

# **Yarning about yarning: A literature review on the use of justice yarning circles in Australia**

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In this article, we use the terms ‘Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander’ and ‘Indigenous’ interchangeably, although we acknowledge that some people consider that the term ‘Indigenous’ does not appropriately recognise the heterogeneity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across Australia. We acknowledge and celebrate the differences amongst Australia’s many and diverse Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures.

## **Introduction**

According to senior Indigenous researcher and social worker Professor Dawn Bessarab and Dr Bridget Ng'andu (2010: 38), '[a]cross Australia, Aboriginal people constantly refer to and use yarning in the telling and sharing of stories and information'. Tyson Yunkaporta (2009: xiii), a leading Aboriginal social researcher, has described a 'yarn' as 'a meeting, conversation, or dialogue that has particular protocols depending on the Indigenous community or relationship in which the yarn takes place'. Geia, Hayes and Usher (2013: 15) have observed that:

Aboriginal yarning is a fluid ongoing process, a moving dialogue interspersed with interjections, interpretations, and additions. The stories remain in our conscious state like a thread hanging, waiting to be picked up again, to be continued, reconstructed, reinforced and once again embedded in our ontology. Yarning almost always contains the threads of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island history as it moves into the present tense, its parameters within present time is filtered through the memories of the past as the two move simultaneously and at points collide and reveals fragments of the future. This type of Aboriginal storytelling or yarning enables Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to reconstruct their lives in new ways while at the same time keeping their cultural integrity intact. Further, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander yarns are rarely an individual construct; they carry within them the shared lived experience of their families, and communities.

The Yarning Circle (2021a: np), created by Lee Townsend, an Aboriginal woman born and raised in Blacktown, describes the 'Yarning Circle® [a]s a place where stories and knowledge can be shared in a caring environment that's relaxed and comfortable' and as a traditional learning method that 'leads to inclusion, participation, value of the individual and access to contemporary outcomes in today's modern world' (2021b: np).

Yarning circles are used in a variety of contexts and settings. This article presents a select literature review on evaluations of yarning circles with Indigenous<sup>1</sup> adults in the Australian criminal justice system, in both community and prison contexts. We also include other relevant programs that contain elements of yarning.

We conclude with recommendations for future evaluations of yarning circles and other Indigenous justice programs. In particular, we outline a number of strategies for ensuring that evaluations adopt culturally-appropriate research approaches.

## **Methodology**

We sought to identify the key concepts, issues, and extent of current research on the use of yarning circles with adults in the Australian criminal justice context. To do this, we systematically searched online databases, using the following search terms:

- Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander;
- crim\*.
- healing circle\*;
- Indigenous;
- justice;
- men's group\*;
- offen\*;
- talking circle\*;
- women's group\*; and

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<sup>1</sup> We use the terms 'Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander' and 'Indigenous' interchangeably, but acknowledge that 'Indigenous' may not appropriately recognise the heterogeneity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across Australia.

- yarning circle\*

Studies were identified through a series of Boolean search strings, using the above terms across Google Scholar and government websites. We also conducted forwards and backwards citation searches of all relevant literature located. In total, we located 12 relevant programs that have been evaluated,<sup>2</sup> eight operating in the community and four in prison.

In addition, we contacted and/or conducted informal consultations with 38 stakeholders, in every Australian state and territory, across a range of organisations, including academia, government, community groups and service agencies. Of these, 17 stakeholders, across a range of government and non-government organisations, were Indigenous.

## **Literature Review**

Our review of the literature quickly revealed that there are few evaluations of justice yarning circle programs. On one level, this is hardly surprising, because yarning, by definition, is fluid and led by the interests and needs of participants, and therefore does not lend itself readily to Western concepts, such as effectiveness and quantitative methods and evaluation tools. In addition, there is a relative lack of evaluation of Indigenous programs more generally. For example, Hudson (2017) found that, of 1082 Indigenous programs identified, only 88 (8%) had been evaluated.

Against this background, the present review synthesises the available evaluations on yarning circles, variously defined. We organise these into those taking place in the

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<sup>2</sup> Given the paucity of research carried out on the use of yarning circles in the criminal justice space in Australia, we used a broad definition of ‘evaluation’, to ensure we captured as many studies as possible. This includes process and/or outcome evaluations, as well as research which conducts inquiries into how a program is working, but does not necessarily report on the process or outcomes. See Better Evaluation (2022).

community and those inside prison. We then examine issues specific to the needs of criminalised women.

### **Community-based Programs**

While not strictly an evaluation, the ethnographic research conducted by Radke (2018) on a women's yarning circle affiliated with the Murri Court in Queensland warrants inclusion. Radke (2018) examined a program 'which aim[s] to create an Indigenous-centred space where defendants and Community Justice Group [CJG] members of the same gender could build a rapport' (2018: 55; see also Radke and Douglas 2020). Radke found that the topics discussed included childcare, welfare, foster care, racism, colonisation, religion, and connections to the Stolen Generations. In addition, CJG members helped participants with finding housing and provided participants with food, both during the session and in the form of leftovers.

