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Research and Evaluation

Between Two Worlds: Indigenous Leaders Exercising Influence and Working across Boundaries

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Although there has been considerable commentary and debate relating to Indigenous political leadership, less attention has been given to the emergence of Indigenous leaders working to improve Indigenous prospects from within the worlds of community development, management, and administration. Based on in-depth interviews with a cohort of emerging Indigenous leaders in these situations, we found that these leaders are producing their own style of leadership, drawing on their Indigenous identity as a resource, while negotiating the policy and other demands of white Australia. The style of leadership that is emerging has its own distinctive attributes, being more relationally based than is the norm. We suggest that these differences have an important cultural dimension, but also relate to the strategic and tactical challenges of managing 'two-ways'. We conclude that these characteristics may be difficult to recognise and reward in organisations where leadership is conceptualised in more instrumental terms.

Key words: *Indigenous leadership*, *managing 'two-ways'*, *bureaucratic leadership*

The longstanding problems experienced by Indigenous Australians in relation to health, employment, and social outcomes have been widely documented. However, insufficient attention has been paid by scholars to the role of Indigenous leaders in actively confronting these issues. In the political arena, Indigenous leaders have articulated disadvantage and fought for rights, resources, and recognition (Langton 2012; Lippmann 1991; Maddison 2009). Increasingly, Indigenous Australians are taking on leadership roles in community-controlled health services, education and educational reform, and community development (see e.g. Jeffries and Menham 2008; Panaretto et al. 2014; Pearson 2009).

In this study, via a research partnership with the Australian Indigenous Leadership Centre, we look specifically at the development of emerging Indigenous leaders seeking to 'make a difference' through their work in their communities and, more broadly, as community-oriented liaison officers, managers, and administrators. We suggest that Indigenous leaders working in these situations are developing a relational style of leadership, one that is characterised by norms, values, protocols, and practices, which are distinct from those prioritised in more managerialist models of leadership (Sanders 2008a). However, many challenges remain for these leaders working 'between two worlds'.

The 'two worlds', broadly speaking, are those of Western organisational reality and demands, on the one hand, and that of Indigenous communities, on the other hand. A typical example is that of an Indigenous person working for a state or federal department, with responsibility for engaging with Indigenous communities in relation to the implementation of policy. In other situations, an Indigenous leader may be employed by a particular community and required to work with a variety of stakeholders to achieve desired outcomes. Other examples include Indigenous leaders working with not-for-profits dealing with Indigenous and,

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often, non-Indigenous clients or with Indigenous students.

Indigenous leaders between two worlds find that their work is a process of constant interpretation and negotiation. Each context in which they work poses new tactical and strategic dilemmas. For many aspiring leaders, maintaining stability of employment for themselves, when there are constant cutbacks and policy changes, is a continuing challenge.

This study pursues important aspects of leadership practice that can be overlooked by research that is framed by more managerially oriented leadership models. Much leadership research is situated within an organisational hierarchy in which leadership is defined as influencing others to achieve organisational outcomes (Bryman 2013). Leaders operating in contexts characterised by more fluid power relations have been found to exhibit a broader range of leadership behaviours, and in particular appear to be more relationally oriented (Helstad and Møller 2013; Uhl-Bien 2006). In these contexts, leaders can draw on sources other than authority, such as a sense of community, to empower themselves (Wilke and Speer 2011).

Ayman and Korabik (2010) suggest that leadership research needs to demonstrate a better appreciation of the diversity of possible leadership styles. In addition to recognising the role of factors of gender and culture in the expression of leadership, they also indicate the need for leaders to show insight into their own preferred style of leadership and how it differs to others. Although leaders in the current study worked within formal organisational settings and authority structures, they also attempted to exert influence across individuals and communities outside the organisational boundaries. To do so they drew on their Indigenous identity to inform their purpose and role as a leader. Whilst drawing on one's own values has been viewed as an important foundation for authentic leadership, the ways in which values and purpose are derived from a wider sense of collective identity are less well-understood. We suggest that our interviewees' experiences in securing recognition and support may hold important lessons for all mainstream organisations.

Indigeneity in Leadership

The literature relating to Indigeneity in leadership is complex, reflecting a number of cross-cutting perspectives and concerns. As a 'constructed' category or lens, the concept of Indigenous leadership is itself one that reflects prevailing scholarly traditions. Initially, in the 19th and 20th centuries, Australian Indigenous leadership was documented from a largely anthropological perspective. However, reflecting changing scholarly perspectives, by the 1960s and 1970s accounts of Indigenous leadership drew increasingly on structuralist and other perspectives (Hinkson and Smith 2005; Ivory 2008). Indigenous leaders, both in traditional and less-traditional contexts, were understood to face huge imbalances of power between themselves and a dominant white society and government (Cowlishaw 1983). At the same time, Indigenous societies were themselves changing rapidly under the impact of dispossession and the exercise of white power (Lippmann 1991).

