

CONSULTATION, CO-DESIGN, AND COMMUNITY CONTROL IN ABORIGINAL RESEARCH

Background

The use of co-design in research and project methodologies has been on the rise in recent years. It is a particularly popular concept applied to projects related to Aboriginal People, to demonstrate acceptability of projects. In this discussion paper, Yerrabi Yurwang asks to raise some key considerations when designing and implementing co-design as a methodology for research and other projects.

Current use of co-design

Co-design as a methodology is loosely based and shares a common space with other concepts, including Participatory Action Research. Co-design has been used broadly, without a clear agreed definition. It has been referred to as a “buzzword” (Shay and Sarra 2023) which is applied in different ways.

Analysis of projects funded under the Medical Research Futures Fund (MRFF), funded by the Australian Government and administered by the NHMRC carried by Yerrabi Yurwang shows that 7% of all research projects funded under MRFF, from 2017-2023 (83/1182) indicated utilising co-design. For Aboriginal health research projects, the rate is 18% - over 2.5 higher (26/146).

However, the application of this concept varies across the application. In most of the applications under Aboriginal health utilising co-design (25/26), the co-design element was focused on a specific output, such as co-designing an intervention, or health promotion resources. Only one project specifically indicated utilising co-design for the actual project itself.

Consultation, Co-design, or Community Control?

Yerrabi Yurwang wishes to apply clarify in using the definition of co-design in ACT Aboriginal health and research contexts. Co-design should be reserved to be used on models that allow shared input and shared power between community and external researchers throughout the different stages of the design project. If a co-design process limits input of partners only to pre-defined workshops with pre-defined scopes, then the methodology is consultation, mislabelled as co-design.

To clarify, Yerrabi Yurwang sees a clear role to both consultation and co-design methodologies. We are far from having the capacity we need to fully address our community’s needs, and working in collaboration with external researchers in different ways is essential. We do however wish to have a clear definition of

terminologies, and associated expectations on involvement and engagement with differing project types.

The table further below offers a quick summary of key differences between the three main methodologies of community engagement in Aboriginal health research.

Table: Consultation, Co-design, and Community Control over Aboriginal research and other projects, from Yerrabi Yurwang’s perspective.

	Consultation	Co-design	Community Control
Initiative	Usually initiated by external researchers, identifying a gap/ need that can be addressed.	Can either come from external researchers, or from Community which identify	Initiated and conceived by the community, or by a Community Controlled organisation, following accepted cultural mandate/ protocol.
Project implementation	Project implementation is driven by the external researchers/	The project plan has a clear instruction on division of responsibilities across individuals and organisations involved. The burden may not be equal because capacity is not, but all involved have shared responsibility to drive implementation.	Project implementation is driven by the community, usually via a Community Controlled organisation following accepted cultural mandate/ protocol.
How is community input achieved?	Through a pre-defined framework for input, usually through a series of workshops, focus groups/ yarning, or other pre-arranged gatherings.	Input achieved through all levels of the project: in the design and implementation through ongoing exchange and agreement of the co-design partners, as well as through a pre-defined framework for wider community input.	The community owns and drives the project, usually via a Community Controlled organisation following accepted cultural mandate/ protocol, and so the whole project is conceived designed and run from community perspective, as well as through a pre-defined framework for wider community input.
Decision making power (final word)	With the project leader/ owner. In case of research: the lead researcher/s based in academic institutions.	Equally shared between the community (usually via an Aboriginal Community Controlled organisation), and externally-based researchers and their institutions. Clear governance must be established that reflects an equal split in decision making.	The community, usually via governance of Community Controlled organisations, and following accepted cultural mandate/ protocol.



Putting this Position Statement into practice

This Position Statement informs Yerrabi Yurwang's activities in a number of ways:

- Guidance for partners when approaching Yerrabi Yurwang to join a co-design process. If your organisation is considering approaching Yerrabi Yurwang for research or other projects, this document provides guidance in how to appropriately define your methodology.
- Guidance for the Yerrabi Yurwang staff, board members, and community members to support a better understanding the terminology used and to better engage with co-design and other processes in the future; and:
- Help inform the work of the upcoming Yerrabi Yurwang ACT Aboriginal Human Research Ethics Committee (YAAHREC) and prospective applicants.

Conclusion

Yerrabi Yurwang believes that research on Aboriginal people should be Aboriginal-led and controlled. Community control and self-determination also means developing our own capacity to conduct research. Building capacity of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and of Aboriginal researchers is what we are committed to advance.

In an area where we do not currently have this capacity, co-design can be an appropriate methodology. An correctly applied co-design approach is one based on true and actual partnership between Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (or other Aboriginal organisations with the appropriate cultural mandate) and external researchers. The co-design process must be guided by the Aboriginal partner organisation/s throughout all of its stages