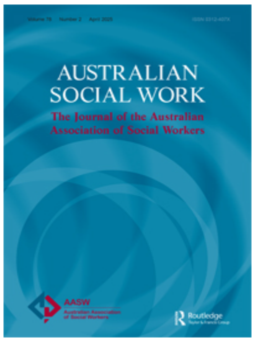

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Indigenous Data Sovereignty: What Can Yarning Teach Us?

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ABSTRACT
Yarning is a trusted, culturally integral way of creating new knowledge that is different from focus groups. This article is a reflection piece from an Aboriginal Researcher engaging with Indigenous Standpoint and auto-ethnographic approaches to explore how yarning interfaces with Indigenous data sovereignty. It is argued through the themes of deep listening, tension, relationality, and power—from memories and lived experiences—that yarning upholds the rights of Indigenous data sovereignty because it enables intimacy, connection, and recognition of cultural knowledge holders.

IMPLICATIONS

- Indigenous Data Sovereignty recognises the rights of Indigenous people to determine the means of collection, ownership, and dissemination of data pertaining to Indigenous Peoples.
- The level of intimacy and connection between First Nations Peoples obtained through yarning is at risk of being compromised if non-Indigenous researchers conflate yarning with focus groups.

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Indigenous Data Sovereignty; Indigenous Standpoint; Yarning; Auto-ethnography; Indigenous Voices; First Nations Voices; Focus Groups; Aboriginal Social Work Research

My name is Luke Cantley. I have family connections to the Gunditjmara Nation of Victoria; however, I was born and raised on Kaurna Country. For over 12 years I was employed in direct practice, including several years as an Aboriginal health worker. During the past six years of my career I have been positioned as a researcher in Aboriginal health. I have obtained formal qualifications in primary health care, population health, and health promotion, and have also made the decision to study social work. During my time in direct practice, I was invited to participate in research focus groups to share insights on topics such as consumer health outcomes, prison health, and public housing. As my career in research became established, I spoke with Elders and senior Aboriginal leaders about yarning and was invited to observe and participate in yarning circles they facilitated. Through this process of listening and learning from others, I was able to utilise those teachings and step into the role of facilitator within my own yarning circles over time.

My current research aims to understand what safety and wellbeing mean for First Nations families and I am collecting this knowledge through yarning. Being invited

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into yarning, and being trusted to lead yarning, has enabled me to reflect on how the social work profession has gained First Nations knowledge in the past. But at the same time, it has allowed me to pause and think about Indigenous data sovereignty. I wrote this article to share my learnings of yarning but also to encourage non-Indigenous social work researchers to think about what I perceive is a growing phenomenon of conflating focus groups with yarning. This perception has come from participating in numerous focus groups where I witnessed researchers place chairs into a circle to claim yarning through uncritical declarations about decolonising their research. My learnings are shared through engagement with ideas about Indigenous data sovereignty and my Indigenous standpoint.

In this article I argue that it is crucial that as social work researchers we start to think about how the discipline upholds Indigenous peoples' right to data sovereignty. With increased representation of First Nations people in social work academia, we are witnessing a facilitation of new conversations in social work research, calling for things to be done differently (for example, Green & Bennett, 2018; Prehn & Walter, 2023).

I am writing this article to join those conversations and critically think about how we gain knowledge from First Nations people and why it matters for social work.

The term "First Nations" has been used in this article to respect the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices who have shaped my learning. I reflect on my own experience of engaging with yarning circles and focus groups. I bring my knowledge to the study to examine the ways both methods contribute to growing First Nations knowledge and critically analyse how both methods represent Indigenous data sovereignty rights.

Background Context

Yarning

The creation of new knowledge is essential for researchers to come to know how we understand things, but what knowledge is and how it is developed is contested. Chenoweth and McAuliffe (2021) acknowledged that understanding happens in many ways and that the quality of the knowledge we obtain is constantly being reviewed to ensure that it is reliable. Further they state that there are various methods of obtaining knowledge and that "some professions place greater emphasis on factual knowledge generated by quantitative data such as surveys, whereas human service practitioners such as social work[ers] employ other sources to obtain data" (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2021, p. 134). For example, in social work, there are different qualitative methods used to generate knowledge, such as semistructured interviews, participant observations, and focus groups (Adler et al., 2019). A focus group is a process of gathering participants together to engage in a group interview to generate new knowledge (Liamputtong, 2019). Liamputtong (2019) stated that the knowledge gained from this process is far more in-depth than that discovered through individual semistructured interviews or client observations as it allows participants to discuss meaning through conversation. In qualitative research the use of focus groups is a popular method to collect data and has not changed for the best part of a century (Halliday et al., 2021).

