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Caring beyond compliance: how social procurement professionals reshape relational norms in construction projects

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ABSTRACT

Large construction projects are increasingly required to create social value through social procurement. Yet project managers often struggle to fulfil these contractual obligations due to industry norms that undermine the relational practices on which social value creation depends. Using Ethics of Care theory and drawing on semi-structured interviews with fifteen Social Procurement Professionals (SPPs) in the construction industry, this article investigates whether and how SPPs practice care, and how a caring relationality challenges the transactional, rationalist norms that otherwise prevent projects from creating social value. Thematic analysis shows that to create social value, SPPs foster trust, reciprocity, and collaboration among webs of project actors by evoking their emotions, moral responsibility, holistic perspectives, and long-term commitment to change. In doing so, SPPs act as intermediaries who work on shifting relational norms in projects towards greater inclusivity and care. The findings suggest that while SPPs often remain marginal and under-resourced in project structures, they play a critical role in shifting how projects create social value, thus offering new insights for both project management scholarship and practical implementation of social procurement.

1. Introduction

Large construction projects are increasingly expected to create social value—i.e. to benefit local communities over and above the public service or infrastructure being built (Raiden et al., 2019). As resource-constrained governments look for ways to maximise value for money beyond cost and quality, they and other clients are formalising social value expectations through social procurement clauses in head contracts (Barraket et al., 2016). These clauses require projects to create social value by strategically leveraging the resources and relationships within supply chains (Furneaux & Barraket, 2014; Loosemore et al., 2021). This may require projects to create new employment opportunities for people who face complex barriers in the labour market (Hurt-Suwan & Mahler, 2021; Meltzer et al., 2024) or allocate a proportion of work packages to organisations such as social enterprises, local businesses, Indigenous-owned businesses, and other minority-owned organisations (Denny-Smith et al., 2024; Sumner et al., 2023).

Despite increasing interest in social procurement as a strategy of social value creation (McCrudden, 2004; Sumner et al., 2023), research shows that project managers in construction often find it difficult to satisfy contractual social procurement requirements (Natoli et al., 2023; Troje, 2023). In countries like Australia, where social procurement is increasingly mandated in large government contracts, project managers and subcontractors report not understanding these requirements, instead seeing them as risks to project budgets, programs, quality, and safety (Loosemore et al., 2020; Natoli et al., 2023). Other studies point to negative perceptions of social enterprises as lacking the capacity to complete large work packages (Loosemore & Reid, 2019; Lou et al., 2023), or a lack of capability and resources among subcontractors to establish strategies and initiatives that create social value (Barraket & Loosemore, 2018; Loosemore et al., 2020). Further, efforts to create social value by working across project levels and areas, or with organisations in other sectors, are hindered by tensions between organisational logics (Loosemore et al., 2021; Nawaz & Guribie, 2022; Troje & Andersson, 2021).

While the social procurement literature often frames barriers or challenges to social procurement implementation in terms of inadequate

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capability or capacity (outlined above), we argue in this article that a fundamental challenge in creating social value through procurement in construction projects is relational in nature. Specifically, we argue that relational norms in the construction industry—i.e. the social rules informally shared by actors in construction projects that guide expected ways of interacting and behaving (Benítez-Ávila et al., 2018; Cao & Lumineau, 2015)—are not compatible with social value creation. Relational norms in the construction industry are typically transactional, low-trust, opportunistic, competitive, and orientated on self-interest (Barraket & Loosemore, 2018; Brown & Loosemore, 2015; Clegg et al., 2023; Galvin et al., 2021). They sit in tension with the norms that research on social value in construction projects finds to be necessary for defining and creating social value—namely, longer-term, reciprocal, trusting, and collaborative relationships (Baba et al., 2021; Barraket & Loosemore, 2018; Gyadu-Asiedu et al., 2024; Klitgaard & Gottlieb, 2024; Raiden et al., 2019) that mitigate power differences between webs of stakeholders (Çıdık et al., 2024) and are inclusive of local communities (Bandé et al., 2024; Di Maddaloni et al., 2025).

There is thus substantial scope and need for project management scholars to investigate how to strategically shift relational norms in construction projects so that they are better suited to creating social value (see Loosemore et al., 2021; Klitgaard & Gottlieb, 2024). This is needed not only because of the contractual obligations being placed on projects to create social value through procurement processes, but also because without strategies that foster the required relational norms, projects risk bringing about negative social impacts. Negative impacts may include harm to communities (Di Maddaloni et al., 2025), social or greenwashing (Locatelli et al., 2025), or unsafe or exploitative practices in project supply chains (Denny-Smith et al., 2024; Loosemore et al., 2019). Further, research shows that the lack of inclusive processes in projects leads to cost hikes (Gil & Fu, 2021).

This paper contributes by drawing on Ethics of Care theory to offer a new conceptualisation and strategy for fostering the relational norms suitable for creating social value in construction projects (Gilligan, 1982; Held, 2006; Tronto, 1998). Ethics of Care theory contrasts decision-making that is grounded in rationalist, individualistic approaches (where decision-makers tend to view themselves as autonomous and in competition with others) with decision-making that is grounded in an awareness of one's interdependence and embeddedness within a web of relationships (Nunner-Winkler, 1993). Through thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with fifteen Social Procurement Professionals (SPPs; this study's unit of analysis), we develop insights into whether and how SPPs embed Ethics of Care within projects (i.e. care as practice). Further, we analyse how these practices challenge the existing relational norms in the construction industry that create inequitable patterns in who provides and resources care (i.e. care as political). The two research questions that this article addresses are thus:

1. Do SPPs practice Ethics of Care when implementing social procurement in construction projects? How?
2. Are SPPs' Ethics of Care practices orientated on the politics of care—i.e. on changing the relational norms in the construction industry that create inequitable patterns of care within and across projects? How?

Our empirical findings show that SPPs facilitate social procurement by fostering relationships based on trust, reciprocity, information sharing, and collaboration, as well as by evoking actors' emotions, sense of moral responsibility, holistic perspectives, and a long-term orientation to change. In other words, they shift how project actors relate to one another in the context of temporary projects, with potential to challenge the relational norms that structure processes of value creation in projects and the construction industry as a whole (Hernes, 2025). SPPs bring a unique relational skillset to the construction industry that project managers should recognise and value. While SPPs are often poorly resourced and located on the periphery of projects (Loosemore et al., 2022; Troje, 2023; Troje & Gluch, 2019, 2020), they are critical actors that are actively working to promote the relational norms that research shows to be well-suited to creating social value.

