

Doing Good Business – Success Factors for an Indigenous Australian Tourism Enterprise

Dr Kylie Radel*

*School of Management and Marketing
Central Queensland University
Rockhampton
Australia*

Mailing address: Building 19, Central Queensland University, Rockhampton QLD 4702, Australia

Email: k.radel@cqu.edu.au

Phone: 61 +7 4930 9510

Mobile: 0419 660 252

Abstract

The Dreamtime Cultural Centre in Central Queensland began operation in Australia's Bicentennial year, 1988. Over the 22 years of its operation, the enterprise has grown to provide a range of services and facilities including cultural tours, conference facilities, a motel and restaurants. The study on which this paper is based sought to develop a grounded theory model accounting for the success of the Dreamtime Cultural Centre. The model demonstrates a complex and highly interdependent process. As an Indigenous tourism enterprise, the Centre is structured to reflect and reinforce the integration of Australian Indigenous social structures and processes that accommodate the dynamics and relationships arising from the cultural mores, traditions and expectations of a complex community. This paper provides an overview of the key findings from over four years of field work within the Centre.

Key words: Indigenous Tourism, Grounded Theory, Indigenous Entrepreneurship, Family Connections

Introduction

Tourism has been considered as a means of long-term economic growth, social development, independence from welfare and ultimately, self-determination for Indigenous Australians (Boniface 1995; Commonwealth of Australia 1991; DITR, 2003). There are positive flow-on effects from economic participation including employment, education, health and social well-being (Boniface 1995; UNWTO, 2009). However, the diversity of Indigenous tourism products and services and their reliance on the culture, traditions, values and lifestyles of Indigenous communities, present some unique issues for enterprises. The tourism industry can be difficult to access for Indigenous peoples

(Altman 2001b) due to its requirement for high levels of communication and cultural literacy, the need to adopt foreign cultural styles, and impacts from “direct and intensive social interaction with tourists” (Altman and Finlayson 2003, p. 79). Indigenous tourism requires significant cultural, social and economic adjustments by the host community (Altman and Finlayson 2003; Watson and Kopachevsky 1994).

Cultural and Indigenous tourism are essentially dependent upon authenticity of culture and experience (MacCannell 1976; Zeppel 2001) yet can promote commodification (Dyer, Aberdeen, and Schuler 2003; Ryan and Huyton 2002). Further, acculturation, inauthentic representation and a range of other issues (Altman and Finlayson 2003; Arthur 1999; Commonwealth of Australia 1991; Hall 1994; Hinch and Butler 1996, 2007; Schuler 1999; Smith 1989; UNWTO, 2009) are hallmarks of Indigenous tourism. What is known of Indigenous enterprises includes that they may be ‘fragile’; generally employ few people; they may only operate occasionally; and they may be under resourced and reliant on continued government support and funding (ATSIC 1997; Zeppel 1999, 2000). While just over one third (37%) of tourists demonstrate a medium to high interest in experiencing Indigenous culture when they travel through Australia (ATC, 2003), the industry remains under promoted, under commercialised, under represented (ATSIC 1997; Zeppel 1999, 2000) and largely experienced peripherally rather than as the central purpose for travel (ATC, 2003; Ryan and Huyton 2002; Schmiechen 1997).

Further to these challenges, Australian Indigenous communities experience the historical legacies of colonisation and continuing social, health and educational disadvantage. These disadvantages are seen as consequences from “structural factors, locational factors, cultural factors and prejudices held by non-Indigenous society” (Pascoe and Radel 2008, pp. 301-302). Among others, Martin and Liddle (1997) and Foley (2000a) have suggested that low employment and its associated low income levels, poor standards of living, poor health and life expectancy, limited access to education and low participation rates in ‘mainstream’ economic activity are likely to remain intractable issues for many Indigenous communities. The outcome from this is that, “goals of economic self-sufficiency and economic development may be unrealistic” (Martin and Liddle 1997, p. 2). Along with continuing and long-term welfare dependency and the lack of opportunity for many remote communities (Altman 2001a, 2001b; Martin and Liddle 1997), economic development through tourism enterprises remains challenging, at best.

