

## Community highlights

Written by Cory Zanoni, Community Manager, The Conversation

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The Conversation receives a lot of comments each day and you can't read everything. That's why we occasionally end the week with a selection of community highlights: comments we enjoyed or thought worth discussing.

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### [Why old theories on Indigenous counting just won't go away](#)

Ray Norris's article looked at old theories that Indigenous people couldn't count beyond four and explained why they persist:

But the real problem is that his original generalisation is often misinterpreted to mean all Aboriginal people can't count beyond four or Aboriginal people don't have a concept of numbers greater than four, both of which are obviously incorrect.

Even worse, respectable academic papers continue to be published that fly in the face of the evidence.

In the comments, Rosey Billington [added a linguistic approach](#) to the article's subject:

In looking at the linguistic patterns across Australian Indigenous languages, the major limiting factor is whether there is currently any opportunity to collect any data at all. There is no scope for re-examining data and repeating experiments if a language is no longer spoken, and unfortunately that is the case for a great many languages of Australia, including for the Victorian languages you mention as exceptions to the pattern. As you say yourself, ethnographic information suffers from all sorts of potential errors of misunderstanding, mistranslation, and misinterpretation, and that is why researchers and communities are cautious about what conclusions they draw from old records, like Dawson's 1881 work, when there is no way the information can be verified. Though there may be exceptions, the generalisation about Pama-Nyungan languages having a handful of words for numbers is based on a database of several hundred thousand words across about 200 Pama-Nyungan languages, so that suggests

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a pretty strong trend in the available data. The thing is that when this sort of information gets discussed in the wider community, and in the media, it's too easy to equate differences in linguistic patterns with differences in how people might see or interact with the world. Having a small number of words for numbers is not a statement about counting ability – the 'five and five' example you give shows exactly why. It's much like lists of 'untranslatable' words you see floating around online – it's tempting to think that because German has a single word 'schadenfreude', it reveals some deep insight about German culture, when in fact English speakers (or anyone) is just as capable of talking about (and participating in) taking pleasure in another person's misfortune – we might just need to use our linguistic resources in a different way.

To which Ray [replied](#) :

I take your point Rosey. And we should be suspicious of old accounts which contain a single report which seems contrary to other evidence. But there is a solid body of evidence, from many different sources, including respected figures like Tindale, of people having words for higher numbers.

But I'm mystified how modern academics pick and choose the data they cite in their papers, citing data that support their ideas and ignoring the rest.

For more on this subject, read Claire Bower's response article: [Countering the claims about Australia's Aboriginal number systems](#)

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## [FactCheck Q&A: is \\$30 billion spent every year on 500,000 Indigenous people in Australia?](#)

Nicholas Biddle FactChecked this claim from Warren Mundine:

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We sat down with the Productivity Commission. We looked at the Indigenous space. \$30 billion is spent in this space annually. \$30 billion on 500,000 people and you still see the problems you get to see. What that tells me straightaway as a businessman, because I run my own business, is there's a lot of fun and games going in there and we need to sort that out and we need to find out where the wastage of our funding is.

Nicholas's verdict was as follows:

Warren Mundine's statement uses the most accurate and up-to-date estimate of government spending on Indigenous Australians – about \$30.3 billion, according to the Productivity Commission.

However, only a small proportion of the overall Indigenous expenditure is on Indigenous-specific programs. The rest comprises the cost of providing mainstream services, such as schooling and health care, that all Australians enjoy.

His figure of 500,000 Indigenous Australians is a bit low, likely reflecting reasonably common uncertainty on this question (as well as him being on the spot on a fast-paced, live TV program).

The general point about needing “to find out where the wastage of our funding is” is important, and requires careful evaluation of the impact and cost-effectiveness of Indigenous-specific and other social programs.

The FactCheck was reviewed by Dennis Foley and Elise Klein.

Jon Altman, a Research Professor at Deakin University's Alfred Deakin Institute of Citizenship and Globalisation, [posted the following](#) in the comments:

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Warren Mundine is an Indigenous 'leader' who advises government as the appointed, not elected, chair of the Indigenous Advisory Council. He wants to carry no responsibility for the diabolical state of Indigenous policy under the current Indigenous Advancement Strategy with all its evolutionary connotations.

The Fact Checkers are all current or past colleagues of mine and in my view by only focusing on the dollars discursive framework, population and outcomes (as requested) they miss some key issues including how many of the dollar expenditures are imposed, not requested; and how by just examining the dollars and the population you cannot make any objective assessment of the effectiveness of expenditure to meet government-imposed Closing the Gap targets for Indigenous Australians living in a diversity of circumstances ranging from suburban Sydney to remote desert Australia.

In 2012 I wrote a critique of the Indigenous Expenditure Review titled 'Aboriginal Expenditure: It is a White Thing!' duly acknowledging the reference I was making to Richard Bell's insightful theorem 'Aboriginal art—It's a White Thing!'. The Productivity Commission deployed its considerable staff resources to dismiss my critique and ignore my recommendations. I will rehearse just a few of my criticisms here.