This article begins by positioning the study at the intersection of relational work and social value creation in projects, before drawing connections between the key tenets of Ethics of Care theory (Gilligan, 1982; Held, 2006; Tronto, 1998) and existing research on the relational work of SPPs in construction projects. The article then outlines the interpretivist, qualitative empirical method of the study; outlines six themes that emerged from the data; and concludes with a discussion of the contribution of this research to scholarship and practice.

2. The pivotal role of relational work in creating value in projects

Projects are temporary, hybrid organisations that bring together unique constellations of resources and capabilities (Spanuth et al., 2020) with the potential to deliver innovative solutions to challenges in physical, political, economic, and social contexts (Keegan & Turner, 2002; Wald et al., 2025). Although hybridity—i.e. the coexistence of multiple institutional logics, organisational forms, or value orientations within a project (Jewer et al., 2023)—offers opportunities to create value by combining diverse resources, perspectives, and practices that would not be available if actors were working independently, it also introduces tensions that can compromise project success. For example, Public Private Partnerships are one well-known example of hybrid organising in the construction industry that face challenges related to governance and information sharing (Aden et al., 2021); synchronisation of tasks, activities, and resources (Caldwell et al., 2017); and aligning actors' divergent values and goals (Solheim-Kile et al., 2019). Increasingly, scholars argue that relational work is a critical and necessary approach to managing these and other challenges of hybrid organising in order to enable projects to create value (Aben et al., 2021; Cao & Lumineau, 2015; Galvin et al., 2021; Gil, 2009).

Despite being relatively nascent, the research on social procurement in construction projects consistently shows that social value is created through relational collaboration between a wide range of actors (including contractors, subcontractors, social enterprises, Indigenous-owned businesses, etc.), some of which are seen as outsiders to the construction industry (Barraket & Loosemore, 2018; Loosemore et al., 2022; Troje, 2023; Troje & Gluch, 2020). The literature shows that when social procurement is instead implemented through rationalist, instrumental, and competitive interactions, it becomes a surface-level and compliance-driven activity that is confined to low-value and low-risk parts of the project, thus reducing benefits to local communities (Barraket & Loosemore, 2018; Loosemore & Reid, 2019).

Building collaborative relationships in the construction industry is challenging not only because projects bring together diverse actors *temporarily* and via a certain *sequence* of events (Ika et al., 2025), but also because interactions within temporary projects inevitably reinforce or challenge norms that persist beyond project parameters (Geraldi et al., 2025; Hernes, 2025). Accordingly, the transactional relational norms that structure interaction in construction projects have emerged in response to particular industry features, including that project managers often lack the emotional intelligence, institutional support, and resilience capabilities to overcome unexpected adversity in projects (Clegg et al., 2023). Xu and Smyth (2023) argue that arms-length relationships among independent entities in construction projects and the underlying transactional business model of construction firms are making it difficult to create value in projects through interactions that are centred on caring. At the crux of this article is thus an examination of how project actors—and specifically SPPs, who are employed by private sector construction contractors—are embedding caring relationalities in projects as a way of challenging and changing persistent relational norms in the construction industry to enable construction projects to create social value through procurement.

3. Ethics of care theory: a framework for conceptualising the relational work of social procurement implementation in construction projects

In extending our current understanding of social procurement in the field of construction project management, this article uses Ethics of Care theory to offer a new conceptualisation of social procurement as a caring and relational practice (Gilligan, 1982; Held, 2006; Tronto, 1998). Ethics of Care theory has recently been introduced in project studies to highlight the importance of relationships, care, responsibility, and intersubjectivity for value creation in projects (Xu & Smyth, 2023). Ethics of Care theory stems from the foundational work of psychologist Gilligan (1982) and emphasises that people are irrevocably connected in a specific time and place, and that they have a responsibility to care for one another in order for their web of relations to live and work healthily and productively (Fisher & Tronto, 1990; Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 2013). To practice Care Ethics, decision-makers need to develop holistic and shared understandings of care needs through two-way, non-hierarchical dialogue and knowledge sharing (Tronto, 1998). As such, Ethics of Care argues that morality exists beyond the hegemony of rationalist, individualist thought and can be expressed as interpersonal, relational, and non-hierarchical (Nunner-Winkler, 1993). The conceptual framework presented in Fig. 1 outlines these core, longstanding conceptual tenets of Care Ethics.

Existing research on social procurement illustrates how SPPs and other project actors promote and embed new relational norms in projects that enable social value to be created through procurement decisions. The remainder of this literature review draws links between core tenets of Ethics of Care theory (see Fig. 1) and the social procurement literature, outlining how SPPs appear to be promoting Ethics of Care relationalities in the construction industry through both 'care as practice' and 'care as political' (FitzGerald, 2020; Robinson, 2020).

3.1. Ethics of care 'as practice': examining how SPPs practice care to meet the social procurement requirements of construction projects

As outlined in Fig. 1 (regarding *who* should be considered in decision-making, *how* people should interact, and *what* the basis of decision-making should be), 'practicing' Care Ethics requires reciprocal, iterative dialogue between interdependent actors to co-create shared understandings of unmet needs. Miller (2020) defines unmet needs as the absent things 'which must be met or provided for humans to continue to live, to function as agents, and to thrive' (p. 646). Identifying unmet needs is a necessary step in social procurement implementation—whether in project strategy when deciding how the focus of a project's social procurement could benefit a community, or in project implementation when supporting and employing individuals who face complex barriers to employment.

