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Listening to Country: A prison pilot project that connects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women on remand to Country

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Listening to Country: A prison pilot project that connects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women on remand to Country

Research shows that prison programs addressing intergenerational trauma and grief, loss of culture and spiritual healing are more relevant and beneficial necessary for incarcerated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples than mainstream approaches. Nevertheless, Indigenous-led or culturally focused programs receive little attention and limited resourcing in Australia’s prison system compared with conventional mainstream rehabilitation programs. Depending on the jurisdiction and prison, such programs can be even less accessible for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. Listening to Country was an arts-based prison program pilot project that was developed and delivered with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in the Brisbane Women’s Correctional Centre. It aimed to explore the role of acoustic ecology, soundscape and deep listening in connection to culture and Country. This paper presents findings from a process evaluation of that pilot program project in order to illustrate the potential for Indigenous-led, culturally focused, and culturally safe prison programs to improve wellbeing for incarcerated Indigenous peoples.

Keywords: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prison programs; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in prison; cultural maintenance and wellbeing; Country; Dadirri

Introduction

There is no disputing the fact that focusing on ‘front-end’ (socio-economic and early prevention) policies is crucial in changing the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the criminal justice system (Blagg et al 2005, 166; Daly and Proietti-Sciaroni 2009, 8). This is particularly important if the aim is to dismantle the ever-expanding prison industry to achieve ‘social change and freedom from the inequalities and oppressions that drive mass incarceration’ (Baldry, Carlton and Cunneen 2015, 171). For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, the functionality, legitimacy, and efficacy of prisons and more generally, the criminal justice system, are at the forefront of their critiques of and resistance to state-centred interventions (Cunneen and Tauri 2016). While we acknowledge and support such critiques, we are also concerned about ‘back-end’ (rehabilitation and criminal justice) policies, which we believe for now, are necessary to provide people with a second chance.
an opportunity to _for-change-and_ avoid deepening their criminalisation. For example, Beranger, Weatherburn and Moffatt (2010, 1) propose that ‘[e]fforts to reduce Indigenous over-representation in the criminal justice system should be focussed on offender rehabilitation and assistance in promoting compliance with court orders’ since reducing the rate of reappearance in court has an impact on recidivism. How this can best be achieved needs further consideration, since prison rehabilitation programs are not often culturally safe. This is despite evidence that suggests culturally safe prison interventions that employ ‘culturally sensitive practices’, ‘an awareness of cultural protocols’, and that are ‘delivered or supported by Indigenous facilitators’, are more likely to have an impact on wellbeing or reoffending (Perdacher, Kavanagh and Sheffield 2019, 6). This article uses one example, Listening to Country, to illustrate how ‘back-end’ programs can be established and implemented in a prison so that they are culturally safe and are embraced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants.

Listening to Country is an arts-based, Indigenous-led and culturally focused prison _program pilot project_ that was developed and delivered to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women on remand in the Brisbane Women’s Correctional Centre (BWCC) in early 2019. The aim of the _program pilot project_ was to explore the value of acoustic ecology, soundscape, and deep listening in promoting cultural maintenance and wellbeing among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in prison. The _program pilot project_ used deep active listening framed by the philosophy and practice of Dadirri (Ungunmerr 2017) to collaboratively produce an immersive soundscape composed of culturally significant sounds from natural environments, traditional musical instruments, and from the voices of the participants. Both the creative process and the resulting ‘product’ (an audio file and CD) were designed to promote wellbeing through connection to culture and Country. An independent process evaluation conducted by the first author (a non-Indigenous scholar) framed around a relational ontology—a way of being within research that is relationship oriented (Martin 2003; Wilson 2008)—assessed the appropriateness and effectiveness of the design and delivery of the _pilot program_ in achieving its aims. The evaluation also collected some limited evidence of the benefits of the _pilot project_. This paper reports on that evaluation, which confirmed that Listening to Country adopted an Indigenous-led, and culturally safe approach in its design and implementation and as a result, it has the potential to culturally-focused prison programs are powerful in supporting facilitating the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women on remand. The evaluation did not measure the impact of the _program pilot project_ on recidivism (or pathways to desistance). Measuring such outcomes is challenging and it is often done in ways that are
not ethically or methodologically sound (Putt 2013). Evaluations which utilise traditional Western methodologies and definitions of health or wellbeing often emphasise rates of recidivism in prison contexts, and disregard cultural and social determinants in favour of individual outcomes in the healthcare context. These research methods are perceived as inappropriate, uncomfortable and unsafe by participants, and often yield ‘lacklustre’ results (Murrup-Stewart et al. 2019, 172). By contrast, a comprehensive literature review of research on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander healing processes, including prison programs, found strong evidence that findings are ‘remarkably consistent’ when evaluations are grounded in local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge systems and use participatory methods that are predominantly qualitative (McKendrick et al. 2013, 3). These were the principles that guided the process evaluation of Listening to Country.

Sounds in Prison: The alarming rates of over-incarceration

Numerous studies and government policies have addressed the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the Australian criminal justice system, particularly in the custodial setting, and yet we have seen little change in incarceration and offending rates. This is primarily because the reasons why Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people so often come into contact with the criminal justice system are extremely complex (Morgan and Louis 2010) and conventional ways normally adopted to address recidivism do not take into account the historical and continuing effects of colonisation. Recent Australian Bureau of Statistics data indicate that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people make up 3.3 per cent of the total Australian population (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2016), but from 30 June 2019 to 30 June 2020 the rate was 15.6 times higher than the aged standardised imprisonment rate for non-Indigenous people, and on 30 June 2020 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people accounted for 29 per cent of all prisoners (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2020, Tables 1 and 17). Of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in prison in the September 2021 quarter, only 63% were sentenced, meaning the rest were on remand (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021, Table 13).

Of particular concern is the alarming rate at which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are being incarcerated. In 2000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women made up 22 per cent of the total adult female prisoner population, whereas in 2020, that figure jumped to 36 per cent (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2000, 2020). In Queensland, the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in prison was 3.6 times higher in 2020 than it was
in 2001\(^{6}\) (83 in 2001 compared to 303 in 2020), with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women accounting for 39.5 per cent of all adult female prisoners in Queensland in 2020 (in 2001 the percentage was 28.6) (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2000, 2020). In 2020, rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander female incarceration were not only higher than the rates for non-Indigenous women, but also that of non-Indigenous men (423.5 per 100,000 compared to 277.1 per 100,000) (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2020, Table 21).

**Sounds in Prison**

The stressful environment of prison, and the separation from family, community and Country, compounds the higher rates of chronic health conditions, mental health issues, and substance abuse that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals experience (Sivak et al. 2017). A key contributor to stress, violence, self-harm and suicide in prison is the harsh and stressful soundscape of the prison environment (Moran and Turner 2018). Prisons are often described as noisy, unpredictable, hostile and disorienting, with unpleasant soundscapes punctuated by outbursts of violence and shouting (Rice 2016). Prisoners lack ‘acoustical agency’ over their environment, with the harsh soundscape functioning as an aspect of the wider punitive role of imprisonment (Rice 2016, 10). The concept of acoustical agency or the degree to which a person in prison can control what or how much they hear, is particularly key in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community context of ongoing colonisation, and struggles for agency and self-determination.

With the lack of personal space and acoustical agency in prison, sound is therefore a source of significant stress and it can also have profound implications for empowerment and relaxation. There is an abundance of evidence that exposure to sounds of nature reduces stress and promotes relaxation, has restorative effects, and encourages cognitive skills (Ratcliffe, Gatersleben, and Sowden 2013). Although the oppressive nature of prison, particularly for marginalised groups, is well documented in criminological literature (see, for example, Crewe 2020; Eliason, Taylor, and Williams 2004; Liebling 2011), the rehabilitative and therapeutic effects of connection to nature for imprisoned people is a significantly under-researched topic (Hemsworth 2016), and there has been no research in this area specific to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations.

Drawing on qualitative research from the United Kingdom and the Nordic region, Moran and Turner (2018) found that exposure to green space and natural acoustics had calming effects **on people** in prison, reducing levels of stress and tension and **even resulting in** improved
health outcomes. Jewkes, Moran and Turner (2020) found similar outcomes when exploring prisoners’ responses to blue (water) spaces. The researchers suggest that there is a lack of research into the restorative effects of natural soundscapes in prison because prisons are not often perceived as healing or rehabilitative in their function (Moran and Turner 2018; Jewkes, Moran and Turner 2020). However, due to the inherently restrictive environment, sounds of nature in prison could be more vital to a person’s emotional wellbeing compared to other environments (Hemsworth 2016). Furthermore, the profound connection Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have to Country suggests the health and wellbeing effects of nature sounds could be even more pronounced for these populations. Supporting rehabilitation through stress reduction and connection to nature could have an important role in encouraging healing and ultimately reducing reoffending. Positive experiences of creativity, connection to culture, community and Country, and connection to natural and culturally relevant soundscapes inside prison may have a powerful effect on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s wellbeing and their pathways to desistance. Listening to Country builds on this literature by testing the establishment and implementation of an Indigenous-led arts-led program-pilot project for women on remand. The principles underpinning the program-pilot project and how its implementation was perceived and received by various stakeholders and participants is described below, using a process evaluation that also explored what short-term benefits the program-pilot project delivered to the women who participated.