It is not surprising that social work researchers engage with focus groups as this process holds many benefits, including the ability to engage with diverse populations to discuss research topics (Linhorst, 2002). However, it is important to note that, as Makosky et al. (2010) described, the success of focus groups can often be dependent on how the researcher facilitates them. For example, the facilitator must find a balance between staying focused on the topic and being willing to give up a degree of control of the conversation to allow unanticipated themes to be generated.

In contrast to a focus group, First Nations people engage in yarning. Australian First Nations Peoples have been practising yarning for thousands of years and this is integral to ways of understanding and learning (Atkinson et al., 2021). The integration of yarning circles as a data collection method is in its infancy within western research practice (Geia et al., 2013). Many authors discuss yarning as a process of information sharing and knowledge building. For example, Barlo et al. (2020) stated that yarning is a process of relationship building and information sharing that, when used in partnership with First Nations communities, allows for the creation of new knowledge. Mooney et al. (2018) observed that yarning is important in First Nations cultures as individuals bring diverse perspectives and experiences. Walker et al. (2014) proposed that yarning is a useful tool for data collection, stating "yarning is a common form of communication that is undertaken daily by First Nations peoples, it is a powerful form of information sharing and knowledge building" (p. 1219). Yarning is being discussed as a preferred method because it aims to minimise the impacts of colonial research through building relationships and is a process of interacting with peers within a supportive environment (Atkinson et al., 2021). Therefore, yarning is recognised as a common form of communication between First Nations people within a safe space, as well as having the clear ability to build new knowledge (Barlo et al., 2020).

Cultural protocols exist and must be considered when yarning in First Nations communities. According to Bessarab and Ng'andu (2018), men's business cannot be discussed with women present in the yarning circle and the same for women's business with men present. Elders may feel challenged by being questioned by younger researchers; these protocols will impact the storytelling process if not observed. For this reason, it is not simply a matter of just calling an interview a yarn when talking to First Nations people. Bessarab and Ng'andu (2018) pointed out that yarning embraces storytelling; therefore, keeping the yarn focused can be difficult because it is often seen as disrespectful to interrupt. However, when given the space to develop organically, the storytelling can provide insights that may not have originally been considered or even achieved with more conventional research methods (Barlo et al., 2020).

Indigenous Data Sovereignty

Indigenous data sovereignty is a movement led by First Nations Peoples to exercise sovereignty over their peoples' data (Prehn & Walter, 2023). For the longest of times, research has been carried out on First Nations Peoples, and not in partnership with them, resulting in non-Indigenous researchers building strong academic careers based on knowledge gained from First Nations communities (National Health and Medical Research Council [NHMRC], 2018). In addition, "many First Nations Peoples perceive the distribution of the benefits from research to only benefit the researcher" (NHMRC, 2018, p. 8). This has resulted in the "generation and use of data that has been informed by the standpoint of non-Indigenous Australians" (Prehn & Walter, 2023, p. 373). This approach contravenes principles of Indigenous data sovereignty as it overlooks Indigenous rights. For example, the right for First Nations Peoples to determine how and why Indigenous data is collected and used (Prehn & Walter, 2023).

Professor Maggie Walter et al. (2011) argued that social work research has been socially and culturally separated from First Nations Peoples, allowing white privilege to go unchecked. As a result, social work researchers' perspective on how to collect data within First Nations communities has been based on assumptions and researchers have never truly grasped the consequences of these assumptions (Walter et al., 2011). There are calls for changes to be made to how social work researchers collect data with First Nations Peoples (Walter & Suina, 2019) to rectify these concerns. Indigenous data sovereignty is one such movement social work must look to in answering this call. The concept of Indigenous data sovereignty recognises the right of Indigenous Peoples to determine the means of collection, ownership, and dissemination of data pertaining to the Indigenous Peoples to whom it relates (Walter & Suina, 2019, p. 236). It also allows First Nations Peoples to make decisions about the use of data that support their communities. Indigenous data sovereignty highlights practical considerations about how data is used in the context of research and practice, specifically around ownership and consent to accessing intellectual property rights (Kukutai & Taylor, 2016).

