadsheets and then stored electronically by a member of the research team who specialises in data handling. Next, the interviews were printed out and crosschecked for omissions and accuracy by two other team members. Finally, the printed interviews were sent to another member of the team, who specialises in qualitative data analysis. Responses to specific qualitative questions were coded using the open coding method, and the codes were condensed into specific themes and characteristics, which were then checked by other research team members. The themes and characteristics were then compared with the themes of other earlier studies.

Results

Response Rate and Demographics

Three hundred and six former employees and 54 current employees were identified as potential participants. Of these, 42 former employees and 51 current employees agreed to participate ($n = 93$). Among former employees who did not participate, 16 did not want to participate, 10 were confirmed to have died, and the remainder could not be reached. The response rate was thus 13.7% for former employees and 94.4% for current employees. When individual respondents were given the choice to identify as Aboriginal, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, and/or Torres Strait Islander, 80 identified as Aboriginal, 9 as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, and 4 as Torres Strait Islander. At the time this research was conducted, the total number of employees working in the organisation was 412. Indigenous Australians made up 10% of employees, although many were part-time. It should be noted that while the respondents could identify in any of the three categories for the research, this article will use the term Indigenous, in keeping with the policy of the organization. The demographic characteristics of all respondents, both present and past, are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Demographic	*n* (%)
Location	
Darwin & Alice Springs	49 (52)
Remote Northern Territory	21 (22)
Interstate	23 (24)
Gender	
Male	18 (19.4)
Female	75 (80.6)
Age	
18-24	7 (7.5)
25-34	12 (12.9)
35-44	30 (32.2)
45-54	23 (24.7)
55-64	15 (16.1)
>64	2 (2.1)
Not given	4 (4.3)
Total *N*	93 (100)

Presentation of Results

All data from this research, both quantitative and qualitative, have been coded and presented in tables. The quantitative data presented in Tables 2 and 6 are demographic, and thus have been presented as percentages, which are directly comparable. In all other tables, coded responses to specific interview questions have been aggregated into specific themes, with the total number for each theme presented as a raw score. These raw scores offer the most effective representation, given that respondents would often provide up to four responses to one question without ranking them, while other respondents gave no response. Adjacent to each raw score in a theme are specific examples of rich data, which illustrate both the respondent's language and the range of responses under a specific theme. The response "nothing" (in Table 4) was included as a theme because it identified a positive response (that was there was nothing wrong), as opposed to the category "no response" where there was no answer to a question.

Respondent Qualifications and Employment Histories

Of the respondents employed in urban areas or interstate[3], 62 possessed qualifications in terms of education and/or relevant job experience prior to commencing employment (89%), ranging from experience as an Aboriginal health worker to bachelor's degrees and master's degrees in various disciplines. In contrast, only 11 (52%) of the employees working in remote areas of the Northern Territory possessed such qualifications prior to beginning work with the organisation. The latter group of employees most frequently possessed Vocational Education Training (VET) certificates—one employee possessed a master's degree. Among employees from urban areas, 29 (41%) had studied to gain further qualifications while employed by the organization (at the bachelor's, master's [by coursework], and doctoral degree levels), whereas 13 (56%) of the remote employees began a program of study after gaining employment. The remote employees often pursued the organisation's Certificate in Community Health Research, which was designed to be completed while employed in order to build capacity in remote communities.

While most (63.4%) respondents had only been employed by the organisation once, the remainder had been employed between two and nine times, as summarised in Table 2. The latter figure reflects the short-term nature of the work for many employees, particularly those in remote areas where several projects may start and finish over a 10-year period.

Most-Liked Workplace Factors

Table 3 summarises the thematic responses obtained from the question: "What did you most like about working for this organisation?" It should be noted that, in some cases, participants gave multiple answers that could be assigned to different themes. In other cases, responses related to least-liked factors and so were added to Table 4. While the organisation's staff and their characteristics was the highest ranked response to the question, an unexpectedly high-ranking response was the vision of the organization.

[3] The term interstate refers to any other state or territory of Australia outside of the Northern Territory.