One of the Elders interviewed by Radke described the circle's role as follows:

It gave the defendants an opportunity to talk to people and Elders that were on their side. Basically, they could open up, ask questions and after a little while, they eventually open up quite a lot. Some of them really purged a lot of information that had been held back or withheld for a long time because they had compassionate ears that were listening and through that process, it helps to find out what their needs might be and how you can assist, appropriately, with things that they might need. But a very good opportunity for bonding and [a] good opportunity to share culture, and experiences, and services (interviewee, cited in Radke 2018: 54).

Both men's and women's yarning circles operate in the Queensland Murri Court, although Radke only observed the women's circle. One of the CJG members described the

differences between the two: ‘for the males, that is a lot more formal than the females where they have the yarning stick, and they need to wait before they touch the food...So even though the women’s are less formal, it’s still not as formal as [the] court’ (2018: 63). Another CJG member said:

The Yarning Circles, I can’t speak for the ladies, but the Men’s Yarning Circles is a resounding success. Because the change in those fellas’ attitudes is good, between one another they dress blokes down, which is interesting to say, ‘listen, brother, you don’t want to start doing that you’ll end up, you will put us all in a bad light, we are trying to straighten things out’ (interviewee, cited in Radke 2018: 63).

A different CJG member explained their role as follows:

It’s necessary to have the Yarning Circles to encourage them and to keep them within the boundary we tell them about boundaries, you [are] being watched and don’t step outside the boundaries. You’re on parole you’ve got a hearing coming up soon, you don’t want to go in there with a record, another record, a criminal record or charges you know you don’t want to go in with other charges, tell them to keep clean, so it’s a good thing cause some of these guys can drop their guard or the bundle and just go off the track (interviewee, cited in Radke 2018: 63).

Collectively, these insights led Radke to conclude that yarning circles seek to create ‘a culturally appropriate space where Indigenous defendants can build a rapport with [CJG] members...[which] allow for a more nuanced understanding of the underlying reasons for a defendant’s offending behaviour’ (2018: 64). She found that this was particularly the case with crimes of poverty and that:

Elders and respected persons are perceptive about how class and social hierarchies within the defendant's communities can be a potential reason for re-offending and continuously coming before the criminal justice system (2018: 64).

Radke also noted that the circles 'allow Indigenous women to gain support from other Indigenous women in the Murri Court' (2018: 66). In other words, a key component of circles is their group dynamic and that members of the same gender support each other through similar issues. This emerged from other literature we examined, for example, Cavanagh, Shaw and Bartram's discussion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men's learning through men's sheds:

As a group, or [community of practice], the men shared a common understanding of issues they have all experienced. The men yarned about trying to solve issues on their own and how they failed — 'couldn't get off the drugs on me own' (George, remote member) — but after joining the group 'and yarnin with black fella mates I got some help'. The men talked about how yarning among themselves supported each man to see more clearly and build hope that they could make changes to their lives (2016: 61).

In concluding, Radke summarised the key features of the yarning circles she observed:

[they] create a space outside of the (white) legal system, where Indigenous women can discuss their experiences and gain support from Elders and respected persons of the same gender. This gender-specific bail program allows defendants and Community Justice Group members of the same gender to build a rapport. In Yarning Circles, Elders and respected persons deal with the compounding effects of individual problems, systemic issues, and intergenerational trauma, while recognising a person's intersectional identity. Yarning Circles aim to create a space where Murri Court defendants can start to grapple with the underlying reasons for their offending behaviour, along with connecting defendants with culturally relevant service providers (2018: 66-67).

The North-West Queensland Indigenous Catholic Social Services (NWQICSS) run a justice program known as the Marapai Ngartathati Murri Women's Group and the Yurru Ngartathati Men's Group. This program seeks to address Indigenous offending in Mount Isa, by providing an alternative to incarceration, in the form of a diversionary rehabilitative bail program (O'Hara 2013). Clients are referred to the program through the Indigenous Sentencing List or through probation and parole services.

Through interviews with staff and stakeholders, and employing a yarning methodology with Indigenous clients, O'Hara (2013) undertook an evaluation of the program, identifying several key elements that clients found beneficial, in addressing their offending behaviour. Firstly, the groups are built on a strong cultural foundation, with a clear focus on reconnecting clients with culture, as strengthening cultural identity was seen to be an important component in implementing lasting change. This was achieved through ensuring that community Elders were part of the process at every stage, as well as providing clients with the opportunity to experience bush healing. Community Elders are present at the group meetings and promote cultural identity and educate younger generations. A staff member expressed the importance of Elders through the process:

the Men's Group is based on our Aboriginal culture where we did have a men's place with older men...and is a place where old men used to gather and if men had problems they'd go and sit down with the Elders and talk about it, what's bothering them, and get that support and what the Men's Group is doing is giving that service back traditional way, where no shame (quoted in O'Hara 2013: 38).