**Listening to Country pilot project**

Listening to Country adopts an arts-led methodology that specifically focuses on ideas of acoustical agency and the healing potential of listening to natural environmental soundscapes. The program-project approach centred on the role of acoustic ecology, soundcape and deep listening in developing cultural strength, agency and wellbeing among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and groups in Australia who experience separation from family, culture and Country. As is described in more detail below, a culturally safe framework—defined by Mackean et al. as consisting of reflexivity, dialogue, a reduction of power differentials, decolonising practices and ‘regardful care’ (2020, 347)—informed and guided the program-project’s inception and delivery. Listening to Country involved an interdisciplinary team of artist-researchers (comprising the second, third, fourth and fifth
authors) and two members of the Brisbane Council of Elders (Aunty Melita Ocher and Aunty Estelle Sandow) who worked with incarcerated women to produce a one-hour immersive audio work – a soundscape – based on field recordings of natural environments (of Country). The pilot was built on the second author’s previous work over several years delivering participatory drama projects in the BWCC, one of which had been an audio drama. The team’s decision to use immersive soundscape was in response to a direct request in 2016 from a group of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women at BWCC who wished to create a ‘culturally relevant relaxation CD’ a sound recording that they could use to counteract the stressful soundscapes of the prison, promote relaxation and connect to natural environments and to Country.

After the initial request from the women at BWCC, the second author (a non-Indigenous scholar) gathered assembled an intercultural team that included Aboriginal artist-researchers (the third author who is a Gunggari woman and fifth author who is a Kabi Kabi/Gubbi Gubbi woman) to co-lead the project. In its early stages, the program project also included the late Aunty Anne Leisha (Griffith University Elder in Residence) as a consultant, as well as Elders and colleagues from the third author’s Guggari networks. The team engaged in extensive consultations with the Brisbane Council of Elders and Dr Claire Walker (Wiradjuri), who led the Murriaghun Cultural Centre at Queensland Corrective Services, to shape the program pilot project and finalise the logistics. These consultations were continued throughout and post-project. Aunty Melita and Aunty Estelle from the Council were then engaged as co-facilitators for the prison workshop series. The team also worked closely with the Aboriginal Cultural Liaison Officers within BWCC, and participated in a smoking ceremony, which was in part undertaken to prepare the women for the program pilot. In terms of the participatory, arts-led research methodology (the creative process), the female participants in the BWCC directed how the work was created, and how it would be shared and disseminated following on from the program project. A group agreement was made at the start of the first workshop program, which encompassed ethical conduct of the research and how respectful working relationships would be maintained within the workshop process. This agreement was revisited at the start of each workshop session.

The approach undertaken by the program pilot project was underpinned by a number of key principles. It was important to have a clear understanding of these principles in evaluating aspects of the design and delivery of the pilot project:

1. Acoustic ecology: this is a dynamic interdisciplinary field concerned with the ecological, social and cultural contexts of our sonic environments. It has evolved from research
investigating the value of listening to natural environments and the negative implications of exposure to noise on our health and wellbeing (Schafer 1977). Acoustic ecology informed how the audio work was produced, and how connections between listening to environmental soundscapes, and the wellbeing of individuals and communities were understood.

2. Acoustical agency: The relationship between agency and wellbeing was a key factor in the development of the pilot program/project; in this case ‘acoustical agency’ or ‘sonic agency’ (LaBelle 2020), where participants might take control of the sonic environment and resist oppressive industrial soundscapes in institutional spaces such as schools, hospitals, aged care facilities and (in the case of the pilot) prisons.

3. Dadiniri: Though incorporating contemporary ideas of acoustic ecology and acoustical agency, the pilot program/project was grounded in the ancient and continuing Indigenous practice and principle of Dadiniri, which Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr (2017, 14) defines as ‘inner, deep listening and quiet, still awareness’ which she notes some might call ‘contemplation’.

4. Indigenous research methods: The approach relied on Indigenous storywork and yarning (Archibald 2008, Barlo et al. 2021), which were central to the collaborative creative process and the generation of knowledge.

5. Arts-led and poetic inquiry: These were central to the methodology for the program/pilot project, meaning creative acts such as drawing, poetry, storytelling and performance became the processes by which knowledge was generated and translated (Prendergast et al. 2009, also see Piddler and Black (2018) who summarise the contributions to a special issue of the Prison Service Journal, which focused on the transformative nature of the arts for people who are incarcerated).

Because the program/pilot project was situated in a remand setting, the participant group fluctuated regularly in size between one and 12, depending on a range of outside factors that included health or legal visits, transfer to other centres, or release. The process involved listening to environmental sounds and soundscapes that the team brought in from outside, yarning together about what feelings and memories these evoked, and then exploring what sounds or environmental soundscapes might connect the women to their Country, or their ‘belonging place’. It was important to include broader understandings of belonging for those who may not know their Country or ancestry, and who may experience shame or distress because of this.
The pilot program research team visited the locations the women selected as being central to their sense of belonging, and made environmental field recordings at different times of day using various arrays of microphones to capture immersive soundscapes and high-quality audio recordings. This included dusk soundscapes with a crackling campfire, dawn chorus in the rainforest, laughing kookaburras by a river, local waterfalls, ocean waves and dolphins underwater (over 80 hours of recorded material). These recordings were edited into short soundscapes from each location (over 15 sites) and brought back to the prison to begin the process of listening and collaborative composition with the women. The team also made recordings inside the prison of words, poetry, breathing, heartbeats, clapsticks and footsteps that were layered and sculpted with the environmental soundscapes. The workshop soundscapes and final audio work were produced in immersive surround sound, using a quadrophonic array for playback in the prison to enhance the sense of immersion. The finished soundscape was made available on CD and uploaded online where the women could access using a password once they were released. What follows are the findings of a qualitative process evaluation that assessed the ways the project was designed and delivered, as well as revealing some of the benefits that resulted for the wellbeing of the implementing and delivering the Listening to Country pilot to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women on remand at the BWCC women.

Methodology of the process evaluation

Indigenous-led research approach

A key aspect of developing the methodology (of the pilot program and the evaluation) was to centre Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander agency and knowledges, and privilege relational, decolonial approaches to the research. This meant ensuring that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were involved in all elements from conceptualisation of the proposal to recording and knowledge translation and follow-up. In doing so, the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies research guidelines were followed (2012). The research evaluation aimed to take a decolonising, collaborative and participatory evaluation approach, in order to prioritise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander standpoints and perspectives. A decolonising and critical race approach recognises research is not ‘value-neutral’, but instead imbued with post-colonial and Western ideals of what is considered valid
and reliable (Dunbar Jr. 2008; Tuhikai Smith 2012). A decolonising methodological approach is concerned with recognising and respecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing and is committed to prioritising Indigenous knowledges and perspectives. Principles reflected in Participatory Action Research (PAR) also informed the research because of their synergies with Indigenous and decolonising methodologies (although the evaluation did not take a strict PAR approach because it was not testing ideas in action, nor evaluating programs that had been designed and implemented as part of the evaluation process). Emphasising and prioritising collaboration and participation allows for social transformation, recognition of the lived experiences and knowledges of the various participants, and a more equal partnership in the way the research is carried out. According to Cargo and Mercer, a ‘key strength of PAR is the integration of researchers’ theoretical and methodological expertise with non-academic participants’ real world knowledge and experiences into a mutually reinforcing partnership’ (2008, 327). Evans et al. argue that a ‘fusion’ of Indigenous methodologies and PAR can transform Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples from being the objects of inquiry to being the authors of the inquiry (2009, 893), which was a goal of the evaluation. The overarching framework for the evaluation was, therefore, to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander protocols, knowledges and standpoints were respected, incorporated and acknowledged, and that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices were privileged. As Martin states, this does not necessarily equate to ‘resisting or opposing western research frameworks and ideologies’, but rather working in conjunction with such methodologies (2003, 205). Decolonising, collaborative and participatory principles were applied by ensuring that the evaluation approach (e.g. who would be interviewed, what data would be collected, what questions would be asked, how the interviews would be conducted, how findings would be reported and how outputs would be produced) was informed by all pilot project stakeholders at the inception of the study. Ethics approval for the process evaluation component of the research was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee at Griffith University, which adheres to requires adhering to the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research guidelines for ethical research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (NHMRC 2007).