While Ethics of Care theory has not yet been applied to research on social procurement, evidence suggests that SPPs are practicing Care Ethics when creating social value with project supply chains. In their study of employment-focused social procurement in Sweden, for

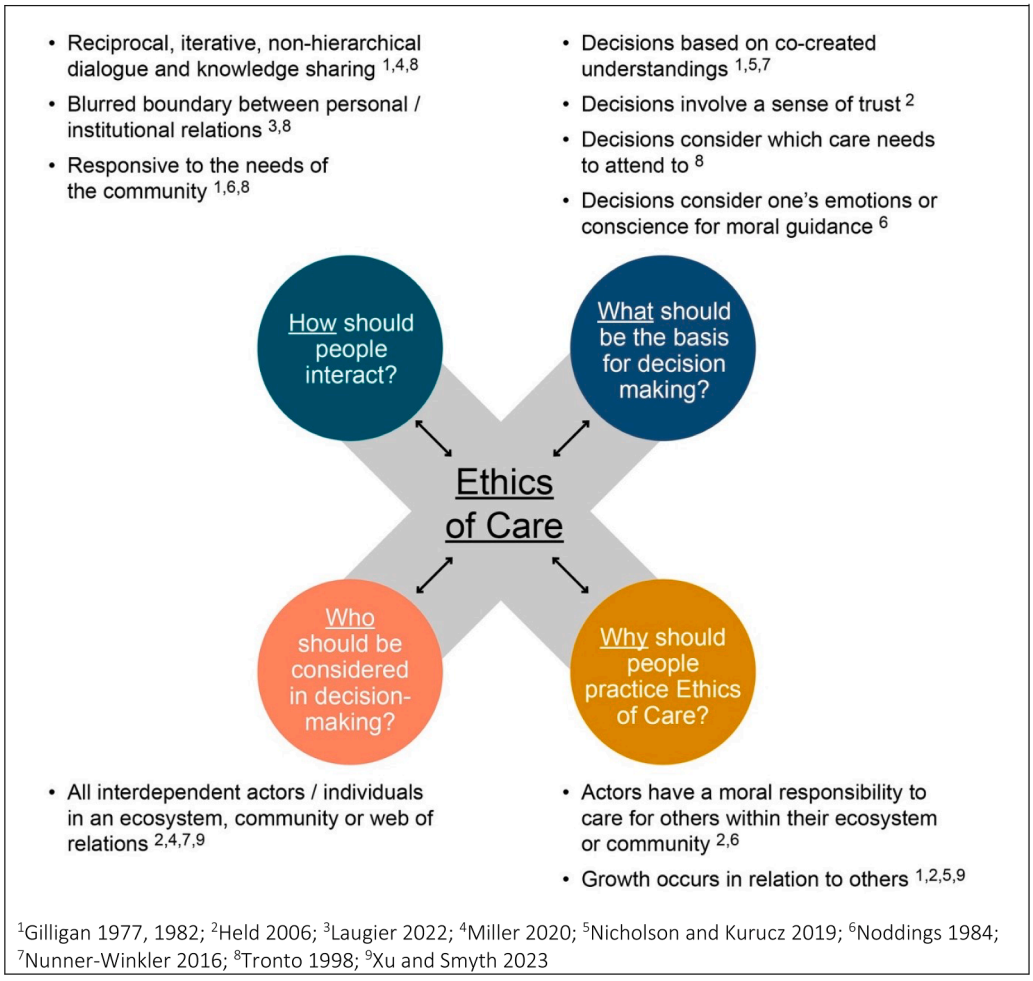

Fig. 1. A diagram mapping out the conceptual tenets of Ethics of Care theory in terms of (1) how people should interact, (2) what should be the basis for their decision-making, (3) who should be considered in decision-making, and (4) why people should practice Ethics of Care.
Conceptual tenets of Ethics of Care theory (source: authors).

example, Troje and Andersson (2021) found that supervisors helped new employees who were recent migrants with personal-life tasks such as helping them to read emails, pay bills, apply for benefits, and write CVs. This suggests an Ethics of Care practice in which unmet needs are identified holistically, by blurring the distinction between employees' unmet needs in the (project-based) workplace and those in their personal lives (Troje, 2023). Research has also shown how project-based intermediaries play an important, trusted role in facilitating dialogue across 'webs of relations'—by bridging a person's personal and work-based life to support their transition into work in construction (Woolcott et al., 2025) and intermediating the power dynamics between employer and employee (Suchowerska et al., 2024).

More recently, Miller (2020) has theorised that decisions about care in practice should consider not only unmet needs (which was the focus of early theorisation of 'care as practice', as noted in Fig. 1), but also experiences of vulnerability, dependence, and precarity. Defining these concepts, Miller (2020) explains that vulnerability refers to an openness to the world and other people over which we have limited control. Dependence is intertwined with need and vulnerability, however focuses on the relations that we have with others to meet our needs and respond to vulnerability. Precariousness refers to instability and uncertainty in life, and whether we can maintain a position where our needs are met. Miller (2020) argues that when we see others experiencing these states, we should respond with Ethics of Care.

Miller's work on vulnerability, dependence, and precarity can bring nuance to project managers' perspectives of where caring practices are needed in the 'webs of relations' that deliver projects. Studies have found that existing suppliers in projects—particularly suppliers further down the supply chain or suppliers that are smaller and younger firms—see social procurement requirements as a risk to traditional measures of success, including cost, time, quality, and safety (Barraket & Loosemore, 2018; Loosemore et al., 2020). Their preference for transactional, low-trust, voluntary, and low-commitment interactions with other project actors (Barraket & Loosemore, 2018) indicates an attempt to reduce dependence on others, perhaps in response to heightened experiences of vulnerability and precarity in supply chains. Resonating with Care Ethics' emphasis on actors within 'webs of relations' being interdependent (noted in Fig. 1), social procurement implementation may thus require caring relationalities to be orientated towards people and communities who access employment opportunities created in projects as well as contractors who are required to change their practices to create these social value opportunities.

By theorising *who* should be considered in decision-making, *how* project actors should interact, and *what* the basis of decision-making should be (see Fig. 1), 'care as practice' theory provides tools for disentangling how to *practice* Care Ethics in projects to create social value through procurement decisions and management. Resonating with Ethics of Care theory, existing research on social procurement implementation provides some evidence of SPPs and other project actors thinking holistically about the unmet needs of individuals (blurring boundaries between unmet needs in their personal and work lives). Research outlines how decisions that are made by webs of project actors need to be underpinned by co-created understandings of unmet needs (which may also include experiences of dependence, vulnerability, and precarity among various project actors). Yet, the theory's emphasis on interdependence among actors, holistic 'webs of relations' perspectives, and the suspension of hierarchical power dynamics suggests SPPs may be engaging in more caring practices than is evidenced by current research.

3.2. Ethics of care 'as political': examining why SPPs challenge and reshape relational norms in the broader construction industry through project-based social procurement

While 'care as practice' (outlined above) maps out interpersonal care practices within an existing order (for example, caring interactions within an organisation or project), 'care as political' theory engages with the structural conditions that create inequitable patterns in who provides and resources care, and under what circumstances (FitzGerald, 2020). This speaks to the dimension of Care Ethics that addresses *why* actors should practice Care Ethics: i.e. actors carry a moral responsibility to care within their ecosystems because growth occurs in relation to others (see Fig. 1).