The centrality of the group was identified by O’Hara as being key to the success of the program and, in particular, the process of sharing and support that occurs within the groups. A staff member interviewed commented on the Men’s group, stating:

Because you see – you see the men sitting down there. The men are talking about themselves, and all the other men around them are other men that supports them when someone talks here. There are all other men around them...that circle in the middle is they’re dealing with this thing inside of them. And after that you see those lines in the brown means they’re going back – that’s the community circle. And the line is that they’ve come from the meeting, they’ve talked about themselves and they feel good about them. So they go back into the community feeling good about what they’ve done (quoted in O’Hara 2013: 40).

One woman commented that taking part helped her to tell her story and: ‘every time when I [am] coming out of woman’s group I always come out light, as you know my heart feel really light’ (quoted in O’Hara 2013: 41). This feeling was echoed by a male client: ‘you get to know everybody and, you know, once you sort of bring all that – relieve all that bloody weight that you’re carrying all the problem, and you start talking to them and they—you know, they don’t judge you, doubt you’ (quoted in O’Hara 2021: 41).

O’Hara (2013) also found that key to the success of the groups was the establishment of group rules, developed in collaboration with the facilitators and clients. The rules included respect, trust, confidentiality, being sober and one person speaking at a time. In addition, a core component of the program was the provision of practical support, including linking clients to services/programs and assisting clients to navigate systems and with transport.

O’Hara (2013) made several recommendations. Firstly, she identified that one of the key issues facing the NWQICSS in implementing the justice program was the difficulty in

obtaining long-term funding. This affected the organisation's ability to create a solid foundation for the program. In light of this, the evaluation recommended that funding bodies 'consider a justice reinvestment approach', providing *at least* three years of to provide program and organisational stability (2013: iv). Secondly was the importance of fostering a holistic approach that focuses not only on criminal justice outcomes, but also on the context of broader family and community concerns. It was recommended that programs of this nature incorporate 'empowerment, self-determination, strengthening cultural norms, traditions and seek to reconnect Indigenous people to their cultural and spiritual origins' (2013: 15). Thirdly, there should be further emphasis on promoting employment and education activities for clients, including linking them with formal education providers and local employment services and industry. Fourthly, the evaluation called for the creation of a similar justice program suitable for young people. Finally, implicit in several of the recommendations is the need for adequate staff training, as well as ensuring positions for both male and female justice workers, to facilitate gender-specific group work.

The Ma'Ddaimba-Balas Indigenous Men's Group in Innisfail, Queensland was evaluated by McCalman et al (2006), although data limitations preclude comprehensive conclusions being drawn about the program's impact. The group met monthly and facilitated social and sporting events, provided health support and supported members through court processes. The group also undertook 'preventive work, such as night patrol and mediation to keep men out of the criminal justice system' (2006: 12), delivered substance abuse, anger management and domestic violence programs, as well as helping the men obtain their driver's licenses. McCalman et al found that the '[e]vidence suggests that Men's Group may be effective in creating some reduction in breaches of domestic violence orders' (2006: 15). McCalman et al (2006) made a number of recommendations, including in relation to data collection. The authors also identified that:

The statistics do lend some support to the claims by Men's Group leaders that their programs have reduced the number of men being incarcerated, and in recent months, show evidence of shorter sentences. Micro-level evaluation could confirm the effectiveness of court support and determine the cost effectiveness of Men's Groups as a diversionary strategy (2006: 16).

McKendrick et al (2014) discussed the Yaba Bimbi Indigenous Men's Support Group, also in Queensland, and established following a series of suicides by young men, some of which took place in custody. The group's main activities involved weekly discussion sessions, including in relation to family violence; counselling; men's health clinics, provided by an Aboriginal doctor; and activities to promote social skills and bonding (hunting, fishing, camping, and visits to the cinema). Local magistrates began referring men to the program and funding was secured to develop a program for young men at risk of becoming involved with the adult criminal justice system and their families, although it was also noted that '[t]here was a perception that some men were using Men's group to escape the criminal justice system' (McCalman et al 2005: 6). There was some evidence that participants reduced their alcohol use and the program was helping to reduce family violence. In addition,

The men identified lack of cultural identity, spirituality and values as a root cause of Yarrabah men's problems. They also realised that these underlying factors needed to be addressed if issues such as suicidal ideation, domestic violence, alcoholism, relationship problems and other traumas were to be eliminated from their lives (McKendrick et al 2014: 68; citing McCalman et al 2005).

The Family and Community Healing program is delivered by the Central Northern Adelaide Health Service. The aim of the program is to address family violence in Aboriginal families in a North-West metropolitan region of Adelaide and focuses on capacity-building

and early intervention. The program uses a holistic approach, with services provided for all individuals in the family and participants separated out into groups for men, women, young people, and community.

