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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

WILEY

Inter-cultural contexts: Exploring the experience of indigenous employees in mainstream Australian organisations

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Abstract

Objective: This study aimed to understand more about the experiences of Indigenous employees within mainstream Australian workplaces. Employment and retention rates for Indigenous employees continue to be disproportionately lower than the mainstream Australian population. The potential impact of the inter-cultural workplace context has featured little in the current research and public discourse on employment and retention rates. This study contributes further research and practice implications within the inter-cultural and organisational psychology literature.

Method: This qualitative study investigated the experiences of 10 Indigenous participants in a metropolitan area who are, or have been, employed in mainstream Australian workplaces. In-depth interviews were conducted using grounded theory methodology and participants' responses coded to identify themes.

Results: Results suggested that some Indigenous employees experience mainstream workplaces as inter-culturally complex environments. This setting is also found to present an increased range of psychosocial barriers to successful employment and retention. A working theory of inter-cultural code-switching between mainstream and minority groups is proposed.

Conclusion: The inter-cultural environment of mainstream Australian workplaces may be requiring Indigenous employees to display high levels of cultural agility to achieve successful employment and retention outcomes. The implications of this study suggest that widespread government initiatives to increase Indigenous employment are unlikely to result in sustained increases in employment and retention unless inter-cultural considerations are given due attention.

KEYWORDS

aboriginal, code-switching, cross-cultural, cultural agility, diversity, employee retention, first nations, inclusion, indigenous, indigenous employment, inter-cultural, workplace diversity management

Promoting employment within Indigenous communities is championed within national discourse as one way to address recognised disadvantage. For example, Indigenous Researcher, Dr Anthony Dillon, recently stated: "Get people into jobs and we will make significant inroads towards addressing suicide and a host of other problems affecting Indigenous people" (Dillon, 2016, p. 16). Indeed, there is evidence, both locally and abroad, that suggests a range of psychosocial and economic benefits are associated with employment (LaMontagne et al., 2016; Roos, Lahelma, Saastamoinen, & Elstad, 2005; Ross & Mirowsky, 1995). Likewise, the experience of unemployment is linked to a range of adverse psychosocial and economic outcomes. Among these are mental health disorders such as depression and anxiety, welfare dependence (Australian Government, 2016), and poverty (Calver, 2015; Deloitte Access Economics, 2014). Therefore, it is perhaps not surprising that employment initiatives have been a mainstay of government attempts to address a range of social issues. However, increasingly Indigenous employment has shown itself to be much more complicated than a preliminary reading of the above pro-employment research suggests, hinting that additional analysis is warranted.

In 2008, the Rudd Government introduced the "Closing the Gap" strategy (Australian Government, 2016), and this initiative was continued by successive governments (Altman, Biddle, & Hunter, 2008). This action mirrored similar initiatives in Canada and New Zealand (Collins, Ihaka, Tapaleao, Tan, & Singh, 2014), aimed at improving Indigenous disadvantage across several wellbeing measures (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2014). Policy initiatives to improve Indigenous employment outcomes have focused mainly on increasing education and training opportunities, job creation, and controversial "work for the dole" schemes, with a particular focus on remote communities (Chirgwin, Farago, d'Antione, & Nagle, 2017).

The results have been less than hoped for, with the initiatives lagging on multiple target areas. Only 46.6% of the Indigenous population was employed in 2016, compared to the Non-Indigenous Australian population rates that have been stable near 72% (Commonwealth of Australia, 2018). Of those who do gain employment, employee retention rates among Indigenous staff are comparatively low (Gray, Hunter, & Lohoar, 2011). Substantial and sustained increases in Indigenous employment and retention have remained elusive.