This article focuses specifically on how yarning enables Indigenous data sovereignty. As a First Nations researcher, I have experienced both focus groups and yarning and I *feel* the difference. To unpack this feeling, I used this article to analyse and discuss my lived experience as a researcher, through auto-ethnography, to contribute to this growing, yet long overdue, recognition of First Nations ways of knowing, being, and doing in social work research. I share my experiences of yarning and how yarning can contribute to, and respect, Indigenous data sovereignty. I used the following research question to guide my writing and to explore tensions I have felt in my lived experience: How does yarning interface with Indigenous data sovereignty?

Methodology

I used both Indigenous Standpoint and auto-ethnography to discuss my reflections on yarning as this approach "helps us to link our ideas together and discover new meanings from the things we see and experience" (Bassot, 2016, p. 16). Auto-ethnography is consistent with Aboriginal ways of knowing formed by oral narrative, which allows the creation of new knowledge (Barton, 2004), providing First Nations researchers with a platform to discuss their own observations within research. Auto-ethnography is different from other research methods as it positions the researcher as the insider with key knowledge; the researcher is considered the expert due to their own lived experience (Houston, 2007). Houston (2007) pointed out that "autoethnography can be a means by which the researcher's voice becomes the dominant voice and should be viewed as an authority to influence the text without the need to refer to outside scholarly sources" (p. 46). To justify my approach in using auto-ethnography as a platform to generate new knowledge, I returned to the literature to see how others have used this approach.

Martin Nakata (2007) stated that Indigenous Standpoint is not just a process of collecting stories of lived experience to disrupt the dominant narrative. Rather, people's lived experience is an entry point for further investigation to understand what we know as knowledge holders. Nakata (2007, p. 195) referred to this as the "cultural interface". This is not a physical space, but rather, a space where First Nations people live and interact, a space to make meaning of the individual and collective experience (Nakata, 2007).

Working through the writings of Nakata and spending time listening to others share their own lived experience encouraged me to reflect on my own collective experience of data collection with First Nations Peoples, ultimately shaping my own standpoint. I bring my own lived experience of talking with First Nations people in yarning circles as well as being a participant in numerous focus groups. Reading the work of Houston (2007) enabled me to discuss social work research and its tendencies to overlook cultural protocols in data collection. I have seen how, when used with authenticity, yarning circles uphold Indigenous people's right to data sovereignty, particularly when we think deeply about the rights of First Nations people to determine the means of collection, ownership and dissemination of data.

I have reflected on the collective experience of engaging in yarning circles as well as remembering the focus groups I have attended. In answering the research question, I will share four key themes that provoked deep thoughts for me:

(1) deep listening
(2) tension
(3) relationality
(4) power.

Findings

Deep Listening

First Nations authors have discussed the importance of deep listening. Ungunmerr-Baumann et al. (2022) described Dadirri or deep listening as being present, listening, and reflecting. Building relationships on trust and respect creates opportunities to engage in codirectional sharing of knowledge. The appreciation of deep listening and the feeling it brings to yarning was something I have experienced from early on in my life. I have strong memories of talking with my Nanna about our family connections to Gunditjmara mob. We would always have long yarns together and I learned what it means to truly listen to someone as I practised deep listening and reflecting during these times with my Nanna—a skill that has become extremely valuable within my own career now. I learned that deep listening requires inner silence as it forces you to become available to the person sharing their story, not to be distracted or make assumptions about what is going to be discussed. Throughout yarning circles, I have noticed that it is crucial for me to hear First Nations voices and to discipline myself to engage in deep listening. I have also observed and felt how others engage in deep listening through the storytelling. I believe this occurs as participants have a shared connection to each other through culture and the collective experience of colonisation; it is this connection that enables deep listening and therefore knowledge that may never be present in focus groups.