First the Productivity Commission makes a crude estimate of what it defines as Indigenous expenditure not what is spent on Indigenous people.

Second given documented disadvantage and historical legacy there is no estimate of what an equitable needs based spend should be. A robust conceptual framework should encompass three inter-lined and inseparable elements: historical legacy, current need and future investment.

Third there is no distinction made between spending imposed and spending desired or invited by Indigenous people. A clear example here is income management, over \$1 billion spent, no evidence of positive outcomes and still the spend continues. The cost of opposing native title claims is quantified as an Indigenous expenditure!

Fourth no distinction is made between positive and negative expenditure, education versus incarceration costs, preventative health versus palliative care: positive and negative

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expenditures are quantified with a positive sign and summed undifferentiated as Indigenous expenditure.

The Indigenous Expenditure Review is a highly abstracted, and highly qualified, estimate of public expenditure on Indigenous programs concocted by the Productivity Commission, with the Indigenous share of mainstream expenditure like defence spending calculated on a share of population basis being most bizarre. It is aligned to the ever-hopeful and failing quest to Close the Gap; it focuses on dollars and turns people into numbers, we need to focus on turning these numbers back into people. And we need to seek out the assessments of Australia's first peoples in all their diversity about what matters, how success is to be measured, what has succeeded, not just the views of ruling political and bureaucratic elites and some dominant and articulate Indigenous 'leaders' currently in the political ascendancy.

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### [Racist kitsch begs a deeper question &ndash; can Jews really be part of Poland?](#)

Lynne Michelle Swarts's article looked at the lived experience of Jews in Poland, both historically and today:

More than half of all Jews murdered during the Holocaust once lived in Poland. A staggering 89% of Poland's pre-war Jewish population of 3.3 million were murdered during the period of the Nazi occupation. It's the single most horrific moment in the thousand years of Jewish life in Poland, and all of Jewish history.

Modern Polish national identity, forged by the division of Poland in 1772 between the three major empires of the 18th century – Prussia, Russia and the Austro-Hungary – remade in the Polish Republic from 1919 to 1939, and again in 1989, still has a long way to go in healing the shattered relationship with Polish Jewry. The Little Jews do little to help repair that historic breach.

Grace Hou [left a comment](#) shared her experience of the Chinese diaspora in Australia and comparing that to the experiences of Jewish people:

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“You can listen to Klezmer music played by Klezmer bands, yet no band member is Jewish. You can sit in one of many Jewishly-named restaurants or cafes and eat traditional Jewish food (including a rare sighting of matzah, served in bread baskets as if a pre-dinner cracker), yet no customers are Jewish. The Polish staff appear nonchalant about how this may all seem to a Jewish foreigner. Young Poles think this is all just cutting-edge cool.”

I think this phenomenon is occurring in many parts of the world, and this specific segment of your article particularly resonated with me. It is all too appealing for some to prosper financially from marketing the food and culture of a distinct ethnicity, yet it is rare that communication with people from this ethnicity actually occurs. It's a shame, as it would perhaps allow for greater understanding, and less bigotry.

From what I have observed, there are various cultures that do tend to be quite insular. Ethnically, I'm Chinese, and I have noticed a lot of the Chinese diaspora stick together; not just owing to linguistic ease and familiarity. Jewish people don't seem to be dissimilar, in that sense of being reluctant to earnestly trust those outside of their own community. Many of us stick to what we know best, which is limiting at times, but always the easier option for the majority! I enjoyed reading your article, thanks for sharing your views.

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## **Food for thought: feeding our growing population with flies**

Bryan Lessard explained how we could use flies to feed our livestock and, in the process, make it easier to feed our growing populations:

While science is racing to develop more drought tolerant crop strains through genetic engineering, there may be a simpler alternative: flies.

Although people in some parts of the world have been eating insects for generations, the general population is opposed to introducing the crunchy morsels into their diet.

Since we might not be ready to eat insects ourselves, could we instead feed insects to our

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farmed animals to feed to growing population?

In the comments, Georgina Byrne [discussed](#) the disconnect between people being happy to eat some meat but not insects:

Thanks for the piece, Bryan. It is unfortunate to say the least that humanity has reached this point through its very success as a species. Doubtless early humans and some tribal hunter gather people are more than happy to find edible protein sources of any kind in a harsh environment. The Witchetty grub is a case in point, as well as the Bogong moth. I simply don't understand the mindset of anyone who might object to eating chicken meat or eggs if the animals had been fed on insect larvae. I guess it shows how far from nature many urban people have gone. That in itself is no doubt a large part of the problem of waste, over population and the disinclination to adequately address the problem of Climate Change.

To which Bryan [replied](#) :

I agree Georgina. There is a disconnect between some consumers and where their food came from. In the future we may have to change our mindset on eating insects or find other novel ways to feed the growing population.

Keep that in mind when you're having dinner this weekend.

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