What is sorely lacking from the national discussion, and the literature, is a psychological exploration of the intercultural contexts occurring when Indigenous and mainstream Australian cultures meet in the workplace. The contributions of Organisational and Cross-Cultural Psychology have been noticeably absent within this discussion. This absence is salient considering that diversity workplace management, cultural intelligence, employee retention, and turnover have been focal research pursuits within the psychological literature more broadly (e.g., Gonzalez & DeNisi, 2009; Roberson, 2019; Thomas, 1999). Therefore, what follows are the findings of a research project that contributes to addressing this gap in the literature. This study explored the experiences of Indigenous employees within mainstream Western-style workplaces in a major metropolitan Australian city. The findings are then placed within the context of relevant psychological constructs.

Key points

- Mainstream Australian workplaces may be experienced as inter-cultural environments by some Indigenous employees.
- Adhering to mainstream western workplace norms may position some Indigenous employees to be at odds with their own cultural norms and protocols, creating inter-cultural tension.
- Inter-cultural environments may require employees to possess higher levels of cultural agility for work-based outcomes and retention.

What this topic adds

- Some Indigenous employees may utilise code-switching and cultural mediation to navigate intercultural tension in mainstream workplaces.
- Mainstream workplace participation may be expecting some Indigenous employees to display high levels of cultural agility to successfully navigate inter-cultural tension.
- Studies investigating international assignments show that employees working in inter-cultural environments generally experience a range of poorer outcomes. These can include lower success rates for the assignment objectives including early termination of the assignment due to the increased stressors. The relevance of these studies to Indigenous employees in mainstream workplaces is explored.

1 | EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES FOR INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS

Jordan and Mavec (2010, p. 26) previously lamented that "there is still inadequate research about Indigenous

peoples' aspirations and attitudes to paid employment, particularly among those living in urban or regional areas." However, there have been many quantitative studies using Indigenous socioeconomic and ABS census data, to explore employment outcomes and other wellbeing indicators linked to economic participation (Altman et al., 2008; Biddle & Yap, 2010; Cooper, 2011; Hunter, 2001; Hunter, 2006; Hunter & Gray, 2017). Additionally, there have been discursive critiques of rhetoric and policy approaches to increasing Indigenous employment (Cutcliffe, 2006), and success stories of inter-cultural working environments (Daly & Gebremedhin, 2015; McRae-Williams, 2011). There are a small number of local studies exploring Indigenous experiences at work and the nature of turnover among Indigenous employees. These include Musharbash's (2004) study that found cultural misunderstandings and incompatibility impacted on Yuendumu community's participation in Community Development Employment Projects. Similarly, McRae-Williams and Gerritsen (2010) gained Indigenous perspectives on mainstream work-life by local Indigenous community members in the Northern Territory. McRae-Williams' participants described "mutual incomprehension" concerning Indigenous and mainstream work habits. A more recent study by Biddle and Lahn (2016) indicated that Indigenous interviewees characterised their workplace experiences as marked by social distance, racism, and discrimination. These and other studies suggest that cross-cultural contexts have the potential to undermine attempts to increase Indigenous uptake of employment (Burbank, 2006; Chirgwin et al., 2017; Larkin, 2013; Sammartino, O'Flynn, & Nicholas, 2003). This present study attempts to understand more about the possible psychological mechanisms experienced by Indigenous employees in mainstream workplaces from an organisational and cross-cultural psychology perspective.

2 | RESEARCH METHODS

2.1 | Design

This study explored the experiences of Indigenous employees in mainstream workplaces using the qualitative methodology of grounded theory, drawing from the work of Glaser and Strauss (1967), and later Charmaz (2006).

The research question posed is, "What are the experiences of Indigenous employees within a mainstream organisational environment?"

The research design and methods followed in this study, based on practice guidelines developed by Liamputtong (2009), included:

1. Purposive sampling of interview participants as per the inclusion criteria outlined in the Participant section that follows.
2. Data collection, consisting of semi-structured interviews conducted by one of the authors (L.S.).
3. Theoretical sampling, in which data are analysed concurrently during the data collection, allowing evolving directions to be explored in further interviews (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).
4. Data collection was terminated at theoretical saturation after 10 interviews when there failed to be any new significant themes identified in the data.
5. Analysis commenced using open coding that involved compiling the data into themes.
6. Axial coding was completed in which these open codes were collapsed into broader thematic codes.
7. The author's (L.S.) decision-making process and self-reflections were recorded via memo/diary entries to create a transparent interpretation process.
8. The author (L.S.) brought the thematic threads together to construct theoretical explanations that are grounded in the data, allowing the topics and links between the codes to be adequately explained and analysed against existing relevant research in coordination with the second author (B.H.).