These learnings have influenced how I understand Indigenous data sovereignty. As stated, past research has been carried out on First Nations Peoples and not in partnership with them, eliminating the possibility for researchers to listen deeply. This undermines the right of First Nations Peoples to select the means of data collection and determine ownership of intellectual property, thereby failing to uphold Indigenous data sovereignty. Furthermore, without understandings of cultural intellectual property, that is, respect for what we know as knowledge holders, the cultural interface will never be recognised in western research approaches.

Tension

Growing up off Country away from cultural connections, being light skinned, and never truly feeling comfortable about sharing who my family is created feelings of tension for me, which I describe as navigating two worlds. These two worlds for me are a western, white-centric world and another world—a world where I live and work as a First Nations researcher, talking with, and learning from, Elders, First Nations leaders, and community members.

I have grown up and continue to live in the western, white-centric world; I have gained significant knowledge in this world through academic learning and practice wisdom. One of the biggest challenges I live with is the tension that comes from the data collection process within the western, white-centric world, where I have seen "taking" of knowledge. I have witnessed non-Indigenous researchers' interactions with First Nations people and "findings" that are often questionable at best, as checking back in with community is often missing. Data collection is done quickly to meet organisational expectations and deadlines. Unfortunately, I have observed how focus groups are often the avenue that enables this practice. Cultural safety and rapport building fall to the side as other researchers have stated to me "we get them in, get them out, talk to as many people as possible" in an attempt to collect data quickly. Focus groups do not allow time to talk about mob or connections to Country. I have observed times when facilitators have commenced a focus group with rapid-fire questions, completely challenging Indigenous data sovereignty rights, in that, the researcher is seeking answers to questions without discussing ownership or dissemination plans.

When reflecting on this tension, Houston (2007) warned us that the tendency to overlook cultural protocols in data collection compromises cultural safety. Tujague and Ryan (2023, p. 48) have reminded us that cultural safety is an experience determined by First Nations Peoples when they are in situations where their presence is welcomed and respected, their experiences are believed and validated, and culture is centred and valued. The practices above that I have witnessed do not promote these customs because non-Indigenous researchers overlook their world views and how this influences their practice. Building relationships and relationality between researcher and participants are difficult in focus groups, as they are allocated a time and date and commence as planned. On the other hand, I have experienced that yarning circles are flexible and consider factors such as community events or sorry business and will fit in with the schedule of the community.

Bainbridge et al. (2015, p. 2) stated "research has been damaging and harmful" and "research practices perpetuate the exploitative history of Australian colonialism on First

Nations communities". I have witnessed this many times when attending focus groups that First Nations people and non-Indigenous people are invited to participate together in the same session. This experience caused great tension for me as I noticed large numbers of non-Indigenous participants became the dominant voice to inform data collection and recommendations. These recommendations also have an impact on First Nations people yet the silence of their voice was not noticed. Outcomes were formed from a position of power and privilege and therefore not representative of the needs of all participants within the focus group, leaving me with the realisation that First Nations Peoples have been left out of the decision-making process that supports their community.

Relationality

Moreton-Robinson (2017) stated that relationality is the premise that social research should become aware of the relationships within the world we live in. Knowing that I also live in another world that is greatly different to the western, white-centric world, I see that this world has a great awareness of its relationality, particularly when engaging in data collection. I have learned that the researcher must be invited into a space to meet with First Nations people, first to discuss the project and its benefits, and second, to collect data over time in a way that builds trust and rapport. Throughout this process there is a shared understanding of who owns the data that is collected. Indigenous data sovereignty reminds us that it is First Nations Peoples who own that data; it is their yarning. In practice, this means that researchers must commit to sharing findings or key themes from the research with the community, allowing for First Nations people to determine meaning or provide feedback on the analysis in line with Indigenous data sovereignty principles. My own research has undergone this process, providing feedback to steering committees and governance groups and then being able to receive feedback or make changes if necessary.

Yarning establishes relationality between people, resulting in accountability between people and the community (Walker et al., 2014). This relationality means that it is crucial for data to be respected, and for the facilitator to report findings back to the community, a process that is often lost in westernised approaches (Walker et al., 2014) but is critical to upholding Indigenous data sovereignty. It has been my experience as a participant in focus groups that facilitators have minimal awareness of the relationality between facilitator and participant. From my perspective, researchers frequently do not return to check findings with participants and have created assumptions within the community, which the researcher is not invested in, that has impacts for the community.