As a result of these challenges and challenges of the tourism industry generally, Indigenous tourism enterprises have experienced high rates of failure (Altman and Finlayson 2003; Butler and Hinch 1996; Zeppel 1998; Zeppel and Hall 1991). Other causes of enterprise fragility or failure have included: 1) inefficient or ineffective organisational and operational business models (Altman 2001b); 2) deficiencies in skills, knowledges and human capacity for Indigenous staff and management (Altman 2001c; Colton 2002; Dodson and Smith 2003; Lindsay 2000; Notzke 2010); 3) continuing lack of access to resources including funding, infrastructure and land ownership (Altman 2001c; Dodson and Smith 2003; Lindsay 2000); 4) lack of access to, and linkages with, travel, government, educational, investment and professional

networks (Lindsay 2000); and 5) on-going challenges associated with partnering with government agencies and departments (Altman 2008; Dodson and Smith 2003).

In order to counterbalance the knowledge of factors contributing to the failure of Indigenous tourism enterprises, the study on which this paper is based, aimed to gain a better understanding of factors that may contribute to the successful development and sustainability for an Indigenous tourism enterprise. Specifically, this study sought to develop a model of such factors from the perspectives of Indigenous staff and management of the enterprise. Resulting from over four years working in the field with staff and management of the Dreamtime Cultural Centre (hereafter referred to as 'the Centre'), the research developed a grounded theory model to account for the key success factors within an Indigenous operated enterprise in the Australian tourism industry.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the key findings of the study. The following discussion will first provide a broad overview of some of the factors that underpin success in Indigenous contexts. The next section briefly summarises the research aims and methodology that underpins this study and the following section provides the key findings and discussion based on the qualitative interpretation of the empirical material collected from over four years of field work. Finally, I provide implications for the future based on the findings from this study.

More than Failure – Doing Success

In light of the nature of cultural and Indigenous tourism, concerns over Indigenous enterprise fragility and potential failure may be well founded. However, the current research only demonstrates that enterprises fail and most, if not all, of these issues may also be applied to other enterprises in other communities and situations (Dodson and Smith 2003). Knowledge of the reasons for failure from a Western economic perspective is clearly not providing a solution to the ongoing struggle for sustainable development (Dodson and Smith 2003). The current literature on impacts (social, cultural and economic) from tourism development is extensive yet there remains a perception that impacts on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, from their own perspectives, requires further investigation (Altman and Finlayson 2003; Arthur 1999; Dodson and Smith 2003; Zeppel 1999). While the issues impacting Indigenous enterprise development remain significant barriers to the development and sustainability of enterprises in general, we must look beyond failure and begin to understand success.

Whether we consider economic, social or entrepreneurial success, the concept of success for Indigenous peoples may well be very different from success as defined by the Western economic model or indeed, European Australians (Foley 2000a). There are typically fewer ventures developed by Indigenous entrepreneurs per capita compared to non-Indigenous entrepreneurs (Schaper 2007) and the nature of Indigenous enterprises typically differs from non-Indigenous enterprises (Lindsay 2005). Schaper (1999; 2007) has suggested that the success of an Indigenous enterprise cannot be measured by traditional Western standards. For many Indigenous tourism

entrepreneurs, the creation of employment and training opportunities for their communities and the retention, rejuvenation and promotion of their culture are among the prime motivations for the establishment of their businesses (Mapunda 2001). Further, the use of traditional lands often forms the basis for Indigenous community members' engagement in entrepreneurial activity (Peredo, Anderson, Galbraith, Honig, and Dana 2004; Schaper 2007). As such, entrepreneurship is often associated with community-based economic development (Peredo et al. 2004). For Indigenous Australians and other First Nations peoples, successful enterprises comprise both economic and non-economic objectives and integrate cultural traditions and behaviours (Paulin 2007). As Martin and Liddle (1997, p. 2) commented,

...there is an 'economic' arena within contemporary Aboriginal societies which is linked to that of the mainstream society, but which nonetheless comprises distinctive values and practices. This Aboriginal economic realm is one in which social capital, rather than financial or other forms of material resources, is typically given primacy.