2.2 | Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted in line with guidelines by Braun and Clarke (2006). These contain six phases of thematic analysis that allow researchers to organise qualitative data into interpretable over-arching themes. These phases were:

1. Becoming familiar with the data; in this study, this was achieved through transcription and reading/correcting transcriptions completed by a third-party contractor while re-listening to the interviews.
2. Generation of initial codes; this involves the first stage of data reduction into smaller pieces of information. Here, theoretical coding (relevant to the research question) and open coding (not pre-determined) were used that identified themes. In line with this approach, not all data were coded, but only the data related directly to the research aims of exploring the lived experience of Indigenous employees working in mainstream workplaces.
3. Latent themes were identified, moving past superficial semantic themes to identify underlying commonalities within participants' responses (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These initial themes and the accompanying open codes are found in Table 1. Codes that did not fit into

TABLE 1 Phase one—initial open coding

Theme: Inter-cultural adaptation
Codes:
1. Pre-colonial norms and values
2. Clash of cultures
3. Transition
4. Difficulties in adapting
5. Cultural dilemmas
6. Cultural obligations
7. Indigenous corporations compared to Western corporations
8. Code-switching
9. Reconciling across cultures
10. Accountability to community

TABLE 2 Phase two—refining themes

Theme: Inter-cultural tension
Codes:
1. Indigenous worldview
   a. Accountability to the community
   b. Conception of work
2. Incompatibility of western ways of working
3. Mainstream role compatibility with role in the community
4. Western HR systems compared to indigenous corporation HR system.
5. Cultural obligations
6. Navigating two worlds

themes related to the research question were not included in further analysis.

4. A review of themes was undertaken, and all of the data related to a similar theme was placed together. These were then reviewed; looking for dominant and sub-dominant themes and ensuring that closely related themes could be combined into a higher-level theme. At this stage, the codes were reworked, and some codes were collapsed down. In contrast, others were expanded and separated, trying to identify core thematic subject matter. From this process, Inter-Cultural Tension emerged as a key theme (see Table 2). However, these were again reworked due to the high amount of overlap between the threads. It became evident that a different approach was required to outline the dominant themes. Thus, these themes were re-ordered and collapsed down to reflect different domains (see Table 3), culminating in the central socio-cultural theme, of which a subset is explored further in this article.

2.3 | Participants

Ten participants were interviewed. All were from a metropolitan Australian city, identified as Indigenous, and were currently or previously employed in mainstream Western-style workplaces. Interviewees included five men and five women across the age range of 20–70 years. There was representation across the full age range, with at least one participant in each 10-year age bracket. Participants' workplace experiences were drawn from several sectors, including private enterprise, community services, mining, self-employment, and public service roles. Inclusion criteria for the participants included identification as Indigenous, being over 18 years of age, and currently or previously having worked in a non-Indigenous mainstream Australian organisation.

TABLE 3 Final themes and axial codes

Theme: Socio-cultural domain
Codes:
1. Indigenous vs Western worldview
2. Mainstream role link to cultural role
3. Differences in approaches to work & vocation
4. Barriers to education
5. Barriers to employment
6. Colonisation & intergenerational trauma
7. Cultural obligations

3 | PROCEDURE

Following Human Research Ethics Approval from the authors' university (Approval 2016/107), participants were recruited via local Indigenous professional networks. Snowball sampling was employed with participants nominating other possible candidates. These candidates were then contacted via email, phone, or social media directly and offered the opportunity to receive information on the study. Those who agreed were provided information and invited to participate. While nearly 20 possible participants agreed to participate, 10 individuals completed a face-to-face interview. Thematic saturation was reached after 10 interviews where repeated themes emerged across participants, thus further sampling was not conducted.