One of the key objectives of the program is to ‘equip Aboriginal people with the skills for effective communication and conflict resolution’ (Kowanko and Power 2008: 28). In their evaluation of the program, Kowanko and Power (2008; see also Kowanko et al 2009; McKendrick et al 2014) found that talking circles were a central component of group activities used to meet this objective. For instance, women’s group activities include a weekly talking circle. A facilitator of the women’s group commented on how the group work supported the development of participants’ skills and confidence in resolving conflict: ‘Coming to the Group is like having a shot of vitamin B that keeps her going for the week and [she] is much more positive about her life and is making an assertive stand for herself’ (quoted in Kowanko and Power 2008: 29). Talking circles have also become a regular part of the men’s group and, according to Kowanko and Power (2008: 30) ‘have proved beneficial in men’s healing journey’. Kowanko and Power found that the group provided a forum for the men to talk about issues and problems that they would not feel comfortable to talk about elsewhere. In focus groups with the men, several commented that the talking circles had ‘taught them to “go home and listen”’ and that ‘[a]ttendance at the group is significant in reducing social isolation, developing identity and confidence, learning new skills, building cultural awareness and connecting to the younger generations to pass on stories, skills and knowledge’ (2008: 29-30).

Rekindling the Spirit operates in Lismore and was originally developed for local men wanting to address their issues with violence (Newell 2010; see also Rekindling the Spirit 2021). It was founded by Greg Telford, an Aboriginal and Islander man from Minjungbal

Country in the Tweed Valley. Reducing reoffending was the most common support need identified by male clients (52%), while most female clients wanted support with training and job-seeking instead (56%) (Newell 2010). As part of the service, a men's healing group is run once a week and involves:

a yarnning circle, free of judgement, to support positive connection, empower change, to build resilience and awareness of self, identify concerns around violence, Mental Health and Alcohol and other Drug use, family/relationship concerns, and so much more. This is a space where we come together to share and exchange our own experiences through story in a safe and supported environment, this process allows for guided solution finding and direction (Rekindling the Spirit 2021: np).

Rekindling the Spirit, while originally developed to address men's violence and other issues, now includes services for both men and women with topics including: alcohol and drug abuse; child abuse and neglect; family relationships; family violence; personal and individual development; parenting skills; and relationship development (O'Hara 2013).

Wulgunggo Ngalu Learning Place (WNLP) is a residential program for up to 18 men in Victoria. An independent evaluation by Clear Horizon Consulting (2013) found program completers also completed their community correction orders at higher rates than Aboriginal offenders in the community. The WNLP also uses weekly men's circles between staff and participants around a purpose-built fire pit, to encourage sharing and discussion of experiences and issues. A past participant provided insight into the importance of the circles, which was captured in the evaluation:

Young black men these days, we've all run off the tracks, but if we can all meet up at places like [WNLP] and share all our different experiences, we all learn from each other and each other's mistakes...A lot of people hold [it all] inside and don't really tell anyone

but when men get together like that we all share our stories, it's a stress reliever... You all get to know one another and share your experience and where you are from and that, it was good... it was like we were all brothers' (Clear Horizon Consulting 2013: 24).

It is acknowledged that some of the aspects that make WNLP effective may be due to its residential component or aspects that are not necessarily replicable in a yarning circle context.

Deloitte and the Healing Foundation (DHF) (2021) recently evaluated the men's healing programs delivered by Dardi Munwurro in Victoria. One of these, the residential men's program Ngarra Jarranounith Place (NJP), ('Men's Healing Place' in Woi Wurung), is thought to be the first Indigenous men's residential family violence healing program in the world and won the gold award at the Australian Crime and Violence Prevention Awards (Australian Institute of Criminology 2021). The program offers a 16-week intensive, culturally-safe residential program for Aboriginal men who use, or are at risk of using, family violence. During the program, participants live independently in a residential property, while receiving holistic support to strengthen their culture, adopt positive behaviours and nurture healthy relationships. They engage in one-on-one case management and

