

PROCEEDINGS OF THE AUSTRALIAN RANGELAND SOCIETY BIENNIAL CONFERENCE
Official publication of The Australian Rangeland Society

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Author family name, initials (year). Title. *In*: Proceedings of the *n*th Australian Rangeland Society Biennial Conference. Pages. (Australian Rangeland Society: Australia).

For example:

Anderson, L., van Klinken, R. D., and Shepherd, D. (2008). Aerially surveying Mesquite (*Prosopis* spp.) in the Pilbara. *In*: 'A Climate of Change in the Rangelands. Proceedings of the 15th Australian Rangeland Society Biennial Conference'. (Ed. D. Orr) 4 pages. (Australian Rangeland Society: Australia).

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SMALL BUSINESS AND CHANGE: IDEAS FROM THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF ABORIGINAL ENTERPRISE

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INTRODUCTION

'We're prepared to work long hours in business, as long as we can be on our land' (Participant A13).

'Success means having my family support and my cultural pride' (Participant A28).

'Good family values are linked to education and the success of my business' (Participant A42).

'You as an individual can succeed, and your community comes with you' (Participant A17).

These conversations illustrate connections between small business and wider social functions within Aboriginal communities. Connections between and within small business are daily experiences for these owners and or managers. Notice the linkages? They connect to land, culture, success, values, family and community. The small business is connected to society; it does not operate in isolation.

These ideas emerged from PhD research into Aboriginal enterprise forms in remote and regional Australia, where connections based on relationships characterise their identities. How can these connections between Aboriginal enterprise and wider social functions help Rangeland small businesses to manage change? This research indicated that many similarities exist between mainstream small business and Aboriginal enterprise, and greater differences exist between small business, and government, large businesses and corporations. Regardless of cultural identity, small businesses can learn from each other, because they all share a universal small business culture (Ram *et al.* 2006).

Literature dealing with small business offers a valuable pool of knowledge to understand enterprises in remote and regional Australia. At a broad level, research on entrepreneurship and small business management dominate the literature. At a detailed level, ideas about culture, motivations, family and community are poorly represented. At its heart, lies the question 'what is a small business and how is it defined?' The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2002) define enterprises through size: from non-employing; to micro-business (1-5 people); small (5-20 people); medium (20-200 people); and large (> 200 people). In fact, small business worldwide, however defined, constitute the bulk of all enterprises in all economies (Reijonen and Komppula 2007). However, they have some special characteristics that set them apart from large business, such as informal procedures; on the job learning; use of personal money and resources; top-down management; personalised decision-making; simple structures; and direct supervision (Bridge *et al.* 2003). These differences to large business begin to characterise a unique small business identity, which connect to wider social functions.

Small business literature also indicates that enterprise is not homogenous (Curran and Blackburn 2001), but hold a range of qualities. Some researchers suggested that small business can be described through family meta-systems (Habbershon *et al.* 2003); inter-locking family directorates (Lester and Cannella Jnr 2006); entrepreneurship social capital (Cope *et al.* 2007); and through spiritual, cultural, traditional and emotional factors (Berry 1996). Specifically, research into Aboriginal enterprise is more attuned to enterprise connections to wider social functions (Altman 2001; Hindle 2005) than mainstream small business measures based on finances, performance and analysis.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Forty seven Aboriginal enterprise owners and or managers were interviewed across five states from regions through western QLD, Pilbara, central Australia, western SA and regional Vic. The research aimed to identify the forms of Aboriginal enterprise, however in doing so, recognised that small business connections were a critical component. In more technical terms, the research was framed

through a qualitative approach, engaging inductive theory building principles managed through grounded theory, and supported by ethnographic and narrative methodologies. These were supported by semi-structured interviews, participant observation, content and cross analysis, together with univariate analysis of data tables. All methods were informed through a theoretical paradigm which interprets and constructs ideas about Aboriginal enterprise, based on multiple inputs. The combined qualitative methodology and methods reflected research pluralism, which later evidenced in the Aboriginal enterprise forms; through connections to wider social functions.

The research assembled two disparate fields; Aboriginal people and mainstream business. As an example, Aboriginal people value relationships, culture, family and a tradition of oral story telling, whilst mainstream business value measurements, individuals, written documents, processes and analysis. The research generated numerous hypotheses and substantive theories about Aboriginal enterprise forms across these fields, by preserving as much as possible, the voice and stories of Aboriginal enterprise owners and or managers.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Connections to wider social functions in the Aboriginal enterprises were based on unique identities, a series of building blocks and their influences. Together they operated as a whole process of enterprise.