4 | RESULTS

As outlined previously in the method section, thematic analysis was conducted on the participants' transcripts according to Grounded Theory methodology on an ongoing basis (Liamputtong, 2009). Initially, 16 main themes were identified across the 10 interviews and then further collapsed into thematic threads. Key findings emerged within an over-arching socio-cultural theme, explored further below.

4.1 | Describing inter-cultural tension

All participants stated that inter-cultural tension was a common occurrence in their experience of mainstream workplaces. For some, this tension was described as being moderately tense, but able to be navigated. Others, however, described employment in the mainstream workforce as almost a frontier of colonisation. Of note was that the more senior participants and members of the Stolen Generations, all of whom had experienced a more traditional lifestyle before enforced displacement, tended to describe high levels of cultural tension. Several participants described a steep learning curve in gaining employment, with formal education and Western work systems being a relatively new and foreign phenomenon in their communities. Many participants described a painful colonial history as contributing to general discomfort, fear, and anger at Western society, making it highly confronting for some to interact with mainstream society.

"... our people feel a bit uncomfortable walking into some of these big organizations as employees. We've always got our guard up because of what's happened in the past, and the entrenched trauma that was systemic from the same people that we try and work with."

"So every time in all my life that I had to step into a White space, that's everywhere, I still go with that brand on myself and so when I am going into work I'm thinking I been judged ... I rather run the other way, I don't wanna deal with that anymore.... Our mob are always under review ... and its always us changing and its always us just been judged, we are always wrong, we're negative, we're not workers, we're lazy ...."

"*We're doing a transition from a customary value system, and we're trying to integrate this value system of education, job, you know ... we've only been in the system 60 years so that value hasn't been properly passed down ...."*

Responses suggested that even when individuals in the community do have the desire to work within the system, the reality of the inter-cultural differences can make this enterprise very difficult.

"Within the community a lot of the people ... want to work, men and women, and set up careers for themselves and their families, but sometimes it's really hard adapting to that workplace ...."

"*So many of our community want work, but they have to fit into the White system to do it. The White system is the White way; there's no consideration for the Black ...."*

These responses highlight that for some Indigenous employees, participating in mainstream workplaces is a culturally charged and emotionally stressful experience. Participants highlighted that the cultural and historical context of their interactions with the mainstream were ever-present, and for some, this was overwhelming and a deterrent to mainstream employment.

4.2 | Navigating inter-cultural tension with code switching

One crucial strategy to navigate inter-cultural tension that emerged repeatedly was developing ways to "code-switch" between Indigenous ways of being and the mainstream ways of being. Code-switching has been defined as "... the act of purposefully modifying one's behaviour in an interaction in a foreign setting in order to accommodate different cultural norms for appropriate behaviour" (Molinsky, 2007, p. 623). Participants stated:

"The language changes, the body language changes, the way we sit ... back in the time and even now when Aboriginal people acted and spoke and live like White people, they got a big tick of approval so when we put on that (White) hat that means that we step in out of who we are into this other frame like an acting frame, that's what we're doing, we're acting."

"Code switch is when I stop being ... [an] initiated Black man whatever and become taking on the values of someone else, of the norm, that's a code switch."

Some participants described the process of code-switching as taking on the ways of the "other" but consequently feeling they let part of themselves go. Code-switching was characterised as a complex existential dilemma, placing the individual in a state of cultural tension. In one respect, the participants described being forced to engage with the mainstream to survive in post-colonial Australia. However, within that interaction, they felt they had to shed part of their identity, creating angst and confronting them with a seemingly irreconcilable quandary.

"To work with the White man, you got to act like the White man, and you assimilate, and then you distance yourself from your identity, and your people, and your culture ... this is how mainstream has made it, for them to fail their culture to rise to the top levels within the Non-Aboriginal culture, that they've got to leave their own behind and put on that White cap."