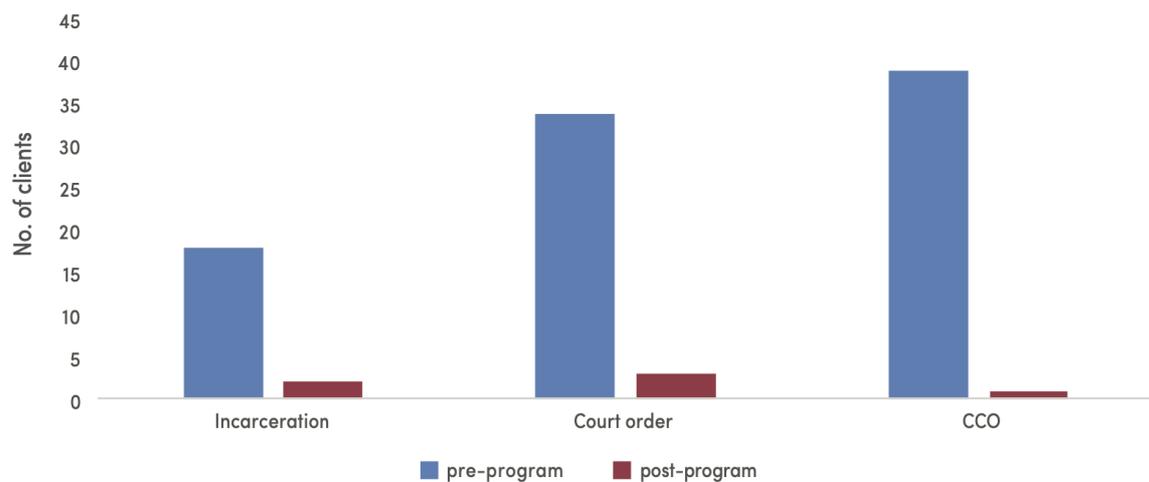
structured weekly development programs that include a vocational program with Parks Victoria, music, writing (to support men to acknowledge their emotions), art, and other cultural programs, including smoking ceremonies, yarning circles, and meditation (DHF 2021: 2).

Participants also receive follow-up support for up to 18 months after completing the program and are encouraged to maintain connection with their local men's groups.

Dardi Munwurro runs several other programs, including a men's healing and behaviour change (MHBC) program and men's healing camps and week-long MHBC program programs in prison, as well as a diversionary program for young men aged 10-17. These three programs were evaluated together by DHF (2021), with some of the data pooled across all three programs. Accordingly, it is sometimes difficult to determine which outcomes can be linked specifically to the NJP, the only program that explicitly includes a yarning circle component. However, the evaluation revealed that:

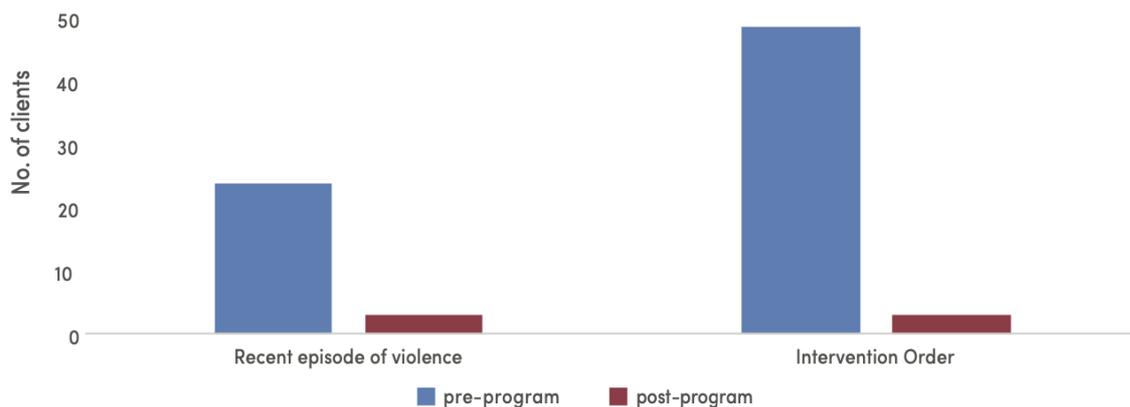
- most respondents who had completed the program felt they had a stronger cultural identity and cultural knowledge, as well as increased community connections and positive identity;
- NJP participants significantly reduced their substance use, although this was lower than for participants in the men's MHBC program;
- across all three programs, the number of people experiencing homelessness and who returned to a substance abuse clinic reduced by 100%;
- there was a 45% increase across all programs in the number of people returning to family/kinship homes or securing their own accommodation;
- before the program, only one NJP participant was in employment, compared with nine post-program;
- there were noticeable improvements in NJP participants' ability to take responsibility for their violent actions; and
- NJP and MHBC participants' involvement with the justice system was dramatically reduced and self-reported violence outcomes were also improved, although the limitations of self-report data were acknowledged (these data were pooled; see Figures 1 and 2).

Figure 1: Justice Outcomes for NJP and MHBC Participants



Source: DHF (2021)

Figure 2: Self-reported Violence Outcomes for NJP and MHBC Participants



Source: DHF (2021)

The evaluation also found that, across the three programs:

- each dollar invested into Dardi Munwurro was estimated to provide a return on investment of 50-190%;
- the rate of incarceration decreased from 13% pre-program to 4% post-program; and
- each avoided case of incarceration represented an annual saving to government of over \$90,000.

While it is not possible, on the basis of this evaluation, to determine the specific impact of the yarning circle component of the NJP, separate from its other components, the following comments from the Chair of the Healing Foundation, in the introduction to the report, are salient:

This report builds the evidence base of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men's healing programs, and thus promotes the benefits of men and boys to reconnecting with cultural values, the restoration of identity, and the building of positive family and community relationships...[and] shows that change happens when we work with Aboriginal men to create a place of safety, providing an environment for them to speak for themselves, tell their own stories, and be in charge of their own healing (DHF 2021: iii).