Research on social procurement in construction projects shows that project actors routinely and inequitably push social value activities down the supply chain to contractors that do not have the capacity or capability to create social value independently (Barraket & Loosemore, 2018; Loosemore et al., 2020; Lou et al., 2023). Without expertise and resources to promote new caring relationalities, project actors do not challenge the inequitable relational norms and politics that prevent construction projects from creating social value in the first place. The construction industry is known for its 'homosocial camaraderie' and respect for lived experience (Hanna et al., 2020) which creates conditions for caring relationships in some situations (Lingard & Turner, 2023). However, camaraderie is often built through 'banter' that disguises bullying and abuse directed at workers who do not fit the stereotypical, 'ideal' construction worker (Greacen & Ross, 2023). This industry-wide pattern that emerges in projects poses risks to social groups who are the focus of employment-focused social procurement policies—including women, Indigenous people, and migrants and refugees (Barraket et al., 2016; Loosemore et al., 2021; Nawaz & Guribie, 2022)—and needs to be managed to prevent social procurement initiatives in projects from causing harm (see Gary, 2022).

Contractors can actively challenge inequitable patterns of care by leading and resourcing collaboration among project actors. In a case study of employment-focused social procurement in Australia, Suchowerska et al. (2024) showed how a contractor established project-based intermediaries in which SPPs connected project suppliers with a network of service providers in the community that offered caring expertise and resources. In so doing, the contractor's intermediary helped fill subcontractors' gaps in caring capability and capacity—a gap that is consistently identified as a barrier to effective social procurement in construction projects (Natoli et al., 2023; Troje, 2023). Contractors can also shift inequitable patterns of care in construction projects by valuing and resourcing social enterprise suppliers that have expertise in 'care as practice' (Campbell et al., 2021) and 'care as political' (see Teasdale et al., 2023). This is a 'political' activity because it shifts legitimacy and resources towards actors that have not historically been recognised or valued by incumbent project actors—such as social enterprise (Natoli et al., 2023).

Overall, the relational, context-dependent, and change-oriented ethos of SPPs suggests that 'care in practice' and 'care as political' provide a critical lens for understanding how and why SPPs seek to disrupt entrenched relational practices and norms. By interpreting their work through the lens of Ethics of Care, we can gain deeper insight into the strategies and approaches most effective in preventing social procurement from becoming a surface-level, compliance-driven activity that reproduces inequitable patterns of care and undermines opportunities for social value creation.

4. Method

4.1. Epistemology

Aligning with an interpretivist epistemology (Schwandt, 1994), this article *interprets* how SPPs in Australia are engaging in the practice and politics of Ethics of Care to help implement social procurement in construction projects. Interpretivist research methods are best equipped to explore Ethics of Care because they are rooted in a social constructivist ontology that understands social facts and processes as co-created by interconnected networks of actors (Gilligan, 1982; Held, 2006). In contrast to rationalist ethical frameworks that see decision-makers

drawing on predetermined rules or frameworks (Nunner-Winkler, 1993), Ethics of Care requires decision-makers to *interpret* their contexts and talk with their 'webs of relations' to co-create understandings of complex care needs in context and decide how to respond (Fisher & Tronto, 1990; Tronto, 1998).

4.2. Research context

To develop insights into whether and how Ethics of Care inform SPPs' implementation of social procurement in projects, researchers conducted qualitative interviews with SPPs working in Australia's construction industry. The Australian context was selected because of the relatively mature state of Australia's social procurement policies which focus heavily on the construction industry (Barraket, 2020), meaning many informants had longer-term experience in social procurement work.

4.3. Data collection

Researchers recruited SPPs by inviting tier-one contracting and consulting organisations in Australia's construction industry to nominate an employee who was active and passionate about implementing social procurement in projects. Research informants could also nominate SPPs whom they knew to be leading social procurement implementation in other organisations. Employing the concept of 'theoretical saturation' (Saunders et al., 2019), the research team continued recruiting and interviewing until informants ceased offering new or relevant insights in relation to the research questions. This resulted in a purposeful and snowballed sample (Bryman, 2016) of fifteen research informants (see Appendix 1).

Research participants were engaged in semi-structured, qualitative interviewing, which was deemed the most appropriate method for exploring and interpreting the practices, motivations, and perspectives of professionals (Bryman, 2016). SPPs are known to be diverse in professional background, seniority and responsibilities in the project, and relationships with stakeholders (Loosemore et al., 2022; Troje & Gluch, 2019), yet similar in their shared experiences of the enablers and barriers to social procurement implementation in Australia's construction industry. Interviews were held online due to the geographic dispersion of informants, with two researchers following a script of open-ended questions and asking follow-up questions as needed. Interview questions explored informants' motivations and approaches to implementing social procurement in construction projects, as well as their perspectives on the key enablers and barriers to creating social value through social procurement in Australia's construction industry.

4.4. Data analysis

Following Thompson's guide to abductive thematic analysis (2022), all interview recordings were transcribed and then 'actively read' by two researchers to begin the interpretive meaning-making process. Researchers then identified 'points of significance' relevant to the research questions—focusing this stage of analysis on *who* SPPs engaged in the implementation of social procurement, *what* SPPs' decision-making was based on, *how* they interacted with project actors, and *why* SPPs were motivated to work on social procurement, including what their aim was (see Fig. 1). After coding five interviews each, the two researchers discussed their coding and developed a code-book (Thompson, 2022), which included codes that linked with the tenets of Ethics of Care theory (as identified in Fig. 1), as well as new codes that labelled relevant and recurring 'points of significance' that remained uncategorised (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). For traceability, Table 1 includes a ˆ against the codes that were derived from Fig. 1, a * against codes derived from broader Ethics of Care theory, and a ~ against codes derived from empirical data. All interviews were then coded against the code-book that researchers developed collaboratively, with minor refinements and

Table 1
Codes and themes, as they relate to the study's research questions and Ethics of Care concepts (source: authors).