Unique Identities

- Each of the 47 enterprises held a unique identity operating along a scale from strong social values through to soft commercial values. Natural groupings existed in four areas: strong social, soft social, soft commercial and a combination. None held strong commercial values.

Building Blocks

- Each Aboriginal enterprise held five building blocks: culture; family/community; motivations, goals, aims and priorities (MGAP); decision-making; and commercial considerations. They operated with varying “volume dials” where owners and or managers self-selected the volume of each building block. All the building blocks variously connected to each other.

Influences

- Each Aboriginal enterprise was heavily influenced by external factors to the enterprise. Common influences included: government, bureaucracy, mainstream society, environment, mainstream laws and culture, employment, education, health and leadership. The influences were both positive and negative and changed at different times, places and situations.

Whole Process

- Unique identities, building blocks and their influences can be described through a whole process of enterprise. Whole processes take in the wide angle view of small business; what part is connected and how, who influences what, where and why. Whole processes captured their connections by recognising the symbiotic and heterogeneous character of small business.

Importantly, the enterprise does not operate as separate elements, in separate departments or offices, instead, the whole process pools wider social functions into the picture of enterprise. Further theoretical conceptualisations found the whole process of enterprise operates through unique accretion.

Unique accretion

- The whole process of enterprise is drawn inwards to unique identities through accretion. Accretion is a term to describe attraction, growing together as one, towards a nucleus, and in this case, the construction of unique identity. Unique accretion is the application of the whole process of enterprise for each owner and or manager in different ways, to suit them.

Unique accretion was developed through induction of the substantive theories based on the five building blocks. Each substantive theory showed similar and contrasting ways to work with culture, family and community, which were impacted by each owner and or manager’s MGAP. These building

blocks impacted small business decision-making and eventually the conduct of commercial considerations. The whole process of enterprise and unique accretion reverses current frames to understand small business through financial measures (see policies under Department of Employment and Workplace Relations 2005), whilst aligning to enterprise research on symbiotic paradigms (Dana *et al.* 2008) and hybrid economies (Altman 2001). These research conceptualisations indicate that multiple perspectives operate in small business based on connections to wider social functions. This indicates that connections internal and external to the small business are critical and interdependent, regardless of Aboriginal or mainstream small business cultural identity.

So how can government and industry work with the whole process of enterprise? This research began to explore this question through difference and power.

Difference

- The whole process of enterprise revealed the uniqueness of each small business and therefore the multiple differences between them. More specifically, the differences between small business and large business, government and corporations. These differences were understood through Henderson's (2004) research with Aboriginal school children: acknowledge that difference is invisible; actively set out recognise difference; and to integrate difference. A fourth element of difference from this research sought ways to manage difference.

Power

- Government, industry and large business have much influence over small business and the concept of power was proposed to help manage differences between them and within each enterprise. Some practical applications included: work with positive and negative power to understand its connections to all social functions; locate the centre and peripheries of power to determine policy impact; and find a balance between the differences in order to equalise relations between small business and its larger counterparts.

CONNECTING SMALL BUSINESS TO CHANGE

So far, the research connected the small business to itself and wider social functions. Yet how can this knowledge help manage change? Change can be identified through: knowledge (being told or learning about it), feeling (a sense something is about to occur), and action (the practice of change). Awareness of a whole process of enterprise, connected to everything else, can help **monitor** change, such as:

- Change in small business hours at work - impacts family time.
- Change in cultural practices such as attending family birthdays - impacts MGAP.
- Change in decision-making practices, such as ignoring environmental indicators - impacts commercial returns or longevity.
- Change in commercial considerations, such as ignoring price fluctuations - impacts family, through reduced money for living expenses.
- Change in community, such as marginalising and ignoring people in difficulties - impacts community cohesion and a sense of belonging. This may result in people leaving the district.
- Change in government policy, such as ignoring the contribution and importance of a wide range of small business shapes, sizes and identities - impacts family through increased tensions, and as such may impact health.

CONCLUSION

The Aboriginal enterprise holds many similarities to mainstream small business, as opposed to large business and corporations which fund, exert controls over or dominate markets. All small businesses are also highly sensitive to government and industry, the very bodies that legislate and influence them through unequal power relationships. Small business is connected through a whole process to wider social functions. When examined through unique accretion, difference and power, it may help owners and or managers **monitor** the change around them, regardless of cultural identity.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was funded by: Primary Industries and Resources South Australia, South Australian Attorney General's Department, member companies of the South Australian Chamber of Mines and Energy, the Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre, and the University of Adelaide. The research was supervised and supported by: Prof T. Vilkinas, University of South Australia, Dr I. Nuberg, University of Adelaide and Dr J. Davies, CSIRO Alice Springs.

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