### **Yarning Circles in Prison**

In-prison cultural programs, which include yarning circles, are run in several jurisdictions, including the ACT. For example, yarning circles generally operate on a monthly basis in the ACT prison, although these have been suspended, due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to an ACT Government (2016: 6) report, these yarning circles 'created a sense of belonging and pride to assist rehabilitation, and encouraged detainees to engage with services to assist with community reintegration'. In 2015, this program was expanded into the Indigenous Traditional Culture Healing Arts Program, with up to 14 to 18 male detainees attending the sessions and 'organisers and participants providing positive feedback' (2016: 60).

The Kunga Stopping Violence Program (KSVP) is a throughcare program in Alice Springs that works to support Aboriginal women who have been incarcerated for alleged

violent offences (see NAAJA 2021; ‘kunga’ means ‘adult woman’ in Anungu languages: Carnes 2015). The KSVP provides pre-release support to Aboriginal women in prison, including a bi-annual four-week violence-prevention, trauma-specific course. When the women are released from prison, the KSVP continues to provide support to the women for 12 months post-release. For some women, the period of support continues past the 12-month period. Relevantly for the purposes of this research, the four-week violence-prevention course runs in a communal format, with three core components: the Circle of Wellbeing; Anger, Violence, Boundaries, Safety; and Loss and Grief. As Bevis et al (2020: 48) explained, the course opens with the use of *Dadirri*, ‘a reflective meditative practice’ intended to ‘not just create feelings of safety in individuals within the group, but also to open an awareness of listening to others, and being listened to, as a process of ceremonial cultural healing’. The concept of *Dadirri* has been shared by Ungunmerr-Baumann (1988). The concept and spiritual practice comes from the Ngan’gikurunggurr and Ngen’giwumirri languages of the Aboriginal peoples of the Daly River region in the Northern Territory and means ‘inner deep listening and quiet still awareness’.

Through the use of ethnographic research methods, Bevis et al observed the women participating in the KSVP. Their observations of the program over this period are instructive:

The women’s stories were told with such simplicity; however, in discussion, the women began to unpack the complexity of their lived experiences. Their individual stories interlinked with their collective narratives... Working with stories is meaning making—transformative, political, healing action (2020: 49).

While the KSVP is a voluntary program inside the prison, Bevis et al (2020) contended that it could also be used by the courts as a diversionary option. Incorporating a

mixed-methods approach, Carnes (2015) conducted a preliminary evaluation of the KSVP.

Carnes made the following observation of the Circle of Wellbeing:

Though the women may not be loud and interactive and talkative in a group situation, it does not mean they are not actively participating by listening and learning. Listening (*Dadirri*) is an important part of understanding. Often they would seek out a facilitator after group work or when someone had said something [that provoked a feeling] (2015: 13).

The Circle of Wellbeing, which incorporates a yarning circle, is only one of three components of the program. However, the findings of the evaluation point to its importance in providing a holistic behavior change program. As Carnes (2015) explained, healing is at the core of the KSVP, as intergenerational trauma underlies the experiences of intergenerational violence for many of the women.

This suggests that evaluations of these programs need to look further than simplistic statistics, such as re-offending rates, getting a job or completing training. Rather, Carnes argued, these programs need to incorporate the priorities of the individual's understanding of their cultural obligations, including caring for family members, staying strong in culture, practising culture and spirituality, and balancing these cultural commitments with the ability to also 'live in the western world' (2015: 4). In this way, Carnes identified several commonalities, across the women's experiences of the program and the insights or goals that they set themselves, on completion of the program and in preparation for release from prison. These include:

- practising *Dadirri* and going on Country;
- further study that leads to work aligned with their family and cultural commitments;

- staying away from alcohol and/or family who misuse substances;
- being able to identify ways of staying safe and having clear boundaries; and
- knowing other Kunga women are there to support them upon release (2015: 12).

A more recent evaluation of the KSVP found that the program is well-regarded in the Mparntwe/Alice Springs community and provides invaluable support to the women and families it works alongside (Anderson 2021). Anderson identified several key themes that added to the program's success. This included:

- staff as a significant strength to the program;
- local staff are valued more than professional qualifications;
- an emphasis on a flexible client-focused and compassionate approach;
- effective trauma-informed training inside prison;
- having systems in place to support staff mental health and wellbeing;
- the employment of a range of effective techniques by staff to communicate with clients;
- the low-profile of the organisation works to its benefit; and
- the ability of KSVP to be resilient throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, by continuing its services remotely.