The methodology relied on four main sources of data:

1. Existing documentation regarding the establishment and funding for the Listening to Country program pilot project, the ethics application and progress reports;
2. Interviews with key stakeholders, including:
a. Members of the pilot program project research team (co-authors);
b. Elders who supported the project;
c. BWCC staff who assisted with the delivery of the program-pilot (who are also considered Queensland Corrective Services staff);
d. Queensland Corrective Services staff (not working in the BWCC) who were involved with the implementation of the program;
e. Women in the BWCC who participated in the workshops.

3. Observations of Listening to Country workshops.

4. BWCC data on numbers of prisoners and number of Listening to Country attendees.

**Interview Data Collection and Analysis**

Interview participants were selected based on their participation and involvement in the **Listening to Country program project**. Potential stakeholder participants were identified by the pilot program project research team and by using snowball sampling, whereby an interview participant suggested other possible participants. Potential interviewees (stakeholders and program project participants) were contacted to ask if they were willing to participate in an interview. Three of the potential stakeholder-interview participants identified by the pilot program research team were not interviewed. Two declined to be interviewed because they felt they did not have a great deal of involvement in the program and one had left their position. Four of the stakeholders who were interviewed were involved in establishing or facilitating the program project. Their responses to the interview questions were not markedly different to the responses given by other stakeholders, indicating that their responses were balanced and not intended to portray the project only in a positive light.

**Program**—The women who participated in the pilot project participants were difficult to locate for the interviews since some had been transferred to another a prison post-sentence or released by the time the interviews were conducted. This resulted in only three project participants being interviewed. The interviews were by telephone or face-to-face. The two Elders did their face-to-face interview together. In total, 12 people were interviewed from the following groups:

[Insert Table 1]
Information about the way in which *Listening to Country* was designed, how it was implemented and whether it met its original aims was collected utilising a semi-structured interview approach. The *program project* participants were also asked why they had chosen to participate in the workshops, how the workshops made them feel, and if and how the workshops helped strengthen their connection to culture and their ideas of Country. On average the interviews took 35 minutes (range 12-71 minutes), although more time was spent talking to each interview participant prior to the interview taking place.

A decolonising and critical race approach was used to interview Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants to reflect the purpose of the study, which is to change and improve conditions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Dunbar Jr. 2008). Decolonising approaches to interviewing are typically concerned with building culturally safe spaces and a rapport with the people being interviewed and ensuring that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and perspectives are prioritised (Ladson-Billings 2000; Tuihawai Smith 2012). In order to facilitate this with the *program project* participants who were interviewed, an Elder was present during the interviews. The Elder contributed to the discussion as they saw fit. With the consent of the interview participants, the interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed by a transcription service. Each participant was assigned a code according to their role to de-identify the data collected, and for the purposes of analysing the data, it was noted whether they were Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (eight participants) or non-Indigenous (four participants). The interview data was analysed using a content thematic approach, whereby the transcripts were individually coded using a deductive process to identify common themes which emerged regarding the effects of the acoustic ecology program on prisoner wellbeing, and their connection to Country. The findings in the next section discuss why Indigenous-led programs such *Listening to Country* resonate with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in prison.

**Findings**

**Reflecting on the Aims of Listening to Country**

The *pilot program project* was built on a holistic approach to wellbeing that recognises the importance of both social and cultural determinants of health for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Gee at al. 2014). This model depicts wellbeing as being dependent upon connections to land, culture, community, family and kinship, spirituality and ancestors,
mental wellbeing and physical wellbeing. The evaluation found that there was a common understanding amongst all of the stakeholders, aside from one (who indicated they did not have sufficient knowledge of the program to be able to comment) that the aims of the pilot project were to reconnect and/or strengthen the women’s connection to culture and Country through yarning (including interacting with the Elders), collaborative creative practice, and Dadirri or deep listening to sounds from the natural environment. For example, one of the Aboriginal stakeholders noted:

> Because those Elders were there, they also had a huge amount of input as well, so that also made it a really culturally responsive piece of research. It was really, really important from my point of view. Really important. A lot of the time women in centres are really stuck with art or sewing or learning hairdressing and because of the limited Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff in Queensland Corrective Services, to have those elders just with those girls by themselves in a small group, very, very important. A lot of the time the girls are in the centre because they’re not connected to culture so it was really important to connect them in that way. (Queensland Corrective Services staff member 3)

Another stakeholder noted that the stark and harsh audio environment of prisons is an impediment for First Nations people in prison in maintaining their connection to Country, because they “It’s something that I probably haven’t thought too much about but then if I think about it, music is such an important part of Indigenous culture anyway. I guess you could say that there are so many audio aspects of the correctional environment that could take away from that connection. It is a very loud environment often. The sounds can be very jarring. But being able to complement that with something that might help re-establish a connection with culture and also the use for relaxation and calming … I think is really powerful.” (Queensland Corrective Services staff member 1)

Reconnecting and/or strengthening the women’s connection to culture and Country in the workshops and when listening to the final product (the CD) was thought to improve their wellbeing by assisting the women to relax and de-stress, and by giving them a degree of acoustical agency:
It’s this idea of allowing people to reconnect to place, to reconnect with the environment through sound. That sound and this idea of deep listening in every way we want to explore. Deep listening has this profound way to reconnect us to a place and time. We know for a fact that has a lot of health benefits in terms of sound changing people’s blood pressure and heart rate and things like that. … [T]he main intention was exploring how, in the context of a prison, we could look at some of those ideas of how sound can be this powerful tool to connect the women to Country and be something that could be positive in their experience in prison. Whether that was to inspire them to go back to Country and visit those locations, inspire them to think differently about their connection to Country and look at ways that that could be, hopefully, a valuable tool in the context of a prison. … To go and record those sounds that were for them and then bring them back to the prison so that experience of what they have talked about, what they have felt connected to—that sound comes back and it’s their sound. It’s not from some random sound-library or database. It’s something that’s being recorded specifically for them. (Pilot project research team member 3)

Four of the stakeholders made mention that it was important to ensure that the women did not experience any harm as a result of conversations about Country, particularly when some of the women may have experienced or may have had family who had experienced being forcibly removed from their families and communities. There was also a risk that the conversations and sounds might generate feelings of associated with missing their families and homesickness. All four agreed, however, that the program pilot project did not have this effect, and that it was indeed, a therapeutic project that was ‘all about healing … a healing journey’ (Queensland Corrective Services staff member 3). However, it was delivered in a culturally-safe manner (Queensland Corrective Services staff member 3). Having Elders present at the workshops was particularly important for supporting the women through any grief and trauma that might be triggered by the content.

It was not possible to assess for whom the program worked best, but three of the stakeholders thought women who were ‘thirsty’ for culture (Pilot project research team member 1), who ‘really came a lot’ (Pilot project research team member 4) regularly attended and wanted to engage, and ‘who made a conscious choice to leave all the other stuff at the door’ (Pilot project research team member 2) would get the most benefit from Listening to Country. Two of the stakeholders also thought that the older women
were more engaged and present for the right reasons, which were to (re)connect to culture and Country. The pilot program-project research team did not impose any criteria for the women to participate in the workshops, although one of the women who participated in the pilot was interviewed—said that participation depended on ‘association issues’, meaning some women could not participate because they were not allowed to be in the same room as other women (Program-Pilot project participant 3). This meant that women who signed up to do the workshops would be assessed for eligibility according to who had previously signed up.

What made Listening to Country ‘work’?

Two main components of the program-pilot project ensured its ‘success’: (i) the fact that it was an Indigenous-led program-project with a cultural focus; and (ii) the skill and dedication of the pilot program-project research team. All of the interview participants, including the three program women who participated in the project participants, identified the cultural safety and focus of the workshops as an important element of the program-pilot project. As mentioned, there are not many programs in prisons, particularly in remand and reception centres, that are specifically for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants, which made Listening to Country unique and appealing for the women. For example, one of the pilot project participants said:

I like it when it’s more Indigenous. I like that because it’s my culture and I look to do things like that with my culture. I like that. I’ll always – if I see something like that to do with my culture or anything, I’ll be in. I’ll be in it, do you know what I mean? (Program-Pilot project participant 1).