Table 2. Number of Times Respondents Were Employed by the Organisation

Number of Separate Times Respondents Were Employed by the Organisation	*n*	%
One	59	63.4
Two	20	21.5
Three to six	13	14.0
Seven to nine	1	1.1
N	93	100

Table 3. Characteristics of the Organization Respondents Liked Most

Characteristic	Number of Responses	Examples of Specific Comments
The staff	30	• Welcoming • Accommodating • Approachable • Supportive • Staff had integrity
The work tasks	18	• Top job • I wished that I could do it forever • Looked forward to going to work each day
The vision of the organisation	15	• They were trying to make a difference • They helped me to help my community
Unspecified positive	9	• Interesting • Good[a] • Fantastic
Learned new skills	7	
Flexible work hours	4	
Cultural sensitivity	2	• Allowed to do family business • Allowed to attend funerals
How they dealt with complaints	2	
Opportunity to work with children	2	
Good pay	1	
Not applicable[b]	14	
Total responses	104	

Note. Respondents were allowed to give more than one response to the question.
[a] Several "good" responses were given in the local language by community workers.
[b] Refers to negative answers or stories that are not applicable, but specific dislikes were coded and added to Table 4.

Table 4. Characteristics of the Organisation Respondents Liked Least

Characteristic	Number of Responses	Examples of Specific Comments
Work conditions	33[a]	• Working in hot sun in communities • Open plan office • I worked in isolation a lot • Being part-time • No desk or computer • Hospital campus clinical and stuffy
Nothing	16	• Nothing was difficult or frustrating • Nothing, I enjoyed my job
Cultural issues	16[a]	• Organisational racism • Who takes responsibility for cultural issues? • Too many conflicting priorities on my time • Workers are treated differently • Lack of obvious effort to get and keep Indigenous people • Being told I only had the job because I was Aboriginal • No Indigenous managers • Lack of cultural understanding
Difficulty of work tasks	13[a]	• Taking blood was difficult • Time frames were pressing • Had difficulty understanding medical terms • Doing research ON my own people • Work was stressful • The difficult IT programs

Note. [a] Indicates that answers to "most liked" question were incorporated because they related to "least liked" aspects.

Characteristic	Number of Responses	Examples of Specific Comments
The organisational structure	9[a]	• I didn't understand the structure • In house politics • Some managers have individual agendas • There were silos • The place went through 3 re-structures • Higher-ups were "pushy" • I was looked down on by people higher up • Need stronger commitment to Central Australia
The way the organisation is funded	8	When the funding ends the job ends Little notice is given when job ends The short-term contracts are frustrating The sudden loss of 3 leading Indigenous researchers because of funding
Lack of training	7[a]	Orientation consisted of someone reading from a manual in the tearoom My roles and responsibilities needed to be defined
Not being appreciated or listened to	6	I didn't have the opportunity to show case my skills, knowledge, and abilities
Lack of career pathway	5[a]	
No comment /incomplete	4	
Resentment from my own people	1	Having to pull the knives from my back all the time in the communities
How I was paid changed	1	It changed from weekly to fortnightly
Not getting to see the final results of the project that I worked on	1	
Total Responses	156	

Note. [a] Indicates that answers to "most liked" question were incorporated because they related to "least liked" aspects.

Least-Liked Workplace Factors

Table 4 summarises the responses to the question: "What did you least like about your job?" In some instances, participants indicated what they least liked in the most liked category and so their answers were recorded in the interest of research integrity, but subsequently transferred to the appropriate code and theme when analysed. It should be noted that the response "nothing" means that nothing was disliked, rather than that no response was given.

In Table 4, dislike with the highest ranking was physical work conditions. Validating the high score for staff as a most-liked factor was the limited mention of staff as a dislike (not being appreciated or listened to was mentioned by 6 respondents). Inclusion of work tasks as both dislikes in Table 4 and high-scoring likes in Table 3 may seem contradictory, but is likely related to the diversity of work tasks required by employees of the organization and the fact that work tasks are carried out under a range of physical and environmental conditions.

The data presented in Tables 5 and 6 refers to information pertaining to former employees only. As Table 5 indicates, 64.3 % of those who have left the organisation are currently employed, which is relatively high given the proportion who responded from remote communities where employment is limited. If those who are in school are included, then 76.2% of those who have left the organisation are engaged in work or receiving education and training specific to future employment. Table 5 indicates that 9.5% of respondents not engaged in the workforce due to age or illness and the remaining 14.2% are unemployed or non-committal about their employment status. The small proportion with illnesses that prevented them from engaging in paid work was not unexpected given the age of some respondents (Table 1). The small number (4/42) who have positions such as professors, general practitioners, and policy officers was one of the most positive outcomes emerging from the study (Table 6), particularly when taken with the number who indicated that they were studying medicine (Table 5).

