

*Speaking the Truth
about Indigenous
Workforce
Experiences*

Nareen Young

MARANA DYARGALI



Interviewed By:

Professor
Robynne Quiggin

Industry Professor Nareen Young, Jumbunna Research at the University of Technology Sydney, is a leading expert on Indigenous people's experiences in the workforce. Nareen has recently led the *Gari Yala* research project (pronounced gar-ree ya-la), which means *Speaking Truth* in the Wiradjuri language.

"We thought Gari Yala was perfect, because what we wanted people to do was speak truth about workplace experiences"

Nareen has a long and esteemed career working with people in workplaces and issues around workplace diversity, pay equity and working people's rights. We talked to Nareen about the ethical approaches taken in the design and direction for the *Gari Yala* project. Nareen shares her insights on the importance of community led research design and engagement. The Indigenous led process enabled open dialogue in the research process, fostering trust and respect about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's lived experiences of employment. Nareen also discusses the support and safety needs of Indigenous participants in cases where they may recall traumatic experiences relating to their work or with the challenging histories that Indigenous people have had with the research process. That this trauma is ongoing, and that the research and survey results show some of the challenging experiences people have at work. The results of the *Gari Yala* research are expected to guide employers

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with information they need about Indigenous people's experiences at work and guide what they need to do now.

"The most important thing that employers can do is unearth the information in terms of what's going on in their own workplaces now. That is a start."

About Nareen

Nareen Young is an Industry Professor at Jumbunna Research, within the Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research at UTS. Nareen is an Eora descendant and has lived and worked all her life on Gadigal land and Dharawal land and raised a family on Gadigal land in Sydney.

RQ Can you tell us about the Yari Gali project?

NY We set up the Indigenous People and Work Research and Practice Hub last year within Jumbunna Research. The *Gari Yala* project, *Speaking Truth* in the Wiradjuri language, is centering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's workplace experiences. When we set up the Hub we quickly discovered that there wasn't a rigorous national project asking Indigenous people about workplace experiences. So that's what this project is. We did the survey work this year and we had 1033 responses. It's very exciting that we've got that kind of response.

RQ Can you tell us a little bit more about that relationship building, how did you begin those relationships in the research process?

NY A whole lot of factors. I've worked as an employment diversity practitioner for a long time; I've headed up two employment diversity peaks. I've been reading research about diversity groups, and been involved in lots of discussions about the diversity groups and what needs to happen, and for diverse groups to flourish at work, and what struck me a long time ago was that there didn't seem to be any work asking Indigenous people about their views about work. Having Aboriginal background myself, I thought it was important to talk about the experiences in informing employers about what they need to do to make workplaces places where Indigenous people could truly thrive.

RQ Who were the initial stakeholders or partners in the project?

NY Fundamentally, the stakeholders are Indigenous people. We partnered with Diversity Council Australia (DCA), which has 600 employer members. Strategically the DCA helped us in terms of getting to employers. They have a really proud reputation among diversity practitioners and among diversity

stakeholders for the work they do. I wanted a survey, because increasingly, Indigenous employment is in the diversity basket in workplaces, and I wanted there to be a survey grounded in the diversity discipline.

RQ How was the project developed?

NY We set up an expert panel of over fifteen Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to oversee the project. It was important for the research that the expert panel be established because there are a narrative and national discourse around Indigenous employment that really is about election cycles and politicians, and used as election fodder, really, in terms of how it's used. It doesn't go to ever having asked Indigenous people about experiences. It goes to non-Indigenous people's views about what needs to happen to get Indigenous people jobs.

Because I've been involved in diversity practice for such a long time, and in Indigenous employment, I was able to handpick the expert panel. I involved people like Kara Keys, who worked at the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) for a long time, Professor Megan Williams, who I had worked with on a workforce development project with the New South Wales Department of Health; Matthew Walsh, who had been at Jumbunna Research; Lani Blanco-Francis, a Senior Aboriginal Human Resources consultant, Ktisty Masella, the CEO of the Aboriginal Employment Strategy (AES). A whole lot of people who know what they're talking about.

I also invited a young academic from the University of Newcastle, Olivia Evans, who works at the intersection of race and class. Now, Member of Legislative Council (MLC), Sheena Walsh, who was working at the Australian Football League (AFL) job ready. The other person on it was Professor Deen Sanders, a consultant at Deloitte, who gave an enormous contribution to the survey design. The group was influential in the way that the survey ended up looking. When we started the research, it was DCA and us, and Kirsten Gray was working with Jumbunna Research, it really was about inclusion and exclusion, but with the advice of the expert panel, it went to racism and experiences of racism and discrimination.

RQ What were some of the principles that guided your process of consultation and negotiation?

NY So we would do work, and then we would distribute it to them, and then we would have a meeting of that group. That happened three times throughout the survey development. Those meetings were very open, and people gave their expert opinions, which were taken very seriously. It was a combination of knowledge, the knowledge of the research and the survey design, and the panel all brought lived experiences of working. It was really interesting, because they'd bring these amazing professional skills and knowledge of the employment arena, but they also brought their lived experience as Aboriginal people to that group.

RQ In developing the survey and bringing together, did you follow a particular protocol?

NY In terms of putting together the survey, I think it was a combination of Blackfella way and DCA way and how they have developed how they do this stuff over the years, which is exactly the process I outlined. That accorded with Blackfella way because it was incredibly consultative, it was incredibly respectful, it was incredibly mindful of that, and they are good allies. They gave us every bit of respect to understand that we knew what we were talking about more than they did, and that really worked. Everyone's contribution was respected, we really knew what we were talking about, and the group went away and did the work.