The Elder involvement ensured the program-pilot was delivered in a culturally safe and respectful manner and that it maintained its cultural focus, as is explained in the following quote:

It's had a lasting effect I think and that was because of the way it was conducted ... what sort of stuff they were looking at and just that, like I said before, the capacity for those girls to just have that Elder access in a very, very tight and culturally safe group. Like those Auntes, they took a lot away from it as well. It wasn’t just the participants in that program, the Auntes took a lot away from it as well. I think that’s a win-win
for everybody. Because those Elders were there; they also had a huge amount of input as well, so that also made it a really culturally responsive piece of research. It was really, really important from my point of view. Really important. A lot of the time, women in centres are really stuck with art or sewing or learning hairdressing and because of the limited Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff in Queensland Correctional Services, to have those Elders just with those girls by themselves in a small group, is very, very important. A lot of the time the girls are in the centre because they’re not connected to culture so it was really important to connect them in that way. (Queensland Corrective Services staff member 3)

The skills and dedication of the pilot program research team was also a crucial element of the program. The pilot program research team were described as ‘smart’, ‘all good’, ‘cool’ and ‘nice’ by the three program-women who had participated in the project/participants, and as a group of people whose ‘heart’ was in the project by the other stakeholders, meaning they were passionate about what they were doing. Without this passion and without their ‘tenacity’, ‘determination’ and adaptability, the program-pilot would more than likely have folded when faced with the challenges presented by the Queensland Correctional Services Research Committee (Pilot program-pilot research team member 2). The general consensus was that the pilot-program research team were able to effectively engage with the women in prison, despite the challenges involved in working in a remand centre. Indeed, one of the program-women who participated in the project/participants noted that the pilot-program research team ‘brought … [them] out over time ’like getting to know a child”, suggesting that the pilot-program research team were able to build rapport with the program participants despite the short time frame in which the workshops were delivered (Program Pilot project participant 1). Another program-participant woman who had participated in the project ended the interview by thanking the pilot-program research team for ‘bringing the project to us girls’ (Program Pilot project participant 3). Only one of the program-participants who had participated in project offered a suggestion to improve the workshops, which was to provide morning tea. She was especially concerned that there was no tea or coffee for the Elders, which she considered ‘rude’ (Program Pilot project participant 3). A member of the pilot program-project research team and both the Elders who were interviewed also acknowledged the support of the BWCC and some Queensland Corrective Services staff as a reason the program-pilot was able to be delivered.
Effects of Listening to Country

What motivated the three program-participants women who had participated in the pilot who were interviewed to attend the workshops was the fact that the program-project was exclusively directed towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in the BWCC, and that it gave them something to do. One of the program-participants women said that she wanted to do the workshops, despite the fact that she ‘didn’t know what it was like or what it was about’, but as she continued attending, she ‘got to know more and more about it’ and liked it (Program-Pilot project participant 1). All three women said that the program-workshops strengthened or reconnected them to culture and Country: ‘It helped me through the sounds and through the music and helped with the Elders being here’ (Program-Pilot project participant 2). One mentioned that she did have a strong connection to culture because she grew up on a mission, but that she no longer connected to it because she now lived in the city (Program-Pilot project participant 3). While doing the workshops, however, her connection became stronger.

The workshops produced positive feelings in all three women, with one saying she felt ‘all right – Great, yeah – good’ (Program-Pilot project participant 1), another saying she felt ‘pretty good, I guess, pretty relaxed’ (Program-Pilot project participant 2), and the third saying she felt ‘good’ to be ‘reconnected’ to her culture (Program-Pilot project participant 3). The women enjoyed the feeling of achievement that comes from creative practice, with one of the women saying that when she is released, she wanted to get her children to listen to the CD and explain that she had participated in producing it. She thought that they would like the ‘animal sounds’ (Program-Pilot project participant 1). This interview participant found the program-project interesting because she had never done anything like it before. All three of the program-participants women said that they would do the workshops again if they were offered, although one said that she would like it if it was ‘the same, but something else’. Different … not the same thing, … just more – yeah, more to it’, meaning she wanted to learn more about what had been delivered the process of delivering, and developing the Listening to Country project (Program-Pilot project participant 1).

Three of the stakeholders (not from the pilot program-project research team) confirmed that they had received positive feedback from the workshop-participants women who had participated in the workshops about the program. One of the stakeholders said that some of the women who had not taken part in the workshops had expressed regret that they had not participated. The fact that the program-participants women who had participated had relayed
their positive experiences to the other women in prison 'speaks for itself' according to this stakeholder (Queensland Corrective Services staff member 3). **There was also anecdotal evidence that Listening to Country had positively impacted the women’s relationships within the prison:** ‘To my knowledge, some of those women had been in a bit of trouble in the centre prior to that research being undertaken, but whilst they were involved in that not one of them got into trouble. Again, that says a lot’ (Queensland Corrective Services staff member 3). Although this was not checked with Queensland Corrective Services, since the pilot program research team did not have access to that administrative data, the interviewee who expressed this view would have been in a position to know that this was correct.

**Conclusion**

This process evaluation found that Listening to Country is a program that has achieved its aims—increased the opportunity for incarcerated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women to strengthen their connection to Country/place, and a sense of wellbeing and agency for incarcerated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, through the development of soundscapes and deep active listening. The results/findings of this pilot program reflected confirm that the program participants felt a reconnection to or strengthening of their connection to culture and Country was facilitated through discussion and deep listening to sounds from the natural environment and by interacting with Elders. These findings align with that of Murrup-Stewart et al. (2019, 183) who have previously concluded that culturally specific arts-based prison programs facilitate connection to culture and Country and ultimately wellbeing. The success of the program/pilot project in the challenging context of prison was attributed to both to the cultural focus of the program/project (which is relatively uncommon in the Australian prison system) and the skill and dedication of the pilot program research team. The former encompassed a commitment to co-designing the program/project with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders, a focus on Country as being central to place and belonging and thus healing and rehabilitation, and the importance of Elder involvement in maintaining a culturally safe, focussed and responsive program/environment. The positive effect of maintaining a cultural focus is demonstrated in the literature, which shows that successful programs will be respectfully and meaningfully co-designed with First Nations people and will incorporate the understandings of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in their creation (Murrup-Stewart et al. 2018). The success of the program/project was also attributed to the
passion and determination of the pilot program research team, and their ability to engage with and build rapport with the women in prison; this facilitated a positive and effective working relationship with the program participantswomen which allowed for the effective supported co-design model that was integral to the program’s project’s success.

While the short-term benefits of the program pilot project are evident in the positive responses of the program participants women who participated in the workshops, Queensland Corrective Services staff and other stakeholders, it is difficult to quantify the impact of this program project on recidivism, owing to issues with the quality of, and lack of access to data collected by corrections. It is debatable whether measuring the impact on recidivism is even desirable when considering interventions specifically developed for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Anthony and Sherwood 2018; Marchetti 2017). Such programs often generate other more achievable outcomes, that are, at least in the short-term, of more benefit to communities. To better understand how and why acoustic ecology can benefit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are involuntarily displaced from Country, further research is needed that broadens the reach of Listening to Country to other prisons or contexts.

Acknowledgements

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Authors’ note

The research discussed in this chapter paper was completed with support from Queensland Corrective Services. The views expressed herein are solely those of the authors and in no way reflect the views or policies of Queensland Corrective Services.
References


Table 1

<table>
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<td>Elders</td>
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<td>Queensland Corrective Services staff</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pilot project program participants</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
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1 The term “Country” is often used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to describe family origins and associations with particular parts of Australia. It refers to ancestral connections to homelands and is an essential ontological concept and relationship that grounds understandings of kinship, place, and belonging (Carson 2016). The term is often capitalised to describe and pay respect to Indigenous peoples’ Country or Countries affiliation and belongingness.

2 The Australian Bureau of Statistics did not publish a breakdown of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners according to sex and jurisdiction in 2000. The earliest year in which this data was available is 2001.

3 Yarning is a fundamental practice within Australian First Nations communities and a method within Indigenous research—described by Barlo et al. (2021, p. 41) as, ‘A term commonly used by Indigenous Australians that simply means to communicate [italics in original].’ It is a sharing or exchange that happens in formal and informal settings and is recognised as a generative process for collaborative meaning making through discussion.