Responses regarding how the organisation impacted future employment are summarised in Table 7; this question received the highest number of answers in the "no response" category, with over 50% of respondents offering no response. The immediate inference from this is that the question may not have been understood, even though interviewers were encouraged to replace words like "impact" with more culturally appropriate terms. All other responses to this question did, however, indicate understanding with most responses (except those recorded in the "other") indicating a positive impact.

Table 8 demonstrates that, even though there were only seven respondents who did not give an answer when asked to suggest what the organisation might do to attract more Indigenous Australian staff, 43 of the responses did not directly relate to the question. Several of these answers have been included in Table 8. Overall, the indication was that the organisation should advertise more widely and in a format that is easier to understand.

Table 9 indicates that respondents noted that providing support was most important to retaining staff, and Table 10 lists the type of support that was identified in more detail, with education and training most frequently mentioned.

Table 5. Summary of Labour Market Participation of Respondents Who Have Left the Organisation

Area	*n*	%
Employed		
Health sector	14	33.3
Education and training sector	7	16.7
Other, non-health sector	6	14.3
Studying medicine	5	11.9
Unemployed	3	7.1
Unable to work for health reasons	3	7.1
Retired	1	2.4
No response	3	7.1
Total	42	100

Table 6. Current Occupations of Employed Respondents Who Have Left the Organisation

Occupation	*n*	Comments
Academic	5	2 are professors
Community health worker	4	
Indigenous health worker	3	
Trainers (for public health programs delivered in communities)	2	
Indigenous interpreter at clinic	1	
Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP)	1	Recycling
Health project officer	1	
Health policy officer for government	1	
Health administrator	1	
Aged care worker	1	
Gardener	1	
General practitioner (medical doctor)	1	
Library assistant	1	
Gas industry worker	1	
Ranger	1	
Health researcher	1	
Self-employed as consultant	1	
N	27	

Table 7. How Respondents Believed the Organisation Impacted Future Work Opportunities

Impact	Number of responses	Examples of Specific Comments
No response	57	
Provided transferable skills & knowledge	27	• Rounded me off • Helped me become a better practitioner • Enhanced my skills rather than developed them • I became a better worker in general • The occupational health and safety (OHS) training provided helped me step into next job
Good for the curriculum vitae	3	• The organisation has a good reputation • I was offered a job because I worked at this organisation
Other	3	• I already had all the skills that I needed • 3 weeks was too short to gain any skills
I made good contacts	2	
It motivated me to study medicine	1	
Total	93	

Table 8. Suggested Strategies to Attract More Indigenous Staff

Strategy Proposed	Number of Responses	Examples of Specific Comments
Response not a recruitment strategy	43	• Doing a good job as is • Not a problem attracting, its keeping them • More part-time and full-time work • Let people work after their contracts finish • Have career pathways • Not sure • Build capacity • Time too short in communities
Advertise in a wider range of places using a wider range of ways	19	• Advertise in Aboriginal-specific print and non-print places • Use different types of media • Advertise in the clinic • A common perception is that this organisation is closed and you can only get a job there if you are recommended by someone
Establish school based trainee-ships and advertise in schools	10	
No response	7	
Make job descriptions easier to understand	7	• Don't use too much jargon • Make wording in advertisements easier to understand • Advertise in Indigenous language (e.g., Yonglu) • Have a place on the web
Make job descriptions easier to understand		• Site that explains what to do with job descriptions and how to apply
Create more identified positions	5	• All they have to do is get an exemption from the Racial Discrimination Act
Pay better salaries	4	

Strategy Proposed	Number of Responses	Examples of Specific Comments
Create networks in communities	3	
Better explain how the place works to Indigenous people	1	
Allow people to address selection criteria for jobs orally rather than in written form	1	
Seek people out	1	

Note. Respondents gave between one and four responses to the question.

Table 9. Suggested Strategies to Improve Employee Retention

Strategy	Number of Responses	Examples of Specific Comments
Improve support	64	• A breakdown of the type of support is provided in Table 10
No response	17	
Cultural awareness for all staff	9	• Do cultural awareness regularly not just at beginning of the year • Academic staff need grassroots training • Need to understand the pressures from community as well as the work pressures
Having a safe place for Indigenous staff to go	8	• Ensure that there is a central hub that people can go to and discuss things
Change the nature of the projects	7	• Make projects continue • Not letting people go when projects finish • People need stability • Keep projects running longer • Treat people better at the end of projects
Offer permanent positions rather than contract	6	
Offer more money	3	
Other	3	• The organisation should prove itself with good wages and outcomes • Make work more flexible, rather than 9-5 • Explain work better

Note. Respondents could give more than one answer.