Research questions	Quadrants of Fig. 1	Primary codes - abductively developed	Themes
Do SPPs practice Ethics of Care when implementing social procurement in construction projects? How?	*Who* is considered?	• Interdependent actorsˆ ◦ Client~ ◦ Head Contractor~ ◦ Local Community~ ◦ New employees~ ◦ Subcontractors~ • Actors' care needsˆ ◦ Interdependence* ◦ Precarity* ◦ Unmet needs* ◦ Vulnerability*	Theme 1.1 SPPs focused on unmet needs in local communities and among new employees, as well as subcontractors' experiences of vulnerability and precarity in projects
	What is the basis for decisions?	• Co-created understandingˆ • Long-term, holistic view~ • Multiple conversations~ • One's emotionsˆ • Trusting relationshipsˆ	Theme 1.2 SPPs based their decisions on holistic understandings of project actors' situations (in the project and beyond)
	How should people interact?	• Two-way dialogueˆ • Non-hierarchicalˆ • With humility~ • With open-mindedness~ • Blurred boundary between personal and professionalˆ • Responsive to needs of project actorsˆ	Theme 1.3 SPPs used humility and open-mindedness to level power relations in the project
Are the Ethics of Care practices o.ff SPPs orientated on the politics of care—i.e. changing the norms and structures in the construction industry that create inequitable patterns of care? How?	*Why* should actors practice Ethics of Care?	• Moral responsibility to the ecosystemˆ • Interdependent actors grow togetherˆ • Actors have unique capabilities/ resources to contribute~ • To create longer-term change in the industry~ • Address inequitable division of caring practices~	Theme 2.1 SPPs saw their day-to-day engagement with project actors as orientated on achieving longer-term change Theme 2.2 SPPs saw head contractors as having a responsibility to enable project actors to improve the longer-term capability and capacity, so that they could create social value in future construction projects Theme 2.3 SPPs relied on project leadership to legitimise their 'bigger picture' and longer-term (i.e. 'political') approach to social procurement

ˆ Code derived from Fig. 1.
* Code derived from contemporary Ethics of Care theory (see section 3.1).
~ Code derived from empirical data.

clarifications to the code-book as needed.

Finally, researchers worked together to develop themes that answered the study's research questions by interpreting the complexities in the stories behind the data (Guest et al., 2012; Thompson, 2022). Researchers did this by focusing on patterns within each domain (i.e. who, what, how, or why) and considering relationships with codes in other domains. In this stage of analysis, the researchers also referred back to their broader reading of Ethics of Care theory as well as their initial reading of the transcripts prior to coding—thus working with theory and data in parallel (Reichertz, 2013; Thompson, 2022). Researchers further developed and finalised themes by writing up the findings under theme-based headings (Guest et al., 2012; Thompson, 2022), referring to quotations from the raw data to give compelling support and illustration of each theme. Quotations are attributed to informants via labels from R1 to R15 (see Appendix 1 for description of informants). Each theme is presented in the following section.

5. Findings

5.1. How practicing Ethics of Care enables SPPs to implement social procurement in construction projects

In response to our first research question, our study shows that SPPs practiced Ethics of Care in their day-to-day interactions with project actors—specifically, through decisions about who they considered in their decision-making (Theme 1.1), the basis for their decision-making (Theme 1.2), and how to interact with project actors (Theme 1.3).

Theme 1.1 SPPs focused on unmet needs in local communities and among new employees, as well as subcontractors' experiences of vulnerability and precarity in projects

To create social value through procurement in projects, SPPs focused on co-creating understandings of unmet needs in local communities and among new employees. SPPs spoke about 'sitting down and talking to people in the community' (R7) and working 'with a core collaborative group… to identify what needs the community may have' (R6). One SPP explained that a local community wanted to move from 'a generation of welfare to a generation of wealth' (R11) and that the community needed services that would support people to go to work, establish businesses, and access quality childcare.

SPPs also helped recruiters understand the needs of candidates applying for jobs in projects. For example, a SPP was often called into interviews to ask questions about candidates' needs which recruiters felt uncomfortable to ask. They explained:

> *I'll sit in an interview with someone that has a disability, and I say: 'Look I need accommodations for my job. I'm a working parent. I can't get into the office before 9:30am. That's an accommodation that the company has made for me.' What's an example of an accommodation that you might need? Can you think of anything that you might need? R1*

SPPs also considered the situations of employers (i.e. subcontractors), however rather than considering their unmet needs, SPPs focused on subcontractors' experiences of vulnerability and precarity in projects. SPPs observed that the 'margins are so small for contractors' and that 'builders are really struggling with resources' (R9), giving rise to a sense of precarity. The norm for 'superintendents [to] work with the same people they've always worked with' (R5) contributed to this sense of precarity, whereby it would be challenging to re-enter the supply chain if let go from a project. In the following quote, a SPP recounted her engagement with a subcontractor's perceived risks, with the plan to shift their sense of limited control over their environment (i.e. vulnerability) into a greater sense of control in which they capitalise on an opportunity.

> *If I have an engineer saying we don't need to procure from Aboriginal businesses or we don't need that person onsite, I'm already thinking about what are their perceived risks, and how can I sell it to them in a way that I'm already solving their problem so that's giving them an opportunity? R14*

The simultaneous, dual focus on employees and employers was required because SPPs understood employer and employee to be inextricably linked and interdependent in the context of social procurement implementation. As one SPP said, 'you have to support the supplier and you have to support the person' (R2).

Theme 1.2 SPPs based their decisions on holistic understandings of project actors' situations (in the project and beyond)

To create a basis for decision-making, SPPs worked towards holistically understanding complexities and interdependencies of unmet needs, vulnerabilities, and precarity, in order to create a basis for decision-making. SPPs achieved this understanding by building trusting relationships with local community groups and providers of services—explaining that it was about the 'human side' (R11) of maintaining regular contact and attending community events. One SPP explained that 'you can't have a relationship from one conversation' (R6) and that multiple conversations that spanned the project and life outside of the project enabled a trusting, two-way, supportive, and longer-term relationship.

Describing decisions on how to support subcontractors, one SPP explained that 'rather than demanding' subcontractors met social procurement requirements, they 'worked with them' towards the requirements (R15). Another explained that their work involved:

> *Meeting with them [subcontractors] regularly to go through what workforce development requirements they have to work on our project… I'll sit down with them and go okay well… what are the barriers that you're facing to reach that target, and so we'll have a conversation, they'll be like 'we can't find anyone, we're putting jobs out, people aren't responding', all these different reasons. So then it's like 'okay, well, have you thought about …' R13*

When working with subcontractors, SPPs sought to understand not just the project or social procurement in isolation, but also broader issues relating to resources, upskilling of workforce, and strategic vision. SPPs reported working with subcontractors over a long period—'staying connected with businesses consistently' (R13) and 'reaching out to them to congratulate them on a great job' (R1). SPPs saw this holistic, 'human', and longer-term relationship as necessary for establishing the basis for decision-making—particularly in terms of understanding how project actors could meaningfully, collaboratively, and reliably contribute to a project's social procurement requirements.