4 These have since been superseded by a Code of Ethics which can be found at https://a��ntis.gov.au/research/ethical-research/code-ethics.
Listening to Country: A prison pilot project that connects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women on remand to Country

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Listening to Country: A prison pilot project that connects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women on remand to Country

Research shows that prison programs addressing intergenerational trauma and grief, loss of culture and spiritual healing are necessary for incarcerated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Indigenous-led or culturally focused programs receive little attention and limited resourcing in Australia’s prison system compared with mainstream rehabilitation programs. Depending on the jurisdiction and prison, such programs can be even less accessible for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. Listening to Country was an arts-based prison pilot project that was developed and delivered with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in the Brisbane Women’s Correctional Centre. It aimed to explore the role of acoustic ecology, soundscape and deep listening in connection to culture and Country. This paper presents findings from a process evaluation of that pilot project in order to illustrate the potential for Indigenous-led, culturally focused, and culturally safe prison programs to improve wellbeing for incarcerated Indigenous peoples.

Keywords: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prison programs; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in prison; cultural maintenance and wellbeing; Country; Dadirri

Introduction

There is no disputing the fact that focusing on ‘front-end’ (socio-economic and early prevention) policies is crucial in changing the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the criminal justice system (Blagg et al 2005, 166; Daly and Proietti-Scifoni 2009, 8). This is particularly important if the aim is to dismantle the ever-expanding prison industry to achieve ‘social change and freedom from the inequalities and oppressions that drive mass incarceration’ (Baldry, Carlton and Cunneen 2015, 171). For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, the functionality, legitimacy, and efficacy of prisons and more generally, the criminal justice system, are at the forefront of their critiques of and resistance to state-centred interventions (Cunneen and Tauri 2016). While we acknowledge and support such critiques, we are also concerned about ‘back-end’ (rehabilitation and criminal justice) policies, which we believe for now, are necessary to provide people with an opportunity to avoid deepening their criminalisation. For example, Beranger, Weatherburn and Moffatt
(2010, 1) propose that ‘[c]efforts to reduce Indigenous over-representation in the criminal justice system should be focussed on offender rehabilitation and assistance in promoting compliance with court orders’ since reducing the rate of reappearance in court has an impact on recidivism. How this can best be achieved needs further consideration, since prison rehabilitation programs are not often culturally safe. This is despite evidence that suggests culturally safe prison interventions that employ ‘culturally sensitive practices’, ‘an awareness of cultural protocols’, and that are ‘delivered or supported by Indigenous facilitators’, are more likely to have an impact on wellbeing or reoffending (Perdacher, Kavanagh and Sheffield 2019, 6). This article uses one example, Listening to Country, to illustrate how ‘back-end’ programs can be established and implemented in a prison so that they are culturally safe and are embraced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants.

*Listening to Country* is an arts-based, Indigenous-led and culturally focused prison pilot project that was developed and delivered to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women on remand in the Brisbane Women’s Correctional Centre (BWCC) in early 2019. The aim of the pilot project was to explore the value of acoustic ecology, soundscape, and deep listening in promoting cultural maintenance and wellbeing among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in prison. The pilot project used deep active listening framed by the philosophy and practice of Dadirri (Ungunmerr 2017) to collaboratively produce an immersive soundscape composed of culturally significant sounds from natural environments, traditional musical instruments, and from the voices of the participants. Both the creative process and the resulting ‘product’ (an audio file and CD) were designed to promote wellbeing through connection to culture and Country. 

An independent process evaluation conducted by the first author (a non-Indigenous scholar) framed around a relational ontology—a way of being within research that is relationship oriented (Martin 2003; Wilson 2008)—assessed the appropriateness and effectiveness of the design and delivery of the pilot project in achieving its aims. The evaluation also collected some limited evidence of the benefits of the pilot project. This paper reports on that evaluation, which confirmed that *Listening to Country* adopted an Indigenous-led, and culturally safe approach in its design and implementation and as a result, it has the potential to facilitating the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women on remand. The evaluation did not measure the impact of the pilot project on recidivism. Measuring such outcomes is challenging and it is often done in ways that are not ethically or methodologically sound (Putt 2013). Evaluations which utilise traditional Western methodologies and definitions of health or wellbeing often emphasise rates of recidivism in prison contexts, and disregard cultural and social determinants in favour of individual
outcomes in the healthcare context. These research methods are perceived as inappropriate, uncomfortable and unsafe by participants, and often yield ‘lacklustre’ results (Murrup-Stewart et al. 2019, 172). By contrast, a comprehensive literature review of research on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander healing processes, including prison programs, found strong evidence that findings are ‘remarkably consistent’ when evaluations are grounded in local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge systems and use participatory methods that are predominantly qualitative (McKendrick et al. 2013, 3). These were the principles that guided the process evaluation of Listening to Country.

The alarming rates of over-incarceration

Numerous studies and government policies have addressed the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the Australian criminal justice system, particularly in the custodial setting, and yet we have seen little change in incarceration and offending rates. This is primarily because the reasons why Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people so often come into contact with the criminal justice system are extremely complex (Morgan and Louis 2010) and conventional ways normally adopted to address recidivism do not take into account the historical and continuing effects of colonisation. Recent Australian Bureau of Statistics data indicate that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people make up 3.3 per cent of the total Australian population (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2016), but from 30 June 2019 to 30 June 2020 the rate was 15.6 times higher than the aged standardised imprisonment rate for non-Indigenous people, and on 30 June 2020 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people accounted for 29 per cent of all prisoners (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2020, Tables 1 and 17). Of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in prison in the September 2021 quarter, only 63% were sentenced, meaning the rest were on remand (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021, Table 13).

Of particular concern is the alarming rate at which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are being incarcerated. In 2000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women made up 22 per cent of the total adult female prisoner population, whereas in 2020, that figure jumped to 36 per cent (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2000, 2020). In Queensland, the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in prison was 3.6 times higher in 2020 than it was in 2001 (83 in 2001 compared to 303 in 2020), with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women accounting for 39.5 per cent of all adult female prisoners in Queensland in 2020 (in 2001 the percentage was 28.6) (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2000, 2020). In 2020, rates of
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander female incarceration were not only higher than the rates for non-Indigenous women, but also that of non-Indigenous men (423.5 per 100,000 compared to 277.1 per 100,000) (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2020, Table 21).

_Sounds in Prison_

The stressful environment of prison, and the separation from family, community and Country, compounds the higher rates of chronic health conditions, mental health issues, and substance abuse that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals experience (Sivak et al. 2017). A key contributor to stress, violence, self-harm and suicide in prison is the harsh and stressful soundscape of the prison environment (Moran and Turner 2018). Prisons are often described as noisy, unpredictable, hostile and disorienting, with unpleasant soundscapes punctuated by outbursts of violence and shouting (Rice 2016). Prisoners lack ‘acoustical agency’ over their environment, with the harsh soundscape functioning as an aspect of the wider punitive role of imprisonment (Rice 2016, 10). The concept of acoustical agency or the degree to which a person in prison can control what or how much they hear, is particularly key in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community context of ongoing colonisation, and struggles for agency and self-determination.

With the lack of personal space and acoustical agency in prison, sound is therefore a source of significant stress and it can also have profound implications for empowerment and relaxation. There is an abundance of evidence that exposure to sounds of nature reduces stress and promotes relaxation, has restorative effects, and encourages cognitive skills (Ratcliffe, Gatersleben, and Sowden 2013). Although the oppressive nature of prison, particularly for marginalised groups, is well documented in criminological literature (see, for example, Crewe 2020; Eliason, Taylor, and Williams 2004; Liebling 2011), the rehabilitative and therapeutic effects of connection to nature for imprisoned people is a significantly under-researched topic (Hemsworth 2016), and there has been no research in this area specific to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations.

Drawing on qualitative research from the United Kingdom and the Nordic region, Moran and Turner (2018) found that exposure to green space and natural acoustics had calming effects on people in prison, reducing levels of stress and tension and resulting in improved health outcomes. Jewkes, Moran and Turner (2020) found similar outcomes when exploring prisoners’ responses to blue (water) spaces. Both studies point to the is a lack of research into the restorative effects of natural soundscapes in prison because prisons are not often perceived
as healing or rehabilitative in their function (Moran and Turner 2018; Jewkes, Moran and Turner 2020). However, due to the inherently restrictive environment, sounds of nature in prison could be more vital to a person’s emotional wellbeing compared to other environments (Hemsworth 2016). Furthermore, the profound connection Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have to Country suggests the health and wellbeing effects of nature sounds could be even more pronounced for these populations. Supporting rehabilitation through stress reduction and connection to nature could have an important role in encouraging healing and ultimately reducing reoffending. Positive experiences of creativity, connection to culture, community and Country, and connection to natural and culturally relevant soundscapes inside prison may have a powerful effect on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s wellbeing. Listening to Country builds on this literature by testing the establishment and implementation of an Indigenous-led arts-led pilot project for women on remand. The principles underpinning the pilot project and how its implementation was perceived and received by various stakeholders and pilot project participants is described below, using a process evaluation that also explored what short-term benefits the pilot project delivered to the women who participated.

