

*Partnership Research
with Indigenous
Businesses in
Australia and the
United States*

MARANA DYARGALI



Dean Jarrett

Interviewed By:

Professor
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Dr Dean Jarrett received his PhD through the University of Technology Sydney Business School in 2019. Dean's PhD research, *Managing Commercial Relationships between Indigenous Businesses and Large Purchasing Organisations: Changing the Play and the Rules of the Game*, investigated the factors that underpin commercial relationships between Indigenous businesses, and their corporate and government buyers. Specifically, Dean looked at this phenomenon through the lens of new institutional economics, and transaction costs economic theory underpinned by Indigenous standpoint theory. The research conducted interviews in Australia, with businesses across different industries, as well as looking at First Nations businesses in the same industries in the United States.

Dean is a recipient of the Fulbright scholarship, which allowed him to study at the University of Arizona within the American Indian Studies Department. With the support of a number of Native American academics, Dean also had connections with the Native Nations Institute and the Law Faculty.

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“So, the way in which you introduce yourself is an important part of building relationships in research. When you introduce yourself, you tell people your story of where you're from, who your family are and how you are connected. In terms of Indigenous cultural values, this allows the building of a rapport and even trust in the relationship. Letting people know who you are, as opposed to what you do, can allow people, in their own time, to determine how we can relate to each other.”

Dean shares his insights on how he worked with the protocols and principles of research with Indigenous people through the use of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Studies (AIATSIS) research guidelines. Dean also discusses how he worked with the University ethics requirements for engagement with human subjects, as well as the extra requirements for ethics of working with Indigenous respondents. Dean's doctoral research utilised Yarning and deep listening as a methods and approaches when he conducted twenty-eight in depth interviews in both Australia and the United States. We hear about the use of Indigenous Standpoint Theory and its use as a tool by Indigenous researchers as well as other ethical research considerations, such as factoring in time for relationship building, and the importance of deep listening and reflexivity.

Dean's family are Koori and Murri from New South Wales (NSW) and Queensland (Qld). Dean's Father is of the Gumbayngirr people located on the mid-north coast of NSW and grew up on the Bellwood reserve at Nambucca Heads NSW. Dean's Mother, was born on the Woorabinda Aboriginal reserve in Central Qld. Both her parents were forcibly removed from their homelands to Woorabinda. Dean's maternal Grandmother is a Gooreng Gooreng woman from the Burnett district of Central Qld in an area north west of Bundaberg at the headwaters of and along the Burnett River. His maternal Grandfather is of the Kungaditchi and Punthamara people from the Channel Country of South West Qld.

Dr Jarrett has presented & lectured at numerous universities and conferences on a range of business, management, and other Indigenous topics. He also has around fifteen years' experience working within third sector organisations in middle and senior management roles and governance positions across areas such as Indigenous health, employment, and Aboriginal land councils. As a business owner Dr Jarrett is a Director with boutique consulting firm Wurindaga Management and Procurement Services. He has a strong interest in Indigenous public policy and legislation, particularly those concerning Indigenous social enterprise and economic development. He believes that inclusive procurement is about Indigenous socio-economic independence and empowerment and tapping into diverse ideas that could bring transformational cultural change within large purchasing organisations for the better. Dean is currently a Board member of Supply Nation, UTS Indigenous Research Committee, UTS Business School Indigenous Pathways Working Group and St. Brendans College, Yeppoon.

RQ Can you tell us about Indigenous Standpoint Theory and how you built your relationships in the research?

DJ There was a difference between the relationships I built in Australia and those built in the United States, despite working with Indigenous groups in both of those places. I was fortunate enough to know a lot of Indigenous business people in Australia because of the business relationships I've had prior to doing my PhD, but I also provided information about the research to various other businesses. The research focused on the construction, professional services, technology, and education and training industries. I had prior knowledge of Indigenous businesses in those industries so methods I used included purposive sampling while combining personal knowledge with industry and academic reports. I also used the snowballing technique, where one business points you to another business and so on.