Previous research has demonstrated that successful Indigenous enterprises involve community at a number of levels (Fitzgerald, Haynes, Schrank, and Danes 2010); contribute towards self-determination and heritage preservation; and are embedded within cultural values and Indigenous ways of doing and being (Anderson, Dana, and Dana 2006; Cahn 2008; Lindsay 2005). The social responsibility of the enterprise demonstrates "commitment to and support for the community" (Fitzgerald et al. 2010, p. 525) well beyond the recognised aims of a profit-making organisation. For Indigenous entrepreneurs and enterprise staff, success may be expressed in terms of collectivistic cultural values and personal characteristics that recognise individual efforts in concert with others as the path to accomplishing group goals (Lituchy, Bryer, and Reavley 2003; Lituchy, Oppenheimer, O'Connell, and Abaira 2007). Success is not tied specifically to status or wealth accumulation at the expense of others but rather as a means to create value for society and the environment (Foley 2000a; Lituchy et al. 2003; Lituchy et al. 2007).

Research Aims and Methodology

Considering both the challenges for Indigenous tourism venture sustainability and the broad understanding of Indigenous concepts of success, the study had two central, and ultimately interrelated, purposes in mind. First, the initial aim was to identify the key factors which affect the success of an Indigenous tourism enterprise mediating between Indigenous and Western 'spaces and boundaries'. Second, the aim was to achieve such identification of key factors through developing and implementing a culturally appropriate approach to research design and method, from a non-Indigenous perspective that synergises Western ways of doing research with Indigenous research perspectives, agendas and protocols.

Congruent with these principal aims, initially this study set out to examine Indigenous and 'Indigenist' perspectives of research (see for example AIATSIS 2000; Cochran et al. 2008; Evans, Hole, Berg, Hutchinson, and Sookraj 2009; Foley 2000b, 2003; Martin 2003; Moreton-Robinson 2000; Nakata 2004; NHMRC 2007; Rigney 1996, 1999, 2003;

Smith 1999). As a result, a framework for doing research in an Indigenous context was developed. The framework consists of epistemological, ontological and methodological components. The epistemological standpoint of the researcher should be underpinned by six key tenets including that: 1) research should advance the cause for emancipation from inherent, systemic racisms; 2) research should acknowledge there are multiple worldviews; 3) the use of reflexivity is critical to assess relationships, reveal subjectivities and interpret multiple worldviews; 4) wherever possible research for Indigenous peoples should be conducted by Indigenous peoples; 5) the research process should seek to develop shared meanings through shared experiences; and 6) research should privilege Indigenous voices by focusing on Indigenous experiences, traditions, heritages, interests and aspirations and recorded through traditional languages (wherever possible).

This epistemological standpoint is further supported by a relational ontology and the need to address Indigenous research agendas (see for example Evans et al. 2009; Foley 2003; Getty 2009; Greer and Patel 2000; Henry and Pene 2001; Martin 2003; Moreton-Robinson 2000; Simon 2002; Smith 1999; West 2000; among others). The relational ontology provides for community, demonstrates reciprocity and adopts responsibility towards Indigenous values and beliefs. Further, the relational ontology allows for recognition of the multiplicity of realities and voices of research partners. Research should also address Indigenous agendas for self-determination and decolonisation (Smith 1999) for Indigenous communities. As such, research should also provide: opportunities for economic, social and political development for communities and peoples; survival of communities, peoples, languages and spiritual practices; recovery of rights, histories and territories; and build Indigenous research communities.

As fitting the epistemological standpoint, relational ontology, agendas and protocols for Indigenous research, approaches to methods for doing research should be collaborative, reflexive (Wilson 2007), participatory (Herbert 2003; Lincoln and Guba 2000) and grounded in Indigenous experience (Houston 2007). The methods need to employ insider perspectives and ensure that researcher subjectivities are both interpreted and integrated into the emergent research processes and practices (Battiste, Bell, and Findlay 2002; Cochran et al. 2008; Marshall and Kendall 2005).