**Listening to Country pilot project**

*Listening to Country* adopts an arts-led methodology that specifically focuses on ideas of acoustical agency and the healing potential of listening to natural environmental soundscapes. The project approach centred on the role of acoustic ecology, soundscape and deep listening in developing cultural strength, agency and wellbeing among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and groups in Australia who experience separation from family, culture and Country. As is described in more detail below, a culturally safe framework—defined by Mackean et al. as consisting of reflexivity, dialogue, a reduction of power differentials, decolonising practices and ‘regardful care’ (2020, 347)—informed and guided the project’s inception and delivery. *Listening to Country* involved an interdisciplinary team of artist-researchers (comprising the second, third, fourth and fifth authors) and two members of the Brisbane Council of Elders (Aunty Melita Orcher and Aunty Estelle Sandow) who worked with incarcerated women to produce a one-hour immersive audio work—a soundscape—based on field recordings of natural environments (of Country). The pilot was built on the second author’s previous work over several years delivering participatory drama projects
in the BWCC, one of which had been an audio drama. The team’s decision to use immersive
soundscape was in response to a direct request in 2016 from a group of Aboriginal and Torres Strait
Islander women at BWCC who wished to create a ‘culturally relevant relaxation CD’ – a sound
recording that they could use to counteract the stressful soundscapes of the prison, promote
relaxation and connect to natural environments and to Country.

After the initial request from the women at BWCC, the second author (a non-
Indigenous scholar) gathered an intercultural team that included Aboriginal artist-researchers
(the third author who is a Gunggari woman and fifth author who is a Kabi Kabi/Gubbi Gubbi
woman) to co-lead the project. In its early stages, the project also included the late Aunty Anne
Leisha (Griffith University Elder in Residence) as a consultant, as well as Elders and colleagues
from the third author’s Guggari networks. The team engaged in extensive consultations with
the Brisbane Council of Elders and Dr Claire Walker (Wiradjuri), who leads the Murrindihagun
Cultural Centre at Queensland Corrective Services, to shape the pilot project and finalise the
logistics. These consultations were continued throughout and post-project. Aunty Melita and
Aunty Estelle from the Council were then engaged as co-facilitators for the prison workshop
series. The team also worked closely with the Aboriginal Cultural Liaison Officers within
BWCC, and participated in a smoking ceremony, which was in part undertaken to prepare the
women for the pilot. In terms of the participatory, arts-led research methodology (the creative
process), the female participants in the BWCC directed how the work was created, and how it
would be shared and disseminated following on from the project. A group agreement was
made at the start of the first workshop, which encompassed ethical conduct of the research and
how respectful working relationships would be maintained within the workshop process. This
agreement was revisited at the start of each workshop session.

The approach undertaken by the pilot project was underpinned by a number of key
principles. It was important to have a clear understanding of these principles in evaluating
aspects of the design and delivery of the pilot project:

1. Acoustic ecology: this is a dynamic interdisciplinary field concerned with the ecological,
social and cultural contexts of our sonic environments. It has evolved from research
investigating the value of listening to natural environments and the negative implications
of exposure to noise on our health and wellbeing (Schafer 1977). Acoustic ecology
informed how the audio work was produced, and how connections between listening to
environmental soundscapes, and the wellbeing of individuals and communities were
understood.
2. Acoustical agency: The relationship between agency and wellbeing was a key factor in the
development of the pilot project; in this case ‘acoustical agency’ or ‘sonic agency’ (LaBelle
2020), where participants might take control of the sonic environment and resist oppressive
industrial soundscapes in institutional spaces such as schools, hospitals, aged care facilities
and (in the case of the pilot) prisons.

3. Dadirri: Though incorporating contemporary ideas of acoustic ecology and acoustical
agency, the pilot project was grounded in the ancient and continuing Indigenous practice
and principle of Dadirri, which Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr (2017, 14) defines as ‘inner, deep
listening and quiet, still awareness’ which she notes some might call ‘contemplation’.

4. Indigenous research methods: The approach relied on Indigenous storywork and yarning
(Archibald 2008, Barlo et al. 2021), which were central to the collaborative creative process
and the generation of knowledge.

5. Arts-led and poetic inquiry: These were central to the methodology for the pilot project,
meaning creative acts such as drawing, poetry, storytelling and performance became the
processes by which knowledge was generated and translated (Prendergast et al. 2009; also
see Fiddler and Black (2018) who summarise the contributions to a special issue of the
Prison Service Journal, which focused on the transformative nature of the arts for people
who are incarcerated).

Because the pilot project was situated in a remand setting, the participant group
fluctuated regularly in size between one and 12, depending on a range of outside factors that
included health or legal visits, transfer to other centres, or release. The process involved
listening to environmental sounds and soundscapes that the team brought in from outside,
yarning together about what feelings and memories these evoked, and then exploring what
sounds or environmental soundscapes might connect the women to their Country, or their
‘belonging place’. It was important to include broader understandings of belonging for those
who may not know their Country or ancestry, and who may experience shame or distress
because of this.

The pilot project research team visited the locations the women selected as being central
to their sense of belonging, and made environmental field recordings at different times of day
using various arrays of microphones to capture immersive soundscapes and high-quality audio
recordings. This included dusk soundscapes with a crackling campfire, dawn chorus in the
rainforest, laughing kookaburras by a river, local waterfalls, ocean waves and dolphins
underwater (over 80 hours of recorded material). These recordings were edited into short
soundscapes from each location (over 15 sites) and brought back to the prison to begin the process of listening and collaborative composition with the women. The team also made recordings inside the prison of words, poetry, breathing, heartbeats, clapsticks and footsteps that were layered and sculpted with the environmental soundscapes. The workshop soundscapes and final audio work were produced in immersive surround sound, using a quadraphonic array to enhance the sense of immersion. The finished soundscape was made available on CD and uploaded online where the women could access using a password once they were released. What follows are the findings of a qualitative process evaluation that assessed the ways the project was designed and delivered, as well as revealing some of the benefits that resulted for the wellbeing of the women.

Methodology of the process evaluation

Approach

The evaluation aimed to take a decolonising, collaborative and participatory approach, in order to prioritise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander standpoints and perspectives. A decolonising approach recognises research is not ‘value-neutral’, but instead imbued with post-colonial and Western ideals of what is considered valid and reliable (Dunbar Jr. 2008; Tuhiwai Smith 2012). It is concerned with recognising and respecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing and is committed to prioritising Indigenous knowledges and perspectives. Principles reflected in Participatory Action Research (PAR) also informed the research because of their synergies with Indigenous and decolonising methodologies (although the evaluation did not take a strict PAR approach because it was not testing ideas in action, nor evaluating programs that had been designed and implemented as part of the evaluation process). Emphasising and prioritising collaboration and participation allows for social transformation, recognition of the lived experiences and knowledges of the various participants, and a more equal partnership in the way the research is carried out. According to Cargo and Mercer, a ‘key strength of PAR is the integration of researchers’ theoretical and methodological expertise with non-academic participants’ real world knowledge and experiences into a mutually reinforcing partnership’ (2008, 327). Evans et al. argue that a ‘fusion’ of Indigenous methodologies and PAR can transform Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples from being the objects of inquiry to being the authors of the
inquiry (2009, 893), which was a goal of the evaluation. The overarching framework for the evaluation was, therefore, to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander protocols, knowledges and standpoints were respected, incorporated and acknowledged, and that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices were privileged. As Martin states, this does not necessarily equate to ‘resisting or opposing western research frameworks and ideologies’, but rather working in conjunction with such methodologies (2003, 205). Decolonising, collaborative and participatory principles were applied by ensuring that the evaluation approach (e.g. who would be interviewed, what data would be collected, what questions would be asked, how the interviews would be conducted, how findings would be reported and how outputs would be produced) was informed by all pilot project stakeholders at the inception of the study. Ethics approval for the process evaluation component of the research was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee at Griffith University, which requires adhering to the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research guidelines for ethical research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (NHMRC 2007).

The method relied on four main sources of data:

1. Existing documentation regarding the establishment and funding for the Listening to Country pilot project, the ethics application and progress reports;

2. Interviews with key stakeholders, including:
   a. Members of the pilot project research team (co-authors);
   b. Elders who supported the project;
   c. BWCC staff who assisted with the delivery of the pilot (who are also considered Queensland Corrective Services staff);
   d. Queensland Corrective Services staff (not working in the BWCC) who were involved with the implementation of the pilot;
   e. Women in the BWCC who participated in the workshops.