The principles and objectives of my research was based on a collaborative partnership arrangement which I developed with each of the businesses I interviewed. It was not an approach of just come in, get the data and go, but it was a more organic or collectivist type of process. My research is qualitative, so it was to do with the story and the yarn. There was a need to be sensitive and do some really deep listening to understand what people were saying, but also what people were not saying. Body language and gestures were very important in that sometimes they gave context to what was being said. A method of Dadirri was used, this is a deep listening process that is more than just listening. It is actually an information exchange that goes deeper in a cultural sense. It can connect you to the yarn, the land and an inner reverence that keeps you present.

While I knew the people in Australia, explaining the research was a big part of the initial stages of my interviews. We had to build the relationships in a different way, because

the relationship had changed from me being a business person who regularly connected with them, to one of being a research partner.

In the US, I was fortunate enough to have Native American academics and friends who counselled and advised me and then later introduced me to various organisations and individuals. Some were friends and others were business owners with which they already had a relationship. It was these introductions that I saw similarities in the cultural protocols of many Indigenous Australians and Native American peoples. Particularly at some of the functions I attended, sometimes Native American folks would mention parents and grandparents and their tribe, and someone would know someone, which is similar to many Indigenous Australian people.

As I mentioned, I met many Native American people. We took time to get to know each other and many became research partners and many became friends. I factored the time it took to get know each other *into my research process* in the US and this actually extended my plans by three months, which I see as a critical investment because I believe we are now friends for life and this holds special significance for me, as I hope it does for them. Our relationship, I believe, is a close bond, not only in a research sense, but in life as well.

So, the way in which you introduce yourself is an important part of building relationships in research. When you introduce yourself, you tell people your story of where you're from, who your family are and how you are connected. In terms of Indigenous cultural values, this allows the building of a rapport and even trust in the relationship. Letting people know who you are, as opposed to what you do, can allow people, in their own time, to determine how we can relate to each other. This initial engagement can help to build a rapport, respect and hopefully, a research partnership that has mutual benefit. In terms of Indigenous Standpoint Theory, it can help frame this deeper connection. Each gets a sense of each-others cultural values from discussing who we are and where we are from as opposed to where they work, for example, and what they do. For my research, this initial process lasted from five minutes to upwards of an hour before we even started discussing the questions about my project.

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It takes time, so you have got to be understanding in terms of peoples' availability. In my research, people were running a business, they have a family, they have other commitments and obligations in community and so on. So, I had to be understanding in terms of their time constraints and expectations. It is really important to be reflexive in the approach to timelines, because people have very busy schedules. Giving people plenty of notice and time needs to be factored in rather than being constrained by it.

For example, I had an experience when I went to Melbourne to interview some people and something happened, which meant I had to fly back to Sydney and make arrangement to come back another time. It was very important to have that understanding that sometimes, unexpected priorities happen and schedules need to change, particularly in Indigenous communities.

All of the people that contributed to the research, are running a business and have other commitments, and obligations in their lives. This may be different to non-Indigenous people. With obligations to their families, communities, business, committees and volunteerism the number of available people to carry out these roles may be very limited so it falls on the same few. Hence, there is possibly a complete difference in the understanding of how time, as a resource, is articulated and encompassed in Indigenous research.

RQ Is that time you take to get to know people a part of reciprocity or is there some other way you would describe that?

DJ It's partly reciprocity in the way that I provide a yarn about me, and although I won't ask, you may provide a yarn about you too. But you may choose not too as well, and that's okay. I also think there's also an obligation to introduce ourselves in this way because it helps to close the divide in our understanding of each other and it may also show respect for our families, community and who I am as a person. The yarn might go right back, it's something intrinsic to us, in our ways of introducing ourselves.

RQ You mention there are things you won't ask, can you speak about that?