In line with the Indigenous Research Framework, the constructivist paradigm (Charmaz 2000; Schwandt 1989) was determined as best fitting the needs and concerns of Indigenous research methodology proponents. While developed from a Western view of research practice and process, the epistemological, ontological and axiological perspectives of the paradigm focus the research and researcher on the interactions, fundamental cultural positions and ideologies of partners in a manner that may be seen as commensurate with the Indigenous research framework. The constructivist paradigm provided spaces and lenses for co-creating and understanding shared meanings through relational ontological and axiological perspectives (Charmaz 2002, 2006; Guba and Lincoln 1994) that are compatible with Indigenous ways of 'being' and 'knowing' (Martin 2003).

Considering the tenets of Indigenous research methodologies, the resulting Indigenous Research Framework and the constructivist perspective, the grounded theory approach was seen as the 'best fit' for this study. The grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2006; Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1990, 1994) was developed as the collaborative, reflexive method to build theoretical understanding of the practices and processes underpinning success for an Indigenous tourism enterprise. The contribution to the development and application of Indigenous methodology is the progression of a 'culturally safe' (Rigney 2003) and sensitive approach to research in Indigenous contexts for non-Indigenous researchers. This was achieved by grounding the findings in empirical materials shared with the researcher, while maintaining connections with Indigenous research partners to supervise the study's progress. Throughout the period of empirical material collection, I continued to visit the enterprise and discuss the emergent concepts and ideas until theoretical saturation of the concepts was reached. After the field work was ostensibly completed, I maintained ongoing conversations between myself and staff and management of the enterprise. I also provided a complete manuscript of the findings of the research to the Centre prior to finalisation of the project and all staff and management were asked for any final feedback on the draft document to ensure that I had provided an accurate representation of voices and perspectives. Staff and management were very supportive of the document and gave their final permission for its publication (which I would not have done had they not approved the findings).

Hence, my understanding of the enterprise success factors and the emergent grounded theory that this study has achieved were generated through the co-construction of knowledge between myself and Indigenous partners with their voices and perspectives being at the forefront as the means for elucidating and understanding success. I achieved this by redefining the participant-observation (Adler and Adler 1987, 1994, 1998; Gold 1958) research design to better reflect aspects of the Indigenous Research Framework (Radel 2010), including Indigenous research agendas and protocols (Smith 1999) as principal elements of the research partner positionalities. As such, I produced a model of three research partner positionalities that are underpinned by reflexive practices and conversation-as-interview processes (Brown et al. 2001; Burgess 1982; Kvale 1996; Web and Web 1932). I then applied these theoretical concepts to my field work, following a process of co-creation (Denzin and Lincoln 2000) and comparative analysis. This process demanded in-depth, comprehensive and on-going questioning (Strauss and Corbin 1990) of both my research partners' and my own situatedness, positionalities and modalities. These conversations enabled me to examine the processes and practices taking place within the study contexts as a basis for constructing the emergent grounded theory.

Throughout the four years of the study, reflexivity (Alverson and Sköldbberg 2000; Charmaz and Mitchell 1997; Gergen and Gergen 1991; Mruck and Mey 2007; Robertson 2002; Rose 1997) was used extensively to interpret the empirical materials. The concepts of voice and representation highlighted the complex struggle for researchers to ensure the presentation of the author's self while providing accurate

representations of partners' accounts and representations of their multiple selves (Hertz 1997).

The Model of Indigenous Tourism Enterprise Success Factors – Organising for Success

The Dreamtime Cultural Centre, acknowledged as a leading Indigenous tourism operation (Zeppel 1999), provided the setting for this study. The perspectives and voices of the Centre's managers and staff formed the basis of the grounded theory (Figure 1), to explain the factors that contribute to the success of this Indigenous tourism enterprise. The resultant grounded theory of success factors was constructed and interpreted from within the cultural, social, economic, and political contexts and 'realities' of Indigenous management and staff.