I have conducted research in a regional community for one organisation only to return to the same community employed by another organisation. I was remembered by the local community. If my data collection had not been carried out appropriately the first time, I would not have been welcomed back the second time. Relationships are important.

Power

At a superficial level, focus groups appear a lot like yarning circles, yet there are major differences between the two (Murrup-Stewart et al., 2021). One such difference is the power relationships. Focus group facilitators drive the conversation, overlooking the relational connection required for knowledge creation. My experience as a participant in focus groups has led me to the conclusion that the facilitator owns the process of creating meaning by hearing a response and then documenting their assumptions about what was shared. In addition, it is common practice for the facilitator to then take ownership of these ideas by stating that they will disseminate the findings to the group at a later stage, but they may not be ever heard from again. As Kukutai and Taylor (2016) highlighted, this process is detrimental to upholding Indigenous data sovereignty rights: "Indigenous people must have power and authority to make rules and decisions about interpretation, validation and ownership of the intellectual property" (p. 119).

Yarning circles allow everyone to interact as they share their lived experience, cultural protocols are upheld, and knowledge is shared as a group. The collective is responsible for the interpretation of data and engage in this process together during the yarning circle. In the projects where I have engaged in yarning, data has been collected and analysed, and then conversations have been held with key representatives from the community about the findings. The community has opportunities to discuss the findings and the ownership of the intellectual property is shared. This assists First Nations communities to make decisions that are supportive and work towards self-determination.

Another clear difference between focus groups and yarning is the role of the facilitator. The facilitators in focus groups are focused on timelines and creating meaning that fits their own agenda. To achieve this I have observed facilitators close off conversations to move onto the next question. In the world of yarning, conversations must be given time and space to move away from the question raised and often the researcher must accept the responses given even if the question remains unanswered. As a junior researcher, I often struggled with this concept, confused about if the responses given would not answer my research questions. It was not until much later in my research career that I became comfortable with the notion that if the storytelling is not answering the research question I was investigating, then perhaps the research needs to pivot to fall in line with the cultural knowledge being shared, not the reverse. Again the longer I engaged in the world of research and the method of yarning, I learned further that the researcher does not hold any power in this space. In one memorable yarning circle, a young mother had come along with her newborn baby and was keen to share her story. Her baby was crying and would not settle; the mother was also busy trying to rearrange some of the baby's clothing and other items that had been dropped around the yarning circle. As the mother was sharing her story, she passed me her baby to hold so she could continue to share her story. I remember thinking here I am trying to be a researcher, yet I am awkwardly holding a newborn baby. But yarning has reminded me I am not just a researcher, I am part of community, and in yarning you just get involved with what needs to be done so that people can tell their story. This means not taking ownership of the space but being part of the meaning making and knowledge being created.

On the other hand, my power as a researcher is something I cannot deny even when yarning. I facilitated a yarning circle with a group of men in a regional location; the following comment was made by a participant:

> As Aboriginal people we know what is going on with our mob and we know what needs to be done to fix things. However, Aboriginal people do not have the ear of politicians or senior people who can make these decisions or put these things in place. But you do, you can take what we discuss here today and turn it into action.

Comments such as this one made in the yarning circle weigh heavily on me. I know I carry the responsibility of ensuring that action comes from the stories that are being shared within yarning circles. Yet, as my research career develops, so does my understanding that I am often powerless to turn this research into action. I know that I am going to write a report that is presented to senior decision makers. The action that is taken from that point is something I am not able to influence. Yet I am still responsible for the stories that have been shared with me to try and make change in the community, creating a heavy burden for me to carry as a First Nations researcher.

Discussion

I engaged with Indigenous Standpoint and auto-ethnographic approaches to explore yarning as a trusted, culturally integral way of creating new knowledge. I wanted to explore yarning as different from focus groups and through this analysis, I argue yarning interfaces with Indigenous data sovereignty because it provides a level of intimacy and connection between First Nations peoples and this is what I felt and remembered through my own lived experience and reflections.