"... so that's what makes it hard with trying to make a life out there—especially coming from a customary setting, grounding you and what shaped your life. You as a person. You've got to honour that somehow, that's hard to let it go."

Participants consistently highlighted a sense of being pulled between two ways of being that were not immediately reconcilable; that adhering to one required pulling away from the other, demanding considerable cultural dexterity to navigate successfully.

Most participants described times that they were required to act as a cross-cultural mediator, adjusting their language and actions accordingly within mainstream workplaces, to facilitate interaction between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous community members.

"An understanding of the systems is really, really important ... we understand their world, so we know how to make things work, we know ... we just know that this is another world, and you got to know it."

"I talk, and I speak in the language that's refined over a few years, but I go, "actually we say it differently, but this is what we talk about, exactly what you're talking about."

Taking on the role of cultural mediator in this way suggests some mastery of biculturalism, as participants were able to help others successfully navigate inter-cultural situations.

4.3 | Accountability to the community

Another complexity in attempting to navigate this inter-cultural dilemma was the role of the community in trying to keep members grounded and accountable to their people. If someone was seen to adapt too successfully to mainstream workplace culture, they might become subject to community backlash and criticism.

"... they do expect you to do your job [but] they do expect you to challenge the system ... to know the system and to influence it in the right way for everyone, not just for our community, but it's our community that's locked out all the time."

"We've got ... all these people at the government levels that the people do expect that they talk for them, and express what we need in the communities ... There is a big expectation that they help with making the community and say at the government level ... the community watches them all throughout Australia, and they're accountable. They are made accountable to their people. [Name of public figure] he's been ostracized and pushed away because he forgot to protect the interests of his people for money, forgot about identity, heritage, and culture, and sacredness for the money."

Participants described themselves as being held accountable to their community while working in a mainstream organisational context. For some, this was navigated by engaging in mainstream employment that also involved participating in cultural, community sanctioned roles. Although the participants were drawn from a wide variety of sectors (e.g., private enterprise, community services, mining, self-employment, and government roles), most of the participants that were currently employed were working in mainstream paid roles that allowed them to interact with their community in a culturally meaningful way, and participate in their community roles at the same time. For some, their position title made this overt, such as an Indigenous Engagement Officer role. However, even for those who were practicing trades, or holding skilled and specialist roles that were not Indigenous identified, they described finding themselves in positions where they would act as cultural mediators between the mainstream organisation and other Indigenous staff or clients.

"My sister said to me once ... 'I think it's about time you came back to the community work.' I said 'why?' and she says 'because with all your knowledge that you've got you should be using it to make our community, make it better .... I'm going' but if I can get change with staff, if we can get [the organisation] to change so that it's more culturally safe, culturally secure, culturally competent, culturally proficient it makes it a better place for our world ..."

Therefore, the participants reflected on the strain encountered in balancing engagement with mainstream employers with their continued involvement and engagement with the community.

5 | DISCUSSION

The themes that emerged from the data highlight the complexity of the inter-cultural workplace that Indigenous employees working within mainstream Western workplaces are required to navigate. Of particular note is the presence of code-switching. This indicated cultural agility as a crucial strength of Indigenous employees that facilitates successful navigation of the inter-cultural tensions. The findings in this current study are entirely compatible with existing theories of inter-cultural agility and adaptation, as outlined in the following discussion.

Code-switching was a term coined by Molinsky (2007). It is adapted from socio-linguistics, and describes the flexibility of using different languages or dialects across different settings and with different audiences. The term Code-switching has also been used by educational, linguistic, and literary scholars to denote inter-cultural adaptation (Bevan & Shillinglaw, 2010; Molinsky, 2007; Mushin, 2010). However, code-switching is a mostly unexplored construct in the context of Indigenous employment within mainstream Australian organisations. A study by Fredericks (2009) found that Indigenous workers in a health service who more closely aligned themselves to social norms of Whiteness appeared more employable and were more likely to gain work. This expectation was presented as being an ethical dilemma and a source of potential identity conflict. Many participants in Frederick's study described a constant negotiation between themselves, their employment, and

their community identity, reflecting strain associated with the process of engaging in code-switching. This mirrors the participants' descriptions of code-switching in the current study.