DJ I suppose it is about respect that goes right back to the old people in my family, my upbringing. My father never spoke directly with my Nana and Pa on Mum's side, there was an avoidance type relationship there. This avoidance relationship goes right back in the family. They never had a direct conversation, but they go around it, by talking on the side or side talking. Dad would say something loud enough so the old people would hear it, but he would do this by talking to Mum and this happened vice versa. I remember when we were growing up, Dad and Pa would be fixing a car, being backyard mechanics together, and they would be yelling out to us kids to come over and get the different tools. Dad wouldn't ask Pa, and Pa wouldn't ask Dad, because of the avoidance relationship there.

For some people, it's disrespectful to ask them questions. Even today, I have a very low communication level with my in-laws. It is an intrinsic thing that I grew up with, it's imprinted in me, I was socialised that way. This is one way I engage with other people now. Sometimes you ask old people a question, and I when I say old people I mean Aboriginal Elders, and they'll just walk away from you, they won't even answer you. But that's your answer. So, if you don't learn from that, you're missing something. There is a skill to the way you ask questions. I sometimes watch Stan Grant and the way he asks a backhanded sort of question, without directly asking it, is brilliant. It is respectful and a real skill. In interviews you can say, "I noticed you talked about 'such and such', is it possible to get a better understanding of that?" You can delve without being rude and disrespectful. There could end up being no real cut and dry answers but the communication process can hold more importance than the answer itself.

I talk about and cite other work on this in my research, the 'high and low context' ways of communicating. Indigenous people largely communicate in high context, you'll get the whole backstory first before you start to discuss things. You might have to go round and round and round a few times, before you get to the actual question you were looking for a response about. Low context communication is a direct

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and straight in approach. For example, you want to engage with Indigenous people? Where's the script for this? This approach is like running through a checklist. Sometimes, high context doesn't work. We can be more spontaneous, coming to a point in a conversation where we can search back into the responses to find something else out. High context for many Indigenous people and low context for many non-Indigenous people is certainly a part of understanding ways of communicating.

The avoidance type relationship, underpinned by cultural values, still happens in business today. People won't go into certain shops in northern parts of Australia, because in laws are working on the counter. Another example of that was when I was teaching and a couple of students from Africa were presenting. We had 15 minutes for the presentation and it took about 45 minutes to present their topic. I didn't mark them down, because I understood the high context way of communicating.

Many relationship and cultural values that Indigenous people intrinsically have, in terms of reciprocity, obligation and avoidance relationships, are very important to factor into a research process.

RQ What do you think works when framing questions for research with our people?

DJ It depends on your research design methodology, what methods you are going to use, and the subject matter. The way I approached it was with open ended questions. In one interview, I asked the opening question of a Native American person and they spoke for half an hour and without interrupting I kept track of what they responded to as they spoke. That is, as the person was speaking I was writing my reflections against upcoming questions. The analysis process and the way you treat



the data becomes very important in these circumstances. The kinds of questions you ask really comes down to how well you've built your relationship with the individual research partner. You can ask more questions if you feel more comfortable, but it is very situational and depends on relational circumstances.

RQ *Can you speak about some of the comparisons between your research in Australia and the United States?*

DJ The ethics processes in Australia and the United States are different. Some of the tribal governments in the US have their own approval process to undertake research on the Reservations. For example, the Navajo Nation have an ethics process you need to go through if you want to go on to Navajo Country to conduct research. You need to have the university's research ethics approval process as well as the Navajo ethics process. Another difference was knowing when you were on a Reservation or not, because some Reservations are inundated with Western businesses, like Mc Donald's and strip malls. I took part in the Native Nations Institute's Nation Building course whilst I was there and also attended some workshops on legal and ethical matters. These courses helped me become well informed about various research processes and some of the aspects of Native American Reservations.