Engaging in storytelling through yarning not only connects me to a cultural practice that has been carried out for thousands of years, but also allows me to feel my standpoint and be open to knowledge creation through cultural connection. Being guided by Nakata (2007), I have remembered that yarning listens to and acknowledges cultural knowledge holders and storytelling as a cultural tool. The use of yarning in research is a relaxed and interactive process, unlike other interview techniques such as focus groups. Yarning provides an opportunity for participants to discuss the topic free from interruption and in ways that are meaningful for them (Walker et al., 2014). Therefore, when difficult questions are asked, I remembered how participants told stories as a way to open up and advance thoughts, feelings, and experiences alongside each other, which provides insight into how community members value culture, family, and community.

Engaging in storytelling through yarning also has allowed me to think about knowledge creation that provides Indigenous data sovereignty. Therefore, I argue that at a superficial level focus groups appear to be like yarning circles, but when one examines Indigenous data sovereignty major differences exist between the two methods (Murrup-Stewart et al., 2021). For example, it can be argued that, to connect with the process of yarning, First Nations Peoples come together and share rich cultural knowledge that can inform social work practice in ways that may never have been considered before. But if social work wants to truly enable this, working alongside First Nations researchers is a necessity to reach and respect this rich cultural knowledge generation that only comes from cultural connections and relationships. In yarning, First Nations Peoples hold the power over what is discussed, and what meaning can be taken from knowledge that is shared. Only then does Indigenous data sovereignty become possible in social work research.

The relationship between social work and First Nations Peoples has been problematic in the past, underpinned by exploitation that has culminated in First Nations people feeling mistrust towards social work and social work-related activities. Yarning offers a culturally safe place when it is First Nations people talking with other First Nations people, sharing connections to culture and a unique perspective. I have witnessed moments of healing, whereby yarning allows the sharing of frustrations that come from colonisation, but despite this sadness or anger expressed, yarning also seems to allow reassurance, being heard and empathy, and being supported by relationality, which makes sharing of rich cultural knowledge possible.

At the same time, through sharing my standpoint, I worry that yarning may be picked up by non-Indigenous researchers without critical reflection. It is vital to state that it is not simply a matter of incorporating yarning into mainstream white social work research and practice. Great tension lies within the use of yarning. It is of great concern that, in a hasty response to a commitment to uphold Indigenous data sovereignty rights, non-Indigenous social work researchers and practitioners are trying to enter the culturally protected space that is yarning. As I have argued, this method can only truly occur when First Nations people are gathering with and interacting with other First Nations people. On occasion, non-Indigenous people have been invited into the yarning space to *support* the process, but only after learning about cultural protocols, understanding relationality and power, and then making a commitment to uphold Indigenous data sovereignty principles. The social work profession needs to grapple with the conflict of seeking appropriate data collection methods such as yarning whilst also acknowledging that non-Indigenous researchers are not able to connect with this process culturally.

There is no doubt that the profession of social work needs to do things differently when attempting to learn new knowledge informed by First Nations Peoples and, even more crucial, act on this knowledge. If yarning is the preferred method of data collection with First Nations peoples (Walter & Suina, 2019, p. 236), then we need to recognise that social work's workforce might not currently be equipped to enter this culturally protected space, forcing social work to either ignore Indigenous data sovereignty rights or be left behind as other professions engage in yarning to uphold those rights. Upholding Indigenous data sovereignty rights can be challenging for people who are new to the concept. My reflection into yarning as a method has shown insight into the risk of non-Indigenous people or researchers who are unskilled in Indigenous research conducting data collection with First Nations participants. Perhaps a simple a message from this reflective piece is that social work needs to start by accepting the premise of Indigenous data sovereignty and move quickly to integrate the principles of Indigenous data sovereignty into its research practices—not just uncritically claim it.

Conclusion

Yarning is a culturally appropriate and accepted method for generating new knowledge and, as I have argued, is different to focus groups. However, social work in Australia is founded upon and embedded in white systems and structures of colonialism. First Nations people have shared with me on numerous occasions when discussing my research experiences with them that non-Indigenous people are not permitted to use yarning. Far too often, we have seen this happen. Social work values yarning but needs to understand this value without taking ownership of this method. If social work in Australia is serious about moving forward in this space and upholding Indigenous data sovereignty, white social work must value the intellectual property of First Nations Peoples and be guided by them on how such knowledge will shape the future of social work research.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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