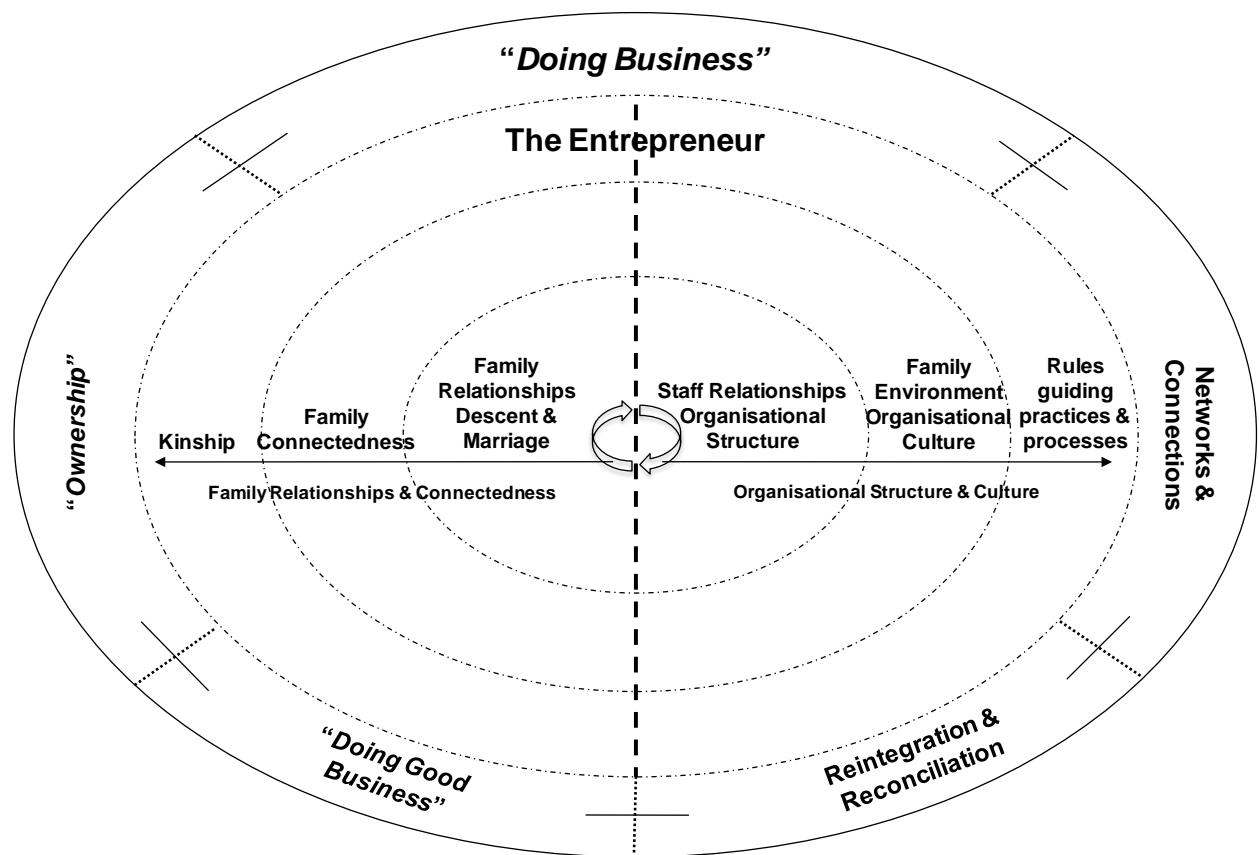


Figure1: The grounded theory model of Indigenous tourism enterprise success factors for the Dreamtime Cultural Centre – Organising for success

This study has shown that the evidence of failure for Indigenous enterprises simply does not provide any effective reciprocal guidelines for success. My grounded theory model of Indigenous enterprise success factors, developed through four years of field work with the Dreamtime Cultural Centre staff and management, demonstrates three main constructs, seven concepts and a number of dimensions to those concepts as key criteria for success in the case of this enterprise.