Table 10. Forms of Workplace Support that Best Meet the Needs of Indigenous Australian Staff

Form of Support	Number of Responses	Examples of Specific Comments
Professional development/further training/support for higher education	26	• Train them for stuff that may be coming up • Ask them what they want to learn and then help them to learn it. • Send them to uni (university) so they can continue to work afterwards • Get us to a level where we can get a degree should we want one • With training people can work their way up
Follow up career aspirations	12	• We need a career pathway
Focus on support for the first few months	7	• This is crucial • There were so many things that I didn't know that would have helped me
Put mentors in place	7	
Better support from supervisor	7	• This person is often the key to what support you get
Foster networks and relationships in a formal way	5	• Create a peer support model. • We should have someone who we can go to, to discuss things in a non-threatening environment

Discussion

Participation Rate and Demographic Information

Only 14% (42 out of 306) of former employees provided feedback, which was largely due to the mobile telephone numbers listed as the primary means of contact for former employees being out of date. Overall, females made up 80% of the respondents, a number both proportionate to employment in the organisation and reflective of the participation in the health workplace for Indigenous females across Australia (ABS, 2013).

Most-Liked Workplace Factors

Relationships are central to the lives of Indigenous Australians (Wilson, 2008), so it is not surprising that working with approachable and supportive staff (and thereby developing good working relationships) was identified as the factor most liked about the organisation. This reiterates the findings of the APSC (2010) employees Census Report and Fredericks' (2009) survey of health workers. The organisation's mandatory cultural awareness training, which presents both Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives and protocols, may have contributed to the perception that staff are approachable and supportive. On the other hand, it may also be postulated that the organisation's vision to address the health inequities of Indigenous Australians may have attracted ethno-culturally empathetic staff.

While the Indigenous Capacity Building Unit seeks to influence attitudes and culturally safe practices, cultural issues were still referenced as one of the least-liked workplace factors, with respondents identifying a wide variety of issues. For example, a general "lack of cultural understanding" was an issue for two respondents. Moreover, ensuring cultural awareness for all staff was identified as a strategy to improve retention (Table 9). While there was acknowledgement that measures to achieve this awareness were already in place, respondents suggested that these measures needed to be strengthened. Suggestions included delivering cultural awareness training more than once per year and the inclusion of workplace-specific examples that could make other staff more empathetic to the emotional struggles and pressures experienced by Indigenous Australians.

Respondents' feedback to various questions indicated that the organisation's reputation and how it worked with Indigenous Australians attracted employees, something not identified in previous Australian studies. For example, respondents noted:

- "I knew that the place had a high level of integrity."
- "It had a reputation of working with Indigenous people in a holistic way."
- "Because I had heard about it and what they do for communities."
- "Thought it was a good place to work."
- "They are recognised throughout Australia and internationally."
- "It was a culturally safe workplace."

Failure to live up to the vision of the organization was not identified as a reason for leaving in a recent exit poll of public servants (Biddle & Lahn, 2016).

The vision of the organisation and the work tasks assigned to employees were ranked highly in this study, as they were in an earlier Aboriginal public service survey (APSC, 2010)—although other studies have not mentioned either. The role of an organisation's vision in attracting Indigenous Australian employees is an area that warrants further investigation, due to its apparent impact. It could also be argued that the "make a difference" emphasis of both the public service generally and the organisation with which this study was conducted more specifically would attract potential employees with different personal goals than those who are attracted to non-service, for-profit organisations.

In a survey of Indigenous Australians employed across a range of workplaces in Northern Australia, McRae-Williams (2012) identified that training and career pathway opportunities were highly valued, and these factors were ranked highly in this study as well. The importance placed on training and career pathway opportunities is also evident in the respondents' identification of a lack of these opportunities as a least-liked workplace factor (Table 4), as well as in the high rating of skills training and enhancement provided by the organisation (Table 7) in terms of future employment opportunities.