Theme 1.3 SPPs used humility and open-mindedness to level power relations in the project

Regarding *how* SPPs interacted with project actors to implement social procurement, SPPs consistently spoke about intentionally leveling power relations in the relatively hierarchical context of the construction project. This enabled SPPs and other project actors to *co-create* understandings of unmet needs, vulnerabilities, dependence, and precarity in the project (see Theme 1.1). They achieved this by practicing humility and open-mindedness as this elevated and welcomed the knowledge of other project actors, and by highlighting the personal stories of new employees as this encouraged emotional connections and relatability among project actors.

Practicing humility was important when engaging the local community. When it came to elevating the knowledge of local community, one SPP said:

> *All of us have got so much to learn, particularly as it relates to white privilege and our role in working with First Nations communities…to have that kind of humility. R4*

Another SPP said that being open-minded when building

relationships with subcontractors invited them to ask honest questions. In one situation, a senior tradesperson asked whether a marginalised group 'actually want to work?'. The SPP described this as an 'honest question' and that while team members responded by 'getting smaller as they were like I can't believe he asked that', it was important for these assumptions to be brought up, heard, and questioned so that the SPP could 'actually address it instead of squishing it down and just pretending it doesn't exist' (R1).

Many SPPs also spoke about the positive effect that sharing new employees' personal narratives or stories could have on leveling power relations between new employees and existing project actors. One SPP explained:

> *whoever they are and whatever role they're in, most people can relate to a story of a refugee or an asylum seeker, or a story of a person with a disability, or the story of a young person who has come from Youth Justice and has had an opportunity and gone on to make a success. R12*

Making new employees 'relatable' encouraged project actors to connect emotionally with the personal situations of new employees, and this enabled them to move beyond the hierarchy that structures relationships on the project site. As one SPP explained, 'stories make it more tangible…people are only a few degrees separation away from marginalised groups' (R3).

5.2. How SPPs engage in 'politics of care' when supporting project actors to implement social procurement in construction projects

In response to our second research question, our study shows that SPPs oriented their social procurement work on mitigating barriers to social procurement in the construction industry, beyond the life of the project. SPPs aimed to achieve longer-term change in the attitudes of project actors (Theme 2.1), leveraged the head contractor's resources to address subcontractor's capability and capacity gaps for future projects (Theme 2.2), and relied on project leadership to legitimise efforts to address the inequities that social procurement aimed to address (Theme 2.3).

Theme 2.1 SPPs saw their day-to-day engagement with project actors as orientated on achieving longer-term change

Reflecting on *why* they approached their social procurement work as described above (Themes 1.1, 1.2, and 1.3), SPPs said they had a 'bigger picture' view of projects, in which diverse project actors could work and grow together to create meaningful, longer-term social outcomes (as opposed to instrumental gains against shorter-term project metrics). The following quote juxtaposes the 'bigger picture' view with approaches that 'leverage' social procurement for one's own gain.

> *[An SPP] understands the bigger picture and doesn't just see it as a how do we leverage from this. Because if we're just doing it to meet a requirement, then we're not going to get the outcomes that we could actually get by seeing the bigger picture. R8*

Speaking about their specific motivation to use social procurement to remove negative stigma (a barrier to employment that can prevent individuals' and communities' needs from being met), one SPP highlighted that institutional change required time and effort from various project actors coming together around a shared social goal.

> *If I can help remove that negative stigma—and I think that'd be something that takes lots of time, lots of effort from lots of different people coming together—then that's really my aim. R1*

SPPs were thus not only facilitating a change towards collective practice in the context of the project, but also a change of perspective and capability that would inform practices on future projects in the industry. For R13, success was seeing subcontractors:

> *'change the way they do things and see the benefit, that's a success for me, and it increases the capability of the industry as well'. R13*

These motivations resonate with Ethics of Care 'as political' which aims to work on the structures that create inequities—i.e. move beyond the instrumental motives of a project and instead care for the ecosystems in which the project is situated.

Theme 2.2 SPPs saw head contractors as having a responsibility to enable project actors to improve the longer-term capability and capacity, so that they could create social value in future construction projects

Seeing the 'bigger picture', many SPPs shared the view that it was the head contractor's responsibility to mitigate differences in the capacity and capabilities of project actors to meaningfully engage in social procurement activities.

While organisations with caring capability (including social enterprises and Aboriginal businesses) were often perceived as not having the capability or capacity for large trade packages 'because they haven't had opportunities to grow, develop their expertise' (R11), informants understood subcontractors that *did* have the capability or capacity to complete trade packages not to necessarily have the caring capabilities that led to social value outcomes. These subcontractors were seen to go 'from job to job… [and] don't have the time to put a strategy together or to make it work in any real way' (R12).

Informants believed the head contractor should help social enterprises, Aboriginal businesses, and small subcontractors access the resources they needed to fill capacity and capability gaps:

> *[we are] the enabler, we have the resourcing capability and availability to meet with social enterprises, Aboriginal businesses, get to know them, understand their capabilities, and then suitably partner them within our existing supply chain. R11*

Highlighting the interdependence between subcontractors and head contractor, R9 explained:

> *the builders [subcontractors] aren't going to be able to do it and add resources to it and time and energy, unless it's funded by the principals. R9*

SPPs recognised that the benefits of these capability and capacity-building activities were not typically realised during the project. SPPs spent time providing feedback to businesses that were unsuccessful in securing project work due to inadequate commitment to social procurement. Feedback enabled those businesses to identify options for responding to future social procurement requirements and this led to success on projects with other contractors. Similarly, the commercial and social value created through new partnerships between supply chain organisations tended to be realised on 'the next project'. By investing in these partnerships, SPPs demonstrated care for the social procurement ecosystem.