The Family as Foundation

The foundations of success as articulated by staff and management of the Dreamtime Cultural Centre are based on Indigenous social and cultural values, beliefs and behaviours, especially those founded upon family relationships, family connectedness and kinship situatedness – connected both to each other (internally within the enterprise) and to members of the wider Indigenous community (external to the enterprise) through their networks and connections. At the core of the Family construct is the concept of family relationships. A number of staff of the Centre are directly related by descent or intimately connected through marriage relationships. The organisational structural hierarchy arises from, and is framed through, family relationships of descent and marriage. Building on this core structure is the concept of family connectedness. Staff are deeply connected through friendships and a “*feeling*” of being part of the Family whether or not they are also connected through relationships of marriage or descent. The family connectedness layer also reveals profound connections for staff through culture, heritage and identity. The organisational culture is embedded within and reflects family connectedness through friendships, culture, heritage, history and identity.

The third layer constitutes kinship and further reinforces the culture and heritage connections. Staff are connected through Indigenous ways of doing and being – through authority structures and rules of association and behaviour which guide formal and informal interactions, roles and responsibilities both within the family and within the work spaces. Kinship rules of association provide a deeper level of conventions that guide how and by whom the work is performed.

Ultimately, businesses are based on people and the successful development of Indigenous enterprises (tourism or otherwise) must recognise and ensure that family relationships, connectedness and kinship (both for staff within the enterprise and between staff and the wider communities) are the explicit foundation upon which the enterprise is developed. The success and longevity of the Dreamtime Cultural Centre is evidence that family and business need not be separate (see for example ATSIC, 1998; Altman 2001b; Pritchard 1998). As shown by this study, and as stated by Martin and Liddle (1997, p. 2),

[i]n the specific case of enterprise development, Aboriginal people's strong emphasis on sociality and on maintaining kinship and other social relations, should be valued as a legitimate and core dimension of business structures and objectives, and not simply as a peripheral concern.

The family relationships and connectedness and the understanding of kinship rules guiding practices and processes require extensive negotiation and mediation for both staff and management. Staff and management work together in the shared family environments to create and sustain economic and social value for Indigenous Australians. The success of the Centre is the management of family and community spaces and the encouragement for staff to actively work within and across those spaces and boundaries where “[e]verybody works together to achieve their goals” (Journal entry, 15.4.05).

The Entrepreneur

In the role of the entrepreneur, the General Manager straddles the boundary between the family relationships and connectedness frameworks and the design and management of organisational structure and culture. In the case of the Dreamtime Cultural Centre, the entrepreneur is a complex combination of Indigenous Elder, successful business person, Australian Army veteran and keen golfer. Each of these key characteristics provides a number of strengths that he brings to his administration of the Centre and play vital roles in how he develops visions and strategies for its continued success.

As Indigenous social entrepreneur and “*Money Man*” for the enterprise, the entrepreneur provides the leverage to seek out, develop and capitalise on new opportunities while ensuring those opportunities provide avenues for self-determination and participation for all stakeholders. However, it is acknowledged that the dependence on the entrepreneur as the linchpin for establishing new sources of funding, providing entrepreneurial energy and developing strategies for continued growth may present a significant risk to the resilience of the enterprise (Sutcliffe and Vogus, 2003 cited in Harland, Harrison, Jones, and Reiter-Palmon 2005, p. 4) and adaptability over the longer term. This dependence highlights the need for careful succession planning and nurturing of future management capacity.

‘Doing Business’

“*Doing business*” incorporates the variety of ways that staff and management have adapted and merged their Indigenous practices and processes with Western business frameworks and expectations to drive success for the enterprise and stakeholders. The construct of “*doing business*” represents the “distinct cultural practices” (Queensland Government 1998, p. 8) of staff and management of the enterprise that enable their participation in the economy and facilitates positive outcomes for the enterprise, the staff and stakeholders on a day-to-day basis.