Least-Liked Workplace Factors

The finding that the organisation generates strong positive feelings because of its people, what they aim to do, and how they manage the organization (Table 3) is consistent with other data from the study, which indicates that a substantial number of respondents said that there was little that they did not like about their workplace (Table 4). Indeed, respondents were more likely to cite non-personnel factors as the aspect of their workplace that they liked the least. For example, respondents noted that they disliked their physical working conditions, either in the office or in hot, difficult outdoor conditions in remote areas. In contrast, earlier studies—such as those from the public service (APSC, 2010)—found management, supervisors, and interpersonal tensions were listed as negative aspects of employment. It is possible that relationships are so important to Indigenous Australians that, in contexts where they are not satisfactory, they will have a larger impact than discomforts or deficiencies related to the physical conditions of the workplace.

A dislike of "organisational structure" is a workplace factor that has not been identified by Indigenous Australians before, even in the hierarchical federal public service (APSC, 2010). The responses in this study expressed a lack of knowledge about how individual sections related to each other and who was responsible for an area or department. Respondents also disliked the continual restructuring of the organization and the silos created by the organisation's structure. In addition, some respondents repeatedly mentioned their perception that "higher–ups" in the organisation were pushy or arrogant. Despite the structural overview provided to employees during their orientation periods, the noted lack of understanding indicates the need for a more comprehensive introduction to Western workplace culture, its organization, and the responsibilities that the "higher–ups" in the organisation have as part of their job.

Although only a few respondents identified not being appreciated or listened to as their least-liked workplace factor, it is nonetheless worthy of attention because feeling undervalued was one of the most commonly cited reasons given for leaving the APS (APSC, 2010). In the organisation with which this

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study was conducted, respect for Indigenous Australians and appreciation for their views are considered crucial to ethical and relevant research. While non-Indigenous Australians may also feel undervalued in the workplace, among Indigenous Australian employees, this perception is bolstered by other factors, such as mismatched expectations compared to their managers and/or barriers to developing relationships that facilitate communication.

Respondents also disliked the temporary nature of many of the jobs within the organisation: They cited not seeing the final outcomes of work projects or tasks and the limited term of employment as a result of project-specific research funding. The latter was not only mentioned as a least-liked workplace factor, but was also mentioned as a strategy to attract and retain more Indigenous Australian employees (see Table 8 comments in the "response not a strategy" category; Table 9 "change the nature of the projects"). While the duration of employment is clearly explained in job advertisements and during orientation, it is not difficult to understand why it was raised in this study, particularly since Indigenous Australians in remote communities may have few other job opportunities. Many business managers, who control individual projects and associated staff, hold informal sessions to help those whose contracts have ended find employment, but the high rating of this factor demonstrates the need for targeted sessions about how to transition into a new job.

The Perceived Impact of the Organisation on Future Employment

While approximately 60% of those surveyed did not provide an answer regarding how their employment with the organization impacted their future work opportunities, the highest ranked answer from those who did respond was that the organisation provided skills and knowledge that helped them find employment after leaving. A review of the employment destinations of those who left (Tables 5 and 6) shows that 64.6% of respondents continue to be employed, with a third employed in the field of health. When the lower ranked impacts of employment in the organization, such as "good for the curriculum vitae" and "made contacts," are added, it appears that the majority of those who responded perceived positive impacts.

Strategies that Might Lead to More Indigenous Australians Being Employed

Forty percent of responses to the question "What might attract more Indigenous Australians to employment?" indicated that respondents either did not understand the question or were unable to provide an answer. The second highest response was that job advertisements should be distributed in a wider range of physical places and forms, suggesting that the wording of job advertisements and the jargon therein may negatively impact the recruitment of Indigenous Australian applicants.

Strategies that Might Improve Retention

The highest ranked strategy to improve the retention of Indigenous Australian staff was to improve support. The types of assistance most frequently identified as necessary (see Table 10) included professional development, specific job or task training, and providing support for university education by designating time for studying during the working week. Again, it could be argued that those who already value professional development, training, and qualifications are more likely to be attracted to an organisation in which knowledge and skills are highly valued—although, as indicated above, it has been identified as important in earlier studies (McRae-Williams, 2012).

Limitations of the Study

A major limitation of this study is that the workplace is a not-for-profit organisation with a stated vision to improve the overall health and well-being of Indigenous Australians and other disadvantaged people. This vision not only directs external priorities but also those internally via the targets it sets for employment of Indigenous staff at various levels and the nurturing and support it seeks to provide, priorities that will not be present to the same extent in many other organisations. Accordingly, applicability of the study's findings may be less applicable to other sectors and organisations. Moreover, the study's sample was predominantly female, and many identified that they were specifically attracted to a service area in which they would have an opportunity to "make a difference." A more gender balanced, diverse sample might produce different results. Indeed, the organisation's specific vision to "make a difference" might further limit the applicability of the findings because it attracts not only Indigenous employees but also non-Indigenous employees who are empathetic toward Indigenous Australians and their cultural perspectives.