Theme 2.3 SPPs relied on project leadership to legitimise their 'bigger picture' and longer-term (i.e. 'political') approach to social procurement

Finally, SPPs emphasised that support from Project Directors and Commercial Managers was essential for shifting away from the instrumental relational norms that dominate the construction industry and towards a collective relationality in which growth of interdependent actors in the ecosystem is the goal. SPPs found that Project Directors who were 'prepared to play a longer game' (R5), and who saw the project as something that would belong to the community following construction (R8), tended to support pursuing social value opportunities in the project. SPPs also relied on support from 'anybody who has budgetary responsibility' on the project (R14) or who 'signed off on the dollars' (R7)—including cost planners, commercial directors, and procurement managers. As one SPP explained:

> *a supportive Project Director is key, but then you've almost got to go down a few levels and get to the people who are making the decisions… people*

within the commercial team are really important to be on board, because all the contracts come through the commercial team at some point. R12

SPPs worked consistently on building rapport and relationships with Project Directors and Commercial Managers, using similar strategies to the ones they used with actors in the supply chain—including sharing stories, piloting initiatives, and making 'things as easy as you can' for them (R2). The hierarchy of project leadership meant that SPPs had to secure the buy-in of specific individuals within the project structure.

SPPs found that clients also influenced the extent to which a project's social procurement requirements catalysed longer-term change in and among organisations. For example, R5's current government client was 'not really interested in social procurement at all', and so it was more difficult to engage the project team in social procurement requirements. On a previous project, by comparison, R5 had a client that made social procurement a priority by establishing a Joint Coordination Committee with the Project Director and Social Inclusion Director to share learnings. Whereas SPPs could work across project areas and levels to develop a broad support base for social procurement, SPPs found that influencing the client's attitudes to social procurement was beyond their reach.

5.3. Synthesis of findings

Our empirical findings illustrate how SPPs enact Ethics of Care as they implement social procurement requirements in construction projects. SPPs work towards co-constructing holistic understandings of unmet needs and experiences of vulnerability and precarity across the project ecosystem, focusing on local communities, new employees facing structural barriers to employment, and subcontractors (i.e. employers). Through humility, open-mindedness, and sustained relationship-building (beyond the life of the project), SPPs work to soften entrenched power asymmetries characteristic of hierarchical project environments. In coordinating responses to care needs and vulnerabilities, SPPs challenge relational norms in the construction industry that create and sustain inequitable patterns of care within and across projects. These practices highlight the political dimensions of Ethics of Care, as SPPs' day-to-day relational work is oriented toward shifting the underlying relational norms of the construction industry, with the aim of introducing new relational norms through which project actors work towards inclusive and longer-term forms of social value creation.

6. Discussion

This article contributes to project scholarship that positions relational work, relational norms, or relationality as critical in the processes of creating social value in projects (e.g. Barraket & Loosemore, 2018; Caldwell et al., 2017; Di Maddaloni et al., 2025; Raiden et al., 2019; Xu & Smyth, 2023). The article's findings align with and extend research that consistently shows social value to be created through reciprocal, trusting, and collaborative relationships (Themes 1.1, 1.2; Baba et al., 2021; Barraket & Loosemore, 2018; Gyadu-Asiedu et al., 2024; Loosemore et al., 2021; Raiden et al., 2019; Troje, 2023; Troje & Gluch, 2020) that mitigate power differentials among webs of project stakeholders over the longer-term (Themes 1.3, 2.1, 2.2, 2.3; Çıdık et al., 2024) and actively include local communities (Theme 1.1; Bandé et al., 2024; Di Maddaloni et al., 2025). Additionally, this article contributes that when fostering these types of relationships in construction projects—which have been innovatively conceptualised here in terms of Ethics of Care—SPPs engage in the politics of reshaping the transactional relational norms that currently hinder social value creation in construction projects (Barraket & Loosemore, 2018; Siva & Gajendran, 2023). By linking care as practice to the broader frame of care as politics, this article highlights how industry-wide relational norms shape and are shaped by project dynamics, with implications for the opportunities that surface within temporary projects for the creation of social value (Geraldi et al., 2025; Hernes, 2025).

For example, in response to the first research question, Themes 1.1 and 1.2 show that SPPs' efforts to create social value through caring practices (Xu & Smyth, 2023) are anchored in an ecosystem or 'web of relations' view of projects (Çıdık et al., 2024; Natoli et al., 2023). SPPs recognised that to address the unmet needs of local communities and new employees who are normatively the key beneficiaries of social value initiatives (Baba et al., 2021; Di Maddaloni et al., 2025; Raiden et al., 2019), they needed to respond to subcontractors' experiences of vulnerability and precarity in project supply chains (Barraket & Loosemore, 2018; Loosemore et al., 2020). This holds implications for the politics of care (i.e. research question two) whereby embedding caring interactions within projects requires holistic understandings of the interdependencies, power dynamics, and resource flows through which projects create value. As Çıdık et al. (2024) recently argued, without working critically and holistically across project ecologies, projects will be geared towards reproducing inequities that limit the creation of longer-term and transformational value for local communities. SPPs' holistic view of project ecosystems brought them to view the head contractor as responsible for resourcing and enabling supply chains to build longer-term capability and capacity for longer-term social value creation (Themes 2.1 and 2.2). Resonating with concerns about the 'weaponisation of care' (Gary, 2022), SPPs recognised that while it is important to foster care through reciprocal, trusting, and collaborative relationships among project actors, relational shifts within projects need to be reinforced by shifts in industry-wide norms about whose responsibility it is to resource and provide care within projects (FitzGerald, 2020).

Also in response to the first research question, Theme 1.3 showed that a key strategy for embedding caring relationalities into projects was to soften power hierarchies between project actors. SPPs did this by sharing stories and narratives that emphasised the relatability and interdependence of project actors (see Johansson & Wickström, 2023; Sergeeva, 2024; Xu & Smyth, 2023). This empirical finding adds to social procurement research that emphasises the importance of finding strategies to challenge stigma in the construction industry about marginalised workers (Suchowerska et al., 2024), subcontractor perceptions of workers with employment barriers as business risks (Loosemore et al., 2021, 2023; Troje, 2023), and widespread assumptions that social enterprises lack capabilities to deliver large trade packages (Lou et al., 2023; Natoli et al., 2023). Challenging stigma and negative perceptions involves engaging in the politics of care (i.e. relevant to research question two) because it aims to shift enduring industry-wide norms that prevent project actors from recognising their interdependence on others in project ecosystems. Echoing the earlier discussion, SPPs made sense of efforts to soften power hierarchies *within* projects, as part of a longer-term and bigger-picture political process of destabilising industry-wide power imbalances that hinder social value creation (Theme 2.1). As Siva and Gajendran (2023) have recently shown, power imbalances within megaprojects often act as barriers to social value creation, with project teams sometimes exercising 'covert power' through deviant tactics to hinder delivery.