3. Observations of Listening to Country workshops.

4. BWCC data on numbers of prisoners and number of Listening to Country attendees.

Interview Data Collection and Analysis

Interview participants were selected based on their participation and involvement in the Listening to Country project. Potential stakeholder participants were identified by the pilot project research team and by using snowball sampling, whereby an interview participant
suggested other possible participants. Potential interviewees (stakeholders and project participants) were contacted to ask if they were willing to participate in an interview. Four of the stakeholders who were interviewed were involved in establishing or facilitating the pilot project. Their responses to the interview questions were not markedly different to the responses given by other stakeholders, indicating that their responses were balanced and not intended to portray the project only in a positive light.

The women who participated in the pilot project were difficult to locate for the interviews since some had been transferred to a prison post-sentence or released by the time the interviews were conducted. This resulted in only three project participants being interviewed. The interviews were by telephone or face-to-face. The two Elders did their face-to-face interview together. In total, 12 people were interviewed from the following groups:

[Insert Table 1]

Information about the way in which Listening to Country was designed, how it was implemented and whether it met its original aims was collected utilising a semi-structured interview approach. The project participants were also asked why they had chosen to participate in the workshops, how the workshops made them feel, and if and how the workshops helped strengthen their connection to culture and their ideas of Country. On average the interviews took 35 minutes (range 12-71 minutes), although more time was spent talking to each interview participant prior to the interview taking place.

A decolonising approach was used to interview Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants to reflect the purpose of the study, which is to change and improve conditions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Dunbar Jr. 2008). Decolonising approaches to interviewing are typically concerned with building culturally safe spaces and a rapport with the people being interviewed and ensuring that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and perspectives are prioritised (Ladson-Billings 2000; Tuhiiwai Smith 2012). In order to facilitate this with the project participants who were interviewed, an Elder was present during the interviews. The Elder contributed to the discussion as they saw fit. With the consent of the interview participants, the interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed by a transcription service. Each participant was assigned a code according to their role to de-identify the data collected, and for the purposes of analysing the data, it was noted whether they were Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (eight participants) or non-Indigenous (four
participants). The interview data was analysed using a content thematic approach, whereby the transcripts were individually coded using a deductive process to identify common themes.

Findings

Reflecting on the aims of Listening to Country

The pilot project was built on a holistic approach to wellbeing that recognises the importance of both social and cultural determinants of health for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Gee et al. 2014). This model depicts wellbeing as being dependent upon connections to land, culture, community, family and kinship, spirituality and ancestors, mental wellbeing and physical wellbeing. The evaluation found that there was a common understanding amongst all the stakeholders, aside from one (who indicated they did not have sufficient knowledge of the project to be able to comment) that the aims of the pilot project were to reconnect and/or strengthen the women’s connection to culture and Country through yarning (including interacting with the Elders), collaborative creative practice, and Dadirri—or deep listening to sounds from the natural environment. For example one of the Aboriginal stakeholders noted:

Because those Elders were there, they also had a huge amount of input as well, so that also made it a really culturally responsive piece of research. It was really, really important from my point of view. Really important. A lot of the time women in centres are really stuck with art or sewing or learning hairdressing and because of the limited Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff in Queensland Corrective Services, to have those elders just with those girls by themselves in a small group, very, very important. A lot of the time the girls are in the centre because they’re not connected to culture so it was really important to connect them in that way. (Queensland Corrective Services staff member 3)

Another stakeholder noted that the stark and harsh audio environment of prisons is an impediment for First Nations people in prison in maintaining their connection to Country, because the ‘sounds can be very jarring’, but being ‘able to complement that with something that might help re-establish a connection with culture and also the use for relaxation and calming … is really powerful’ (Queensland Corrective Services staff member 1)
Reconnecting and/or strengthening the women’s connection to culture and Country in the workshops and when listening to the final product (the CD) was thought to improve wellbeing by assisting the women to relax and de-stress, and by giving them a degree of acoustical agency:

It’s this idea of allowing people to reconnect to place, to reconnect with the environment through sound. That sound and this idea of deep listening in every way we want to explore. Deep listening has this profound way to reconnect us to a place and time. We know for a fact that has a lot of health benefits in terms of sound changing people’s blood pressure and heart rate and things like that. … [T]he main intention was exploring how, in the context of a prison, we could look at some of those ideas of how sound can be this powerful tool to connect the women to Country and be something that could be positive in their experience in prison. Whether that was to inspire them to go back to Country and visit those locations, inspire them to think differently about their connection to Country and look at ways that that could be, hopefully, a valuable tool in the context of a prison. (Pilot project research team member 3)

Four of the stakeholders made mention that it was important to ensure that the women did not experience any harm because of conversations about Country, particularly when some of the women may have experienced or may have had family who had experienced being forcibly removed from their families and communities. There was also a risk that the conversations and sounds might generate feelings associated with missing their families and home. All four agreed, however, that the pilot project did not have this effect, and that it was indeed, a project that was ‘all about healing … a healing journey’ (Queensland Corrective Services staff member 3). Having Elders present at the workshops was particularly important for supporting the women through any grief and trauma that might be triggered by the content.

It was not possible to assess for whom the pilot project worked best, but three of the stakeholders thought women who were ‘thirsty’ for culture (Pilot project research team member 1), who regularly attended and wanted to engage, and ‘who made a conscious choice to leave all the other stuff at the door’ (Pilot project research team member 2) would get the most benefit from Listening to Country. Two of the stakeholders also thought that the older women were more engaged and present for the right reasons, which were to (re)connect to
culture and Country. The pilot project research team did not impose any criteria for the women to participate in the workshops, although one of the women who participated in the pilot said that participation depended on ‘association issues’, meaning some women could not participate because they were not allowed to be in the same room as other women (Pilot project participant 3). This meant that women who signed up to do the workshops would be assessed for eligibility according to who had previously signed up.

**What made Listening to Country ‘work’?**

Two main components of the pilot project ensured its ‘success’: (i) the fact that it was an Indigenous-led project with a cultural focus; and (ii) the skill and dedication of the pilot project research team. All of the interview participants, including the three women who participated in the project, identified the cultural safety and focus of the workshops as an important element of the pilot project. As mentioned, there are not many programs in prisons, particularly in remand and reception centres, that are specifically for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, which made *Listening to Country* unique and appealing for the women. For example, one of the pilot project participants said:

> I like it when it’s more Indigenous. I like that because it’s my culture and I look to do things like that with my culture. I like that. I’ll always – if I see something like that to do with my culture or anything, I’ll be in. I’ll be in it, do you know what I mean? (Pilot project participant 1).

The Elder involvement ensured the pilot was delivered in a culturally safe and respectful manner and that it maintained its cultural focus, as is explained in the following quote:

> It’s had a lasting effect I think and that was because of the way it was conducted … what sort of stuff they were looking at and just that, like I said before, the capacity for those girls to just have that Elder access in a very, very tight and culturally safe group. Like those Aunties, they took a lot away from it as well. It wasn’t just the participants in that program, the Aunties took a lot away from it as well. I think that’s a win-win for everybody. (Queensland Corrective Services staff member 3)
The skills and dedication of the pilot project research team was also crucial. The research team were described as ‘smart’, ‘all good’, ‘cool’ and ‘nice’ by the three women who had participated in the project, and as a group of people whose ‘heart’ was in the project by the other stakeholders, meaning they were passionate about what they were doing. Without this passion and without their ‘tenacity’, ‘determination’ and adaptability, the pilot would more than likely have folded when faced with the challenges presented by the Queensland Corrective Services Research Committee (Pilot project research team member 2). The general consensus was that the research team were able to effectively engage with the women in prison, despite the challenges involved in working in a remand centre. Indeed, one of the women who participated in the project noted that the research team ‘brought … [them] out’ over time ‘like getting to know a child’, suggesting that the research team were able to build rapport with the participants despite the short time frame in which the workshops were delivered (Pilot project participant 1). Another woman who had participated in the project ended the interview by thanking the research team for ‘bringing the project to us girls’ (Pilot project participant 3). Only one of the women who had participated in project offered a suggestion to improve the workshops, which was to provide morning tea. She was especially concerned that there was no tea or coffee for the Elders, which she considered ‘rude’ (Pilot project participant 3). A member of the pilot project research team and both the Elders who were interviewed also acknowledged the support of the BWCC and some Queensland Corrective Services staff as a reason the pilot was able to be delivered.