In particular, the value of listening was identified as crucial to the development of strong, trusting relationships between staff and clients of the KSVP program. Anderson (2021) also mentioned *Dadirri*, suggesting that, while not explicitly referred to by participants, the program promotes 'a deep listening process'. Staff interviewed as part of the evaluation commented: 'We listen. A lot of women don't have that opportunity...for someone to listen to them'. These sentiments were echoed by participants, who emphasised

the value of being listened to and heard, saying: ‘They talk to us, we talk to them, just makes me feel good, talking to someone about my problems’ (Anderson 2021: 22).

Yarning circles have also been used as a delivery approach in the Brothers Inside program in NSW. These circles were facilitated by Aboriginal men, with one facilitator noting that the circle created a relaxed and comfortable environment, where the men could discuss topics openly, safely and without judgement (Hammond 2011). Describing the yarning circles, Hammond (2011: 376) commented:

It’s a more relaxed setting – they have the same upbringing, the same issues growing up and lots of the same issues with their partners, kids and families. Because this was an environment where they could talk openly without being judged about being an Aboriginal man in prison, after being put down all their lives inside and outside prison, they felt comfortable talking in this way.

The positive experience of having the opportunity to spend time yarning with other Aboriginal men was described by a program participant as follows:

I found it very interesting speaking amongst other Brothers that are in the same position as me, in gaol away from our kids. I really like talking about our role as Dads and our strengths – strengths that I didn’t even know I had (quoted in Hammond 2011: 377).

A similar program for incarcerated Indigenous fathers is called ‘Babiin-Miyagang’ (‘Dad’ and ‘Family’ in Wiradjuri). Babiin-Miyagang was first funded by NSW Corrective Services in 2011, as a way to help strengthen and promote the fathering roles and leadership skills of Indigenous men in prison. By 2014, 363 men had participated in the program (Rossiter et al 2017).

The importance of having an Indigenous Elder facilitate the sessions was emphasised by many of the program participants. One commented:

I hope that he [facilitator] knows that he's turned a man around in five little sessions...He had the gumption to sit here, on our level and explain what being a man and what being a Dad was all about. I can't thank him enough. He is a beautiful man – he drives a long way. He does hundreds of thousands of kilometres every year (quoted in Rossiter et al 2017: 20).

Another participant reflected that hearing the Elder speak about their childhood helped him to understand himself and his parents more:

I learned a lot about myself as an Indigenous person, how my ancestors and Elders raised their kids. Stories from when [the facilitator] was a kid, and his parents. That gave me an insight into how our parents grew up (quoted in Rossiter et al 2017: 20).

As Rossiter et al noted, however, in isolation, such programs cannot sustain behaviour change. Rather, additional support and strategies are required to help individuals transition into life outside prison, including 'appropriate emotional support, employment and housing environments suitable for children' (2017: 27).

In 2013, the Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department commissioned the Cultural and Indigenous Research Centre Australia (CIRCA) to evaluate eight Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander offender support and reintegration programs. One of these programs was the Marumali Program, a prison program delivering a culturally-sensitive and -appropriate model of healing within correctional facilities ('Marumali' is Kamilaroi for 'put back together': McKendrick et al 2014). Participants complete a five-day voluntary program, focused on healing long-standing trauma associated with the Stolen Generations.

Feedback from participants and stakeholders was positive, suggesting that the program was successful in providing appropriate cultural support contributing ‘to feelings of empowerment, instilling cultural pride, improving cultural identity, promoting respect, and enhancing a sense of community responsibility’ (CIRCA 2013: 125). The findings also revealed that Aboriginal facilitators are key to the success of the program, as ‘participants feel safe and supported in the group environment with their Aboriginal peers and Aboriginal facilitators, and this encourages participation and engagement’ (2013: 146). Analysis of program data supported the qualitative findings, finding evidence of high completion rates. The evaluation noted, however, that the data management system operated by Corrections Victoria did not track individuals’ program participation in a way that could accurately measure the program’s success in achieving the central program outcome, namely, preparation for post-release programs.

The issue of access to appropriate data is an issue across a range of Indigenous justice programs. Another issue is the need for continuity from prison to the community. For example, Cavanagh, Shaw and Bartram spoke to a men’s shed coordinator, who wanted to establish learning programs in prison and then have the men continue their programs in the Men’s Shed on release. He observed: ‘Start an in-reach program for men in prison and an out-reach program for men recently released from prison...teach them skills...get them jobs through the Shed’ (see 2016: 62).

### **Addressing the Needs of Indigenous Women**

There is increasing recognition of the need for an intersectional approach that responds to the

specific needs of Indigenous women. As Radke noted:

By emphasising the experiences of Indigenous women, Women's Yarning Circles acknowledge a defendant's intersectional identity, their vulnerability to intersectional discrimination, and their experience of potentially being both a victim and an offender in the criminal justice system (2018: 66-67).

She suggested that this model also recognises Indigenous women's experiences as both women and Indigenous people, in ways that programs for non-Indigenous women and/or Indigenous men cannot. Robertson, Demosthenous and Demosthenous made the following evocative observations about women's yarning circles: 'quite often, when Aboriginal women come together to share, they disclose experiences and knowledges that speak to, and of, the secret, the spiritual, and the sacred' (2005: 35).