Taken together, this article's empirical findings show that as part of promoting and embedding care *practices* and relationalities into temporary projects, SPPs also create opportunities for social value in future projects by challenging broader and ongoing relational norms and *politics* that hinder social value creation (Barraket & Loosemore, 2018; Caldwell et al., 2017; Clegg et al., 2023; Galvin et al., 2021; Siva & Gajendran, 2023; Xu & Smyth, 2023). The article's findings contribute to contemporary project management literature that is disrupting the long-held view of projects as time-limited organising with a 'death sentence' (Geraldi et al., 2025). From a temporal perspective, SPPs work within project parameters in ways that simultaneously navigate the (transactional) relational norms that the project has inherited from previous projects, whilst also shifting these norms through Ethics of Care practices so that future projects are in a better position to create social

value (Hernes, 2025). In social procurement literature, SPPs are often described as spanning institutional boundaries between public, private, community, and hybrid organisations (Troje & Andersson, 2021; Loosemore et al., 2020; Troje & Kadefors, 2018)—thus combining diverse resources, perspectives, and practices to create value (Jewer et al., 2023). With a focus on the relational norms that guide interactions in construction projects, this article has emphasised that relational norms bring different types of boundaries that affect how actors interact and collaborate in projects, with implications for value creation. Ethics of Care provides a conceptual approach for reimagining social value creation in project organising as a process that begins with recognising intersubjectivity and interdependence of project actors, and the need to redistribute responsibilities for resourcing and providing care.

7. Conclusion

This article has investigated how social procurement professionals challenge and reshape adversarial and transactional relational norms in Australia's construction industry by layering Ethics of Care relationalities into project-based social procurement initiatives to create social value. Informed by Ethics of Care theory, this article moves beyond conceptualisations of relational work as built on trust, reciprocity, collaboration, and information sharing to also consider how actors' emotions, sense of moral responsibility, holistic perspectives, and long-term orientation (all core tenets of Ethics of Care theory) can drastically shift how project actors relate to one another in the context of the project. This offers potential to challenge the relational norms that structure processes of social value creation in projects and the construction industry as a whole.

While this study was purposefully situated in one industry and national context (i.e. the construction industry in Australia) to ensure that informants were navigating the same relational norms and broader social inequities in their social procurement work, this also limits the extent to which the study's findings can be transferred to other industries in Australia or construction industries in other countries. In the future, researchers can use the contributions of this article to investigate whether and how professionals are using Ethics of Care—in practice and as a politic—to reshape relational norms so that they are better suited to creating social value in projects. There is also scope for future research to examine and critically compare variation in how SPPs engage with Ethics of Care 'as practice' and 'as politics', and for researchers to examine how SPPs layer or nest Ethics of Care relationalities with the dominant rationalist, individualist, and competitive relationalities that structure Australia's construction industry.

While there are many directions in which this research could be further developed, the existing study nevertheless brings to the fore some considerations for policy and practice. In particular, it highlights that while SPPs have strategies for softening hierarchical power relations to enable project actors to recognise their interdependence and mutual obligation to one another, SPPs relied on project leadership (particularly clients, project directors, and commercial managers) to legitimise their efforts with subcontractors and local communities (see Troje, 2023). Second, the study highlights that changing deeply institutionalised relational norms in the construction industry is not easy. Projects—despite being time-bound—cannot escape the institutionalised relational norms that are entrenched in the broader industry. Because efforts to shift the construction industry's relational norms must be made in the context of projects, it is imperative that SPPs be given permission and resources to engage in work where the benefits are realised on future projects. Finally, SPPs bring a unique relational skillset to the construction industry that project managers should recognise and value. While SPPs are often poorly resourced and located on the periphery of projects, they are critical actors that are actively working to build the caring relational spaces in which the construction industry can create social value through procurement.

Data availability statement

The participants of this study did not give written consent for their data to be shared publicly.Due to the sensitive nature of the research, supporting data is not available.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the generation of this paper the authors did not use generative AI and AI-assisted technologies

Ethics statement

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CRediT authorship contribution statement

Roksolana Suchowerska: Conceptualization, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Formal analysis, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Martin Loosemore:** Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Data curation, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Ashlea Coen:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Suhair Alkilani:** Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

Appendix 1. Sample structure

Informant	Position	Organisation Description
R1	Social Procurement Manager	Major international construction and infrastructure contractor. Revenue: AU$ 4.2 billion.
R2	Social Inclusion Manager – Infrastructure & Major Projects	Major international construction and infrastructure contractor. Revenue: AU$ 4.2 billion.
R3	General Manager	Major international building construction, infrastructure, investment & development company. Revenue $5.19 billion.
R4	Head of sustainability	Major international building construction, infrastructure, investment & development company. Revenue $5.19 billion.
R5	Technical Director — Social Outcomes	Major project management, engineering and consulting services firm. Revenue AU$2.72 billion.

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Informant	Position	Organisation Description
R6	Social programme manager	An international construction contractor which specialises in commercial high-rise buildings. Revenue AU $3.78billion
R7	Employee relations manager.	An international construction contractor which specialises in commercial high-rise buildings. Revenue AU $3.78billion
R8	Director, Communication and Stakeholder Engagement	An engineering, management, design, planning, project management, consulting and advisory company. Revenue AU$ 1.06 billion
R9	Senior project manager	Project management consultancy, project manages major projects across Australia, Revenue $15 million
R10	Stakeholder Engagement Manager and Training Project Officer	Multinational and publicly listed construction, property and infrastructure company. Revenue AU$11.1 billion
R11	Social Diversity Supply Chain Manager	Multinational and publicly listed construction, property and infrastructure company. Revenue AU$11.1 billion
R12	People and Engagement Director	International construction, tunnelling, rail, building and services provider Revenue: Revenue AU$ 4.2 billion.
R13	Workforce Development and Industry Participation Manager	An international construction contractor which specialises in commercial high-rise buildings. Revenue AU $3.78billion
R14	Development and Services Manager	Construction contractor specialising in Metro, Freight & Heavy Haul, and Light Rail infrastructure. Revenue AU$55.1 million
R15	Managing Director	Major subcontractor specialising in electrical contracting. Revenue $68 million

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