A reflection I had was, imagine if we had a Gumbaynggirr Nation ethics process that you had to go through before you came onto Gumbaynggirr Country to undertake research. Wouldn't that be brilliant in Australia? It would allow Indigenous Australians to lead, control, manage and drive research issues that we think we need, not others. But I don't think it happens anywhere in Australia. It seems like researchers just come and go as they like. I've over simplified it, of course, it is still difficult to get ethics approvals, but it's not as contained in Australia, as it is in the United States on the Indian Country.

The process of making ethics applications on Reservations led me to change tact. I had to meet in towns and build rapport within Native American business communities in the southwest corner. As I mentioned earlier, this took much longer than what I expected and my

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assumptions about the time it it would take were certainly mislaid. I attended many Chamber of Commerce functions. I went to the National Minority Supplier Development Council in the Southwest. People from the Native Nations Institute introduced me to these folks. Joan Timeche, the CEO of the Native Nations Institute was the main person to look after me. At that time, they were also on the Board of Directors at the Center for American Indian Economic Development. I already knew an Alaskan Native, who was also a Board Member of NANA Corporation up in Alaska. So, I had a couple of connections already who introduced me to different folks. But it all still took time, which is different to what happened in Australia. Here I knew most of the research partners for a long time prior to having our research yarn.

I presented some research in the United States and when people presented they introduce themselves in similar ways to here in Australia. They introduce who their grandfather is and who their grandmother is, so Native American people and others get to know each other's Mob. As mentioned, we are very similar in that way. One of my research partners was a younger guy who was presenting a bid for a contract to the procurement people of the Tribal government. He was sort of taken aback a little bit because he had to introduce his family, which had never happened to him in the western way of doing business. He initially jumped straight into the presentation until the members of the tribal council involved in the process pulled him up and said, that's great, but who's your family here? Where's your family from and so on? So, he had to backtrack and introduce himself that way and then continue into his bid. So very similar.

RQ *Some people might say that is a long process of getting to know people as part your research, I imagine you learnt a lot through that process?*

DJ It was definitely a learning experience. The Native American ethics process at tribal government level is something that we in Australia should really look towards. I might add that not all Tribal governments have an ethics process. However, Indigenous people in Australia need to come together to get to that point, but that could be a

difficult task. If you asked me how many Gumbaynggirr people there are, I'd say well, I don't know. I think there might be 10,000. But if you ask a Navajo they know the number. I think about how powerful that could be, feeling the impact of a Gumbaynggirr Nation. Knowing the statistics makes for a powerful argument and the statistics are there through our Native Title process. A lot of the genealogical work has already been done, not all of it of course, but we know many of the links and who is connected.

The extra time it took to build those relationships in the United States was also a learning process. Other than trying to stay in contact with the research partners, I'm still connected with some of the Native American folks who weren't part of the research, such as the academics and business people. Research partnerships can be more than just a researcher-respondent relationship. Partnership are like 'we are in this together and I really want to make a difference for Indigenous people and their businesses and by extension, our communities.' Prior to the interviews I would explain, 'this work is our work, it's not just mine.' I would say that I am a conduit for your voice, to go out to the broader business community. Together we'll answer how we can reduce transaction costs for us as a collective of Indigenous business people in both the US and Australia. That is how I understand the approach of Indigenous Standpoint Theory, that works for me. While I did the ethics application, undertook the research and did the analysis, it is actually a contribution to academia on behalf of the Indigenous business community, in both Australia and the US. It is the voices of the Indigenous business sectors in both Australia and the US, that I wanted to amplify.

RQ Can you tell us about your approach to sharing the information and translating the results into action?

DJ I think this may be an important question about intellectual property, but as I mentioned, I want to amplify the Indigenous business voice, and use the research process as a platform to make positive change for our people and communities. So, I have no problem with doing presentations, seminars, workshops and being involved in publications etc.

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As for translating the results of the research into actions, I'll have to revisit my thesis. Firstly, my overall research question was, what are the factors that shape the relationships between Indigenous businesses and their large purchasing organisation buyers? Then there were sub-questions largely about, elements of these commercial relationships that constrain and or enable inclusive procurement and self-determination for our mob.