Anthony, Sentence and Behrendt yarned with over 160 women in prison in NSW. They found that the women wanted to receive support from Indigenous-owned and -run organisations, especially services and programs geared towards Indigenous women. As one woman put it: 'take us back to the bush or to the sea to do more black women stuff, back to the land our old ways' (2021: 15). Women's yarning circles may also play a particularly important role in addressing the trauma of child removal, with the intersections between the criminal justice and care and protection systems or particular significance for women (see eg Radke and Douglas 2020).

Although not a program *per se*, Nickson et al (2011) examined the use of the Yarnabout Cards developed by the Nungeena Aboriginal Corporation for Women's Business on the Sunshine Coast. The Yarnabout Cards feature photography and artwork significant to the Indigenous community and are used as a tool for therapeutic work. They 'provide

opportunities for people of all ages to explore meaning, reflect on their experiences, and build on conversation. The cards be used as tools in reflection, counselling, group work, learning, and yarning' (2011: 90). This highlights the broad range of ways in which yarning can be used throughout the justice system and the scope to embed yarning into daily activities, to make the justice system more culturally-appropriate. As Blagg, Bluett-Boyd and Williams (2015) noted, the cards have also become a resource for the local Indigenous community, and are potentially an income-generating and capacity-building resource for the organisation that makes them and their use by mainstream services may also encourage Indigenous women to seek support.

## **Conclusion**

This literature review has examined the available research on yarning circles in the Australian adult criminal justice context. Some of the common themes we identified include the importance of *Dadirri*, or deep listening, the key role played by Indigenous facilitators and Elders, and the desirability of including time on Country.

There was generally a paucity of research explicitly demonstrating the impact of yarning programs. The lack of research on the impact of yarning circles is unsurprising, given there are relatively few robust evaluations of Indigenous justice programs generally (see eg Blagg, Bluett-Boyd and Williams 2015; Hudson 2017). Further research is therefore required to evaluate programs of this nature. It is vital that such research be undertaken by and designed in collaboration with the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, to ensure its methodology is appropriate and consistent with an Indigenous worldview and is grounded in local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge systems (see eg McKendrick et al 2014; see also Tuhiwai Smith 2012). It is axiomatic that any evaluation of

yarning circles should itself include yarning as part of its methodology (see eg Blagg et al 2021; Munro et al 2017). Yarning as part of research methodology has also been used successfully in the evaluation of other types of prison programs (see eg Marchetti et al 2022). In addition, the findings must be relevant to the local context and Blagg, Bluett-Boyd and Williams (2015) have called for evaluation of Indigenous-specific programs to be based on community needs, rather than funding priorities or other standards as set by funding bodies.

We suggest that future evaluations of justice yarning circles adopt the framework developed by CIRCA (2013), which sets out the following good practice themes for Indigenous justice programs:

1. Focusing on crime prevention and aiming to reduce over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the criminal justice system.
2. Meeting needs and addressing a service.
3. Culturally-appropriate program design.
4. Achieving outcomes in line with program intent.
5. Promoting inclusive community.
6. Effective service coordination and collaboration.
7. Advocating for systems reform and improving relationships among key stakeholders.
8. Effective governance and management processes.
9. Clear articulation of program intent.
10. Program sustainability.

This would capture a broad range of parameters and includes qualitative understandings of how and why a program works (or does not), for whom it works (or does not), and the circumstances in which it does (or does not) work.

Crucially, there needs to be acknowledgment that yarning may not lend itself readily to evaluation, using traditional Western paradigms, and should not be measured purely against metrics, such as reduced reoffending. Commenting in relation to Indigenous men's behavioural change programs, Putt and Yamaguchi (2015: 4) suggested that:

Irrespective of the type of program being evaluated, a constant refrain in the evaluation reports is the lack of data that can help answer the question as to whether they have made a difference to the key outcomes of reduced offending and victimisation. This means that what might be assessed as effective implementation is dependent on the realisation of secondary and more immediate outcomes.

These secondary outcomes may include better engagement from participants; increased knowledge and skills; strengthened cultural identity; and improved cultural competence among practitioners and service agencies (Putt and Yamaguchi 2015). Other secondary outcomes they identified included increased self-awareness and a better understanding of legal expectations.

Finally, it is important to recognise the value of yarning circles may lie in their ability to contribute to change, rather than being able to directly attribute changes to such programs (CIRCA 2013). Furthermore, a range of additional supports and measures are required to bring about and sustain change, including in relation to education, employment, housing, mental health, substance abuse, sexual and family violence and child protection and removal and, as well as recognising that these issues occur within a broader context of ongoing systemic racism and the enduring intergenerational trauma of colonisation (see McKendrick et al 2014). Any evaluation therefore needs to be realistic about what yarning circles can – and cannot – achieve and not judge them against unreasonable expectations.



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