One's cultural identity is a central mechanism for organising behaviour, values, and priorities, but individuals can work within multiple cultures effectively and identify with multiple social groups (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Caligiuri (2012)) described the construct of cultural agility comprising a set of psychological and behavioural competencies that allow individuals to engage effectively within inter-cultural situations. These behavioural competencies include cultural minimisation (focusing on commonalities rather than differences), adaption (adapting one's behaviour to suit the host culture), and integration (merging aspects of culture) (Caligiuri, 2012). The culturally agile individual can move effectively between these three behavioural sets depending on the context, choosing the most appropriate for the situation, and this appeared to be reflected in the discourse of participants in the current study.

Furthermore, Caligiuri and Tarique (2016) demonstrated that cultural adaptation, cultural minimisation, and cultural integration accounted for 17% of the total variance in job performance in a cross-cultural environment. This result indicated that job performance was impacted by these mechanisms for managing inter-cultural relations, also called cultural agility.

The participants in this study repeatedly articulated the inter-cultural complexity that they had experienced in mainstream workplaces, and the strategies they had used to moderate these. Such strategies included the ability to code-switch and act as an inter-cultural mediator within the workplace, suggesting high levels of inter-cultural agility, consistent with Caligiuri and Tarique's prior findings. Therefore, individuals who were able to utilise their cultural agility in this way may have been more likely to succeed in mainstream workplaces.

5.1 | Implications

These findings suggest an emerging theory of dominant and minority inter-cultural code-switching in the context of Indigenous employment within mainstream organisations. It is theorised that some Indigenous Australians are required to code-switch and display a high level of cultural agility in order to succeed in mainstream Western workplaces. This echoes the cultural tension highlighted in previous studies outlined above by Biddle and Lahn (2016), Daly and Gebremedhin (2015), Fredericks (2009), and McRae-Williams (2011). Indigenous Australians seem to face a cultural dilemma due to the tension between Western workplace practices and competing cultural pressures. Research suggests that cultural competency training is a valuable means of enhancing the cultural security of Indigenous Australian employees (Lumby & Farrelly, 2009). Therefore, integrating a series of organisational practices that reflect Indigenous cultural values may assist in reducing these tensions reported by the participants in this study. As noted by Lumby and Farrelly (2009, p. 14), "cultural security recognises that [the integration of cultural values] is not an optional strategy, nor solely the responsibility of individuals, but rather involves society and system levels of involvement." The practical implications of navigating code-switching and inter-cultural agility in mainstream organisations reinforce the call to integrate cultural security within the practices of Australian mainstream organisations.

5.2 | Limitations

This study provides qualitative insights into the experience of 10 individuals. Although the data was consistent and compatible across the participants in order to afford thematic saturation and the cessation of sampling, we do not claim that these findings are generalisable to other people from the many Indigenous nations across Australia. Further examination of these findings with diverse communities is a future direction for study. In addition, testing the proposed theory about the role of code-switching, cultural agility, and the implications for individual and workplace outcomes using a quantitative or mixed methodology may be a valuable direction for research.

5.3 | Conclusion

This study into Indigenous experiences of working in mainstream Western workplaces in Australia has found that the participants described a consistent theme of intercultural tension. Also, participants described a range of strategies to successfully navigate the inter-cultural tension experienced. These strategies included obtaining mainstream roles, that also allowed them to support their communities as well as using inter-cultural code-switching and acting as intercultural mediators, indicating a high level of inter-cultural agility and adaptation. The implications of this study reinforce the call for culturally-secure workplace practices that may assist in reducing the inter-cultural tension experienced by some in mainstream organisations. In addition, this study highlights the strengths of Indigenous Australians working within mainstream organisations and navigating the tensions outlined.

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