At my stage one presentation, one of the academics asked me 'what theoretical question are you trying to answer here Dean.' I grappled with this for a while and after many days, possibly weeks of research and reflection my response was framed by new institutional economics, which is an interdisciplinary concept that combines the study of economics with organisational structure—transaction costs economics theory is a product of NIE. I used these lenses, from an Indigenous standpoint. That is, my theoretical question became how does new institutional economics and transaction cost economic theory explain Indigenous business relationships? This helped me frame my thesis about the factors that shape the commercial relationships of Indigenous businesses. So, as an Indigenous researcher, exploring Indigenous business issues, with Indigenous business people, that can provide Indigenous lead business solutions, I wanted to Indigenousise new institutional economics and transaction costs economic theory in a way that hasn't been done before.

Part of the economic theories I used lay the concepts of governing institutions (which relate to market relationships) and institutional environments (which concerns policies and politics). In the Australian context, I found that our relationships need a lot of work but our policies aren't too bad. In the United States it was the other way around.

Now in terms of actioning these results, potentially this means decolonising institutional environments and shifting the governance of institutions from transactional to relational.

One way to do this, I believe, is through a rights-based approach which led me into the piece of work I did with Global Compact Australia and KPMG called The Australian Business Guide to Implementing the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. As a direct result of my study we identified six foundational actions for engaging with Indigenous peoples which we believe can transform corporate and government departments commercial relationships with Indigenous businesses. The right-based approach means making change within your company to address the rights of Indigenous businesses. This could mean thorough assessment of your policies and processes and shifting commercial arrangements from being totally transactional to being more relational which is in-line with Indigenous cultural values. In Australia, the relationships aren't good, because Indigenous people have a different cultural value set to a corporate or government departments. So, we hoped we addressed this in the Guide.

RQ Do you have any reflections on the data collection in relation to your respondents?

DJ I went through a process of free, prior and informed consent with each of the respondents and many of them actually wanted their business name to be identified in the research because they thought the research was critical. I chose not to identify the business names, because some businesses chose not to be identified. It was either all in, or none at all. I offered to call them when doing a presentation to see if they'd like the identify of their business in the presentation. There was a bit of communication back and forth with the transcripts as well which helped. I changed from full time study to part time because of the additional time it took to engage with Native American businesses and also the time it took to do the analysis of the data. There is an obligation there to communicate this way because as I said, it was a research partnership and the work was done to support the Indigenous business sector.

RQ Can you talk more about that obligation?

DJ It came up in part of my research and is actually one of the themes. It is an obligation to self-determination. One of the key themes of my research is about Indigenous businesses contributing to their own communities. It was an obligation to be a role model, to show your communities that you get off the reservation, or get off the mission in Australia's case. Not one of the businesses I spoke with about why they started their business said it was about making money. They all talked about other things, like being good examples and being role models, or setting up and contributing to sporting teams. These are the obligations for the businesses that I interviewed. It was highly important for them to give back to their communities, to contribute to the community's well-being. And I think this type of obligation is something that extends beyond business because of the kinships structures, as cultural values, that underpin Indigenous community life both here in Australia and the US.

RQ Is there anything else you wanted to say or comment on?

DJ This notion of time is critical in the research process and really needs consideration. Of course, there are deadlines, but there is also this need to constantly produce, get research out, get it done, make sure you finish. We need to get you through things as quick as we can. Get your stage presentations done. I don't know if that's an appropriate approach for Indigenous researchers because that approach puts pressure on the research process and by extension the relationships that one may have established with Indigenous people and or communities. So, when there's a choice between the relationship between the Indigenous researcher and his or her people, and their relationship with academia, potentially, that could make it harder to choose academia. There's got to be a balance between the benefits of my research to the University, the pressure and the benefits to people who I'm doing the research for. There needs to be more consideration around that.