However, even though this research was conducted in a specialist setting, it provides a starting point for other sectors in which there is genuine interest in using Indigenous perspectives as the basis for developing employment policies. Furthermore, irrespective of sector, every piece of feedback of this nature has the potential to gradually erode the paternalistic approach to policy making that still impacts on Indigenous Australians at all levels.

Another limitation is that, despite interviewer training and the fact that many interviewers were Indigenous, there were questions with a significant number of non-responses (most commonly silences) and responses that did not answer the question that had been posed. While some respondents may have adhered to cultural protocols and deliberately chosen not to answer some questions in order to avoid causing offense, the answers from others indicate that some questions were difficult to understand and/or answer within the time provided. While the interview questions were practiced and revised, this was only done with urban employees. A wider pilot should have been conducted with representatives from a wider range of language groups. However, as part of using a culturally appropriate protocol, the organisation accepted and respected the silences of respondents.

Organisational Changes Resulting from This Research

The findings of this research were reviewed by the director of the organisation involved in this study and presented to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Employment and Development Strategy Working Group. The findings were then used to revise the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Employment and Career Development Strategy. The revised goals of this strategy were to:

- Increase the number of Indigenous staff from 10% to 25%, and
- Achieve retention rates among Indigenous staff that are equal to those for non-Indigenous staff.

The strategies that were identified to assist in recruiting, nurturing, and retaining Indigenous employees emphasized:

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- Employing five more Indigenous staff members in project management positions,
- Requiring Indigenous employees to construct a career development plan as part of a formal performance management program, and
- Identifying specific career transition points and putting strategies in place to assist with job transitions.

Direct actions outside the strategy revision included:

- Introducing a biennial Indigenous Staff Network Forum to provide a culturally safe environment for full-time Indigenous staff to discuss their career pathways, training, and education;
- Increasing the number of Indigenous mentors and mentees completing mentoring training;
- Providing formal mentoring training for community-based researchers;
- Constructing a database that community-based researchers could use to construct their curriculum vitaes (CVs).

Conclusions

This research was conducted in a specialised workplace in Australia that endeavours to redress some of the impacts of colonization. Although the findings present the opinions of a specific cohort of Indigenous employees, considering their feedback in a broader context provides valuable information for those making policy at the organisational or governmental level.

First, organisations should appreciate that their Indigenous employees may highly value Western training and education, but may require mentoring to identify what will suit them and assist in their present and future work. Second, while relationships in the workplace are important for all employees, this study indicates that they may be crucial to Indigenous employees' job satisfaction and by extension their retention. In order to build these relationships, Indigenous employees need empathetic supervisors, trained mentors, and formal opportunities to meet and network with Indigenous colleagues.

At the organisational level, it is frequently non-Indigenous managerial staff members who make policy, so it is crucial that they understand Indigenous cultural values and protocols; similarly, they must provide Indigenous employees with the opportunity to learn about the specific work culture and protocols of their organisation. In addition, the policy formulation or review process should have Indigenous input—either directly, from face-to-face involvement, or indirectly, from regular formal feedback. The resultant feedback should inform cultural awareness training, which should be sufficiently flexible so as to respond to issues as they arise. Structurally, an organisation should also ensure that there is an identified staff role (or section, as appropriate) to oversee the implementation of both employment policy and strategies to address support and retention.

At the government level, qualitative input into policy appears to be largely limited to the opinions of public servants, employers, and managers, and the non-evidential perceptions of politicians, all of whom receive little input from Indigenous people who have been employees. Given the lack of Indigenous input and the paucity of data like that presented in this article, what is required is a far broader range of qualitative feedback from Indigenous employees across a range of sectors and sites, and a less blinkered approach from politicians. With greater political will, policy incentives could encourage collection of the required qualitative data, shifting priority from what has not worked in the past to what Indigenous employees in specific areas and locations of employment feel has worked.

If government monies are to be better spent and gaps are to be closed then feedback from Indigenous Australians who are employed and who have made successful careers through education and training must be heard and valued.

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