Effects of Listening to Country

What motivated the three women who had participated in the pilot to attend the workshops was the fact that the project was exclusively directed towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in the BWCC, and that it gave them something to do. One of the women said that she wanted to do the workshops, despite the fact that she ‘didn’t know what it was like or what it was about’, but as she continued attending, she ‘got to know more and more about it’ and liked it (Pilot project participant 1). All three women said that the workshops strengthened or reconnected them to culture and Country: ‘It helped me through the sounds and through the music and helped with the Elders being here’ (Pilot project participant 2). One mentioned that she did have a strong connection to culture because she grew up on a mission, but that she no longer connected to it because she now lived in the city (Pilot project participant 3). While doing the workshops, however, her connection became stronger. The workshops
produced positive feelings in all three women, with one saying she felt ‘all right – Great, yeah – good’ (Pilot project participant 1), another saying she felt ‘pretty good, I guess, pretty relaxed’ (Pilot project participant 2), and the third saying she felt ‘good’ to be ‘reconnected’ to her culture (Pilot project participant 3). The women enjoyed the feeling of achievement that comes from creative practice, with one of the women saying that when she is released, she wanted to get her children to listen to the CD and explain that she had participated in producing it. She thought that they would like the ‘animal sounds’ (Pilot project participant 1). This interview participant found the project interesting because she had never done anything like it before. All three women said that they would do the workshops again if they were offered, although one said that she would like it if it was ‘the same, but something else. Different … not the same thing, … just more – yeah, more to it’, meaning she wanted to learn more about the process of delivering and developing the Listening to Country project (Pilot project participant 1).

Three of the stakeholders (not from the pilot project research team) confirmed that they had received positive feedback from the women who had participated in the workshops. One of the stakeholders said that some of the women who had not taken part in the workshops had expressed regret that they had not participated. The fact that the women who had participated had relayed their positive experiences to the other women in prison ‘speaks for itself’ according to this stakeholder (Queensland Corrective Services staff member 3). This stakeholder also noted that she had heard from other Queensland Corrective Services staff that the pilot had positively impacted the women’s relationships within the prison: ‘To my knowledge, some of those women had been in a bit of trouble in the centre prior to that research being undertaken, but whilst they were involved in that not one of them got into trouble. Again, that says a lot’ (Queensland Corrective Services staff member 3).

Conclusion

This process evaluation found that Listening to Country increased the opportunity for incarcerated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women to strengthen their connection to Country/place. The findings confirm that reconnection to or strengthening of connection to culture and Country was facilitated through discussion and deep listening to sounds from the natural environment and by interacting with Elders. These findings align with that of Murrup-Stewart et al. (2019, 183) who have previously concluded that culturally specific arts-based
prison programs facilitate connection to culture and Country and ultimately wellbeing. The success of the pilot project in the challenging context of prison was attributed to both to the cultural focus of the project (which is relatively uncommon in the Australian prison system) and the skill and dedication of the research team. The former encompassed a commitment to co-designing the project with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders, a focus on Country as being central to place and belonging and thus healing and rehabilitation, and the importance of Elder involvement in maintaining a culturally safe, focussed and responsive environment. The positive effect of maintaining a cultural focus is demonstrated in the literature, which shows that successful programs will be respectfully and meaningfully co-designed with First Nations people and will incorporate the understandings of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in their creation (Murrup-Steward et al. 2018). The success of the project was also attributed to the passion and determination of the research team, and their ability to engage with and build rapport with the women in prison; this facilitated a positive and effective working relationship with the women which supported a co-design model that was integral to the project’s success.

While the short-term benefits of the pilot project are evident in the positive responses of the women who participated in the workshops, Queensland Corrective Services staff and other stakeholders, it is difficult to quantify the impact of this project on recidivism, owing to issues with the quality of, and lack of access to data collected by corrections. It is debatable whether measuring the impact on recidivism is even desirable when considering interventions specifically developed for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Anthony and Sherwood 2018; Marchetti 2017). Such programs often generate other more achievable outcomes, that are, at least in the short-term, of more benefit to communities. To better understand how and why acoustic ecology can benefit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are involuntarily displaced from Country, further research is needed that broadens the reach of Listening to Country to other prisons or contexts.

Acknowledgements

This evaluation was supported under the Australian Research Council’s Future Fellowship funding scheme (project number FT140100313) and a grant from the Lowitja Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research. The research was also supported by the Queensland Conservatorium Research Centre, Griffith University. We are particularly grateful
to all the incarcerated women, Elders and corrections staff who participated in the research, and to Dr Claire Walker, Principal Advisor, Murridhagun Cultural Centre, Queensland Corrective Services Academy for her continued support and assistance with the Listening to Country project and research. We would also like to thank the reviewers of the paper for their extensive and thoughtful feedback.

Authors’ note

The research discussed in this paper was completed with support from Queensland Corrective Services. The views expressed herein are solely those of the authors and in no way reflect the views or policies of Queensland Corrective Services.

References


Daly, Kathleen, and Gitana Proietti-Scifoni. 2009. Defendants in the Circle: Nowra Circle Court, The Presence and Impact of Elders, and Re-Offending Brisbane: School of Criminology and Criminal Justice, Griffith University.


Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Number</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pilot project research team</td>
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<tr>
<td>Elders</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queensland Corrective Services staff</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pilot project participants</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>12</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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The term "Country" is often used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to describe family origins and associations with particular parts of Australia. It refers to ancestral connections to homelands and is an essential ontological concept and relationship that grounds understandings of kinship, place and belonging (Carlson 2016). The term is often capitalised to describe and pay respect to Indigenous peoples’ Country or Countries affiliation and belongingness.

The Australian Bureau of Statistic did not publish a break-down of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners according to sex and jurisdiction in 2000. The earliest year in which it presented this data was in 2001.

Yarning is a fundamental practice within Australian First Nations communities and a method within Indigenous research—described by Barlo et al. (2021, p. 41) as, ‘A term commonly used by Indigenous Australians that simply means to communicate [italics in original].’ It is a sharing or exchange that happens in formal and informal settings and is recognised as a generative process for collaborative meaning making through discussion.
Response to Reviewers’ Comments Regarding Revised Paper
7 December 2021

The paper has been extensively revised to incorporate the most recent comments made by the reviewers and Managing Editor. The revisions are as follows:

1. The focus of the paper has been sharpened to ensure a reader understands that the paper is reporting on the findings of the process evaluation, and not a project/outcome evaluation.
2. References to the project being ‘therapeutic’ have been removed, eliminating the need for a discussion on the therapeutic value of soundscapes. The project is not based on a western therapeutic model, but rather a First Nations approach to improve wellbeing.
3. A reference to remand rates has been inserted, however, we believe that the fact that the project was delivered in a remand setting makes not difference to the process evaluation, since the pilot was tailored for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women who are incarcerated.
4. ‘Pilot project’ instead of ‘program’ has been used to describe Listening to Country, including in the title.
5. The ‘Just add water: Prisons, therapeutic landscapes and healthy blue spaces’ article by Jewkes, Moran and Turner has been added and incorporated into the discussion about the damaging effects of prisons. A reference to the special issue mentioned by Reviewer #2 has been added.
6. Further clarification of whose perspective is being presented in the quotes and in reporting the findings.
7. Further restructuring of the methodology section, including changing/adding additional headings, and clarifying what material relates to the actual project and what relates to the evaluation.
8. References to critical race theory have been removed since we agree that they are not necessary.
9. Clarifying how the women could access the soundscape online.
10. New quotes added to prioritise Indigenous voices.
11. Rewording opening statements as required by Reviewer #1.
12. Explaining how women were supported during the workshops in case feelings of missing family and home were triggered.
13. Removing unnecessary explanations of quotes as per Reviewer #1’s comments.
14. Rewording ‘are more relevant’ on page 1, line 18 (as per Reviewer #1) and various other comments made by Reviewer #1.
15. Removed references to ‘pathways to desistance’.
16. Ethical standards clarified.
17. Various phrases amended according to Reviewer #1’s comments.
18. Reworded opening statement of the conclusion.

The following suggested changes were not incorporated:
1. Additional references – one of the references mentioned by the Managing Editor was not included because, although the papers discuss art therapy, the project being evaluated was not simply an art-based program in prison.
2. The previous version of the paper had included the ‘n’ when discussing the interview data.
3. Clarification regarding some of the quotes and phrases – we adjusted the wording as much as possible but we believe that some of the suggested changes were not necessary.
4. There is no need to describe in great detail how we met the NHMRC guidelines because that is implicit in the fact that we obtained ethical clearance and the methodology is described in sufficient detail.
5. We believe it is important to note that the responses provided by the research team as interview participants were not markedly different to those of the other stakeholders as a way of validating the unbiased nature of their responses.
6. The changes suggested in relation to page 2, line 45; page 8, line 22 and page 8, line 24 are not necessary because we believe that the wording is appropriate.
7. The 1977 reference on page 10, line 29 is appropriate because it is the originating source for the field of acoustic ecology.