I found four major concepts of “*doing business*” emerged that encompassed a range of dimensions in themselves and worked together to optimise the enterprise’s probability of success. The four concepts included: developing strategies for “*ownership*” (developing and encouraging feelings of personal and psychological investment in and responsibility for, the successful outcomes of the enterprise); maintaining and growing formal networks and informal connections with Indigenous communities and business associates; providing opportunities for reintegration and reconciliation with culture, community and family; and developing perspectives on “*doing good business*”.

The concept of “*ownership*” incorporates the dimensions of: action ownership (being responsible for tasks and taking “*ownership*” for the efficient functioning of individual sections of the enterprise); time ownership (managing time and getting past “Murri Time”); knowledge and identity ownership (ensuring the retention and expression of Indigenous cultures and heritages remains with Indigenous peoples); and financial success ownership (responsibility for and personal investment in, the long-term financial viability and capacity of the enterprise).

The concept of reintegration and reconciliation has three main dimensions: the capacity for staff to reintegrate into the enterprise after any transgressions through an informal opportunity of a 'second chance'; providing pathways for accessing further employment both within the Centre and in other organisations; and providing staff with pathways and motivations to reconnect with family histories and cultural heritages.

The concept of networks and connections is also pivotal to the success of the enterprise and enhances the opportunities for success. The formal networks and informal connections are reciprocal relationships. Information, funding and business opportunities flow into the enterprise and in return there is dissemination of economic resources and sharing of entrepreneurial and management skills flowing back out to the community. Finally, the concept of "*doing good business*" relies on being accountable and transparent, being competent in Western business practices and providing reliable continuity of service for all stakeholders.

Conclusion and Implications for the Future

My research has demonstrated the applicability of a grounded theory research design informed by Indigenous research methodologies and agendas and underpinned by the perspective of the constructivist-interpretive paradigm. My approach has provided a methodology and method to conduct qualitative research within an Indigenous setting from a non-Indigenous perspective that is informed by, and founded upon, the Indigenous research framework. The model of doing business within the contexts of an Indigenous tourism enterprise, as exemplified by the Dreamtime Cultural Centre, co-constructed through the voices and perspectives of the Centre's staff and management, shows a way of organising for success. This model can be translated and extrapolated to the contexts of other Indigenous enterprises, the success of which are fundamental to the sustainable futures of Indigenous communities.

The model of success factors is essentially based on three main themes of 'the family', 'the entrepreneur' and "*doing business*". The core of the enterprise is grounded in the family relationships, connectedness and kinship frameworks which reflect Indigenous Australians' ways of being and doing. These frameworks form the basis for the organisational structure, organisational culture and rules guiding practices and processes respectively. The entrepreneur straddles the boundary between the family frameworks and the organisational structures, culture and processes and requires deep understanding of Indigenous family relationships and Western business entrepreneurial practice. To optimise these two critical success factors, the staff and management must also implement four main approaches to "*doing business*".

The 'gap' in our knowledge and understanding of success factors for Indigenous enterprises suggests that government agencies and Indigenous representatives can not yet provide reasonable guidelines for successful development of such enterprises (Arthur 1999) from Indigenous perspectives (Ivanitz 1999; Stanfield II 1994; Zeppel 1999). The study on which this paper is based has identified that knowledge of alternative ways of doing business, developed through the application of a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin 1994) in a constructivist-interpretive paradigm

(Charmaz 2000; Guba and Lincoln 1994) contributes to Indigenous tourism enterprise strategic planning for the successful mediation of complex political, social, cultural and economic spaces and boundaries.

If tourism development in Indigenous communities in Australia is to live up to the dreams of politicians and industry practitioners alike, then further work needs to be done to enhance our understanding of business practices and processes from Indigenous perspectives. Tourism is a dynamic phenomenon – constantly evolving and changing in response to changes in demand within international tourism markets (Neblett 1998). Along with this evolution there are extensive social, economic and environmental impacts and benefits that must be taken into consideration to enable Indigenous entrepreneurs to respond creatively to the changing environments.

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