RQ Did you involve Elders or Senior Knowledge Holders in the development of the project? Was the development and design influenced by language and cultural dimensions?

NY The expert panel were the Senior Knowledge Holders, Aboriginal Senior Knowledge Holders, about Aboriginal employment around the country. We followed cultural ways in terms of how we treated each other and how we listened to each other and the respect we held each other's opinions in, and there wasn't any competition or big-noting. I think those people on the committee appreciated that it wasn't gammon, it wasn't, they weren't just there to tick boxes, or they were

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there to give their stamp of approval to work that was done, it was very genuine, that we wanted their input, and that was followed through.

RQ Did you give any thought to Indigenous Cultural Intellectual Property, specifically?

NY Yes, Jumbunna owns the survey data. That was something that I negotiated with DCA at the beginning, so we jointly own the copyright of the survey itself. We've got an agreement, and we've reached an agreement around how that will be used. But in terms of the survey data, Jumbunna owns that, ensuring Indigenous ownership of Indigenous data, and DCA will need to seek our permission to use it if they ever want to.

RQ Were there any other ethical guidelines in relation to research and data collection that you had to consider?

NY We were very mindful that if there were situations that had been difficult or traumatic that participants had to put their minds back to, and we gave advice about seeking support from counsellors. We were very, very mindful that some of the questions that we're asked might have raised traumatic experiences or brought back some trauma, so that was a concern, and anonymity was really important because, you know, there were things there that Aboriginal people and Indigenous people talk about work, that they don't necessarily want to be public and want to keep confidential. So the anonymity aspect was really important.

RQ Can you tell us how the study was carried out and how participants were identified, recruited and what research methods did you use to collect the data?

NY It was an online survey. We put it out on social media, and we put it out via the expert



panel. We also sent it out to people we knew. For example, DCA sent it to their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander reference committee, and we sent it to the ACTU. We were amazed at the response. What it said to us is that Indigenous people do want to talk about work. It was word of mouth, word of social media, or the black grapevine really, that thought it out and with really great results.

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RQ How did you engage sponsors in the project?

NY We were fortunate to have the National Australia Bank (NAB) and Coles to sponsor us. Both sponsors have been great. Both were represented in all of the dealings we've had with them by Indigenous people. Topaz McAuliffe, who's a Torres Strait Island woman, from Coles and Evan Liddle, from NAB. The whole process has just been this fantastic, collaborative effort between Indigenous people because they have represented those sponsors, and it's been great.

RQ That's quite an amazing representation of the principles of the UTS Indigenous research strategy being put into action, being Indigenous led and community driven.

NY Yes, and communities from across the country and very diverse backgrounds and very diverse kind of knowledge, and it worked really well. It just has to be community driven. We can't have this situation where we have employment programs and employment policies continuing to be driven by non-Indigenous people. The lived experience of working and the lived experience of all the trauma around the history of research for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in this country is so fraught. It still resonates for people today. The trauma is ongoing, and the survey results will show that about what people's experiences at work are. These things have to be community led, and the report ends with a call to action, what workplaces can do, and that will be the first time that has come from Indigenous people.

RQ Can you talk to us about your plans for publication and dissemination of the research?

What do you hope will come out of the research?

NY The strategic intent behind working with DCA was that the research would go to employers. I think employers are really interested, certainly, NAB and Coles are interested enough to give funding to support the research to find out what Indigenous people say about work. Employers have said for years that they don't know what to do, that they don't know what the thing is that they need to do. This report provides employers with a guide with the information they need about

Indigenous people's experiences at work and a guide to what they now need to do. The most important thing that employers can do is unearth the information in terms of what's going on in their own workplaces now. That is a start.

RQ Did participants in the survey receive any feedback from you about their responses? Will they receive a copy of the survey? Who will benefit from the research?

NY No, they didn't because they were anonymous, so we won't be able to go back to them. Hopefully, they'll see it in their workplaces or the media.

I think people will be able to use it in their workplaces, particularly if they're members of DCA because they work in diversity committed organisations. What's more valuable is having a report out there in the public domain, which is information from the community.

RQ Were there any practical constraints or challenges and/or successes of the study?

NY We were surprised at how many responses we got. We thought maybe 400 is what we'd get. So 1033, it was just so lovely and so gratifying. But it really said to me what I've thought for a long time, that people do want to talk and want an opportunity to be heard around this stuff.

RQ What are some of the lessons that you learned from doing the project?

NY I would very much use that collaborative model again. That's been such a lesson for me out of that. Trust your instinct around using word of mouth to get it out. I've been saying for a long time Facebook is such a used platform for Indigenous communities. The one I think we'd like to do down the track is some good qualitative stuff around the same questions, and I think that will be different again. So let's see what I say in a couple years' time.

RQ Would you have any advice for researchers thinking about doing this kind of survey work with Aboriginal people? Anything that is a takeaway from your own experience from this project?

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NY I think it has to be community led, and I consider my own ethical obligations really important in this regard. I'm white-passing, I didn't grow up in community, I like to be led by community myself because I know my limitations in that context. I think there's an ethical obligation for me to be very much guided by people who have more lived experience and kind of different identity to mine. I think if non-Indigenous researchers take that attitude, kind of Indigenous ways of being, and adopt them to their approaches to Indigenous research and Indigenous people, then that will be really useful.

RQ Can you tell us when the outcomes of the research will be made available?

NY As we speak, doing the last proofing, and then we'll launch it with DCA on the 17th November 2020. It's exciting.



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