Careful observers saw a complex picture. Observing traditional Lajamanu society in the 1960s, Meggitt found 'leadership', defined as the command of a single institutionalised power structure, did not exist. Leadership in one field of activity (e.g. particular ceremonies) did not translate to leadership in other fields. Where decisions were required, those that had shown relevant prowess would be consulted. In more-general contexts, and as the impacts of white society began to be more keenly felt, the need for spokespeople and advocates emerged (Meggitt 1962). Nevertheless, leadership was not conferred by age or experience. Rather, the leader was someone who had developed appropriate skills and whom the community trusted. 'Elders', for example, could be community members of any age, acknowledged for their expertise in particular matters, such as knowledge of culture, or an ability (proven over time) to make decisions on behalf of the community (McIntyre 2001). Leaders were always careful not to assume their right to lead in new situations.

Observers writing from the 1960s onwards saw a somewhat different picture, as

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Indigenous communities began to win more support. Summarising this literature, Ivory found a continuing pattern of highly contextualised and gender-specific leadership. However, there was also a stronger emphasis on the role of traditionally empowered kinship groups, building power and authority through structures of reciprocal obligation and resource-control (Ivory 2008). In the modern era in the Northern Territory (post the mid-1970s), access to resources in many communities began to be shaped by the power of prominent families (Gerritsen 1982). In significant ways, new intercultural patterns of leadership were emerging in traditional societies in response to the opportunities (and threats) implied by changing policies and practices emanating from the dominant white society (Batty 2005; Moran 2010).

In the 40 years from the mid-1970s until 2015, relations between white and Indigenous Australia underwent a series of seismic shifts. Key events included the emergence of land rights, the momentous High Court decision recognising native title, the founding and abolition of ATSIC, and the intervention in the Northern Territory. The emergence at the national level of political leaders such as Eddy Mabo, Noel Pearson, Lowitja O'Donoghue, Patrick and Mick Dodson, Tom Calma, and others transformed the landscape. But at the same time, and at countless interfaces, the task of developing viable understandings and practices of leadership was being undertaken by Indigenous leaders operating at the interface between Aboriginal and white society. We argue that the relevant literatures, both international and Australian, point to an analysis of the leadership task that emphasises its cross-cultural characteristics. Our own contribution, while acknowledging that leadership is exercised in particular contexts, draws out the personal dimensions of this emergent practice.

Indigenous Leadership in Cross-cultural Perspective

In recent times, and with increasing confidence, Indigenous peoples in North America, New Zealand, and Australia have themselves begun framing and defining the meanings of leadership (see e.g. Katene 2010). Spiritually oriented, holistic forms of leadership have been documented by scholars reflecting North American Aboriginal traditions and practices (see Felicity 1999; Julien et al. 2010). A strong radical tradition has defined Indigenous leadership in opposition to Western leadership paradigms (Peach 2011; Smith 2012). But there have also been elements of critique – Rata, for example, argues that 'Indigeneity' may cloak contemporary claims to power by Maori tribal elites (Rata 2011). In the Australian context, both Chris Sarra and Noel Pearson have criticised the negative impact of discourses of 'victimhood' and low expectations on Aboriginal advancement (Pearson 2009; Sarra 2012).

As non-Indigenous researchers, we do not presume to speak for Indigenous people. Our value lies in our own 'outsiderness', and our understanding of the contexts and demands of non-Indigenous leadership and management. Highlighting Indigenous agency is, precisely, the point of our work (Rowse 2010).

Unfortunately, 'Western' leadership literature offers little analytical guidance to the student of Indigenous leadership (Julien et al. 2010). Although there is a weighty tradition of cultural contextualisation in this research, there is confusion about the use and meaning of the term Indigenous. Chinese managers in China, for example, are held to be examples of an 'Indigenous' management tradition, which must be related (when working for Western companies) to the requirements of the non-Indigenous or Western management tradition (see Chen et al. 2013; Zhang et al. 2012). The distinctiveness (in this sense) of 'Indigenous' ways of exercising influence has been compared across different national cultures, although with indeterminate results (see Smith et al. 2012).

It is difficult to see more than a very superficial similarity (in the sense of a cross-cultural job to be done) between the situation of (say) Chinese managers in China, or even Chinese-born managers working in the United States, and that of Indigenous Australians working in contemporary organisational contexts. The need to deal with differing cultural values is present in both cases but in the case of

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Indigenous Australians, as with other First Peoples, the cultural context is one that cannot be understood without an appreciation of the impact over time of dispossession by an invading (white) culture. Differentials of power are present at every interface. The leadership task is also different, in that forms of governance must be created in a cross-cultural context with strongly marked value-dissonances (Fasoli and Frawley 2010). The gulf between traditional aboriginal worldviews and those of non-aboriginal Australia can be enormous (Phillpot 2002).

Indigenous leaders must find ways to create leadership 'two ways' – gaining acceptance in communities on the one hand, while learning to operate effectively in non-indigenous systems of governance (Hilary 2013). For those living in remote communities, the task becomes one of learning to develop and operationalise governance itself (see Hunt and Smith 2007; Ivory 2008; Moran 2010). Within regional communities, as state bureaucracies have expanded their reach, and Aboriginal-owned and controlled organisations have developed, the inter-cultural or 'two-ways' problem has become even more complex. There is an emerging literature on the problems of leading and managing in these conditions (see e.g. Batty 2005; Fitzgerald 2006; Hunt 2013), although almost all of this research is based in particular fields of practice rather than focusing on leadership per se.

A 2001 study of Australian Indigenous managers working for community organisations in the health field found considerable tension at the interface between community expectations on the one hand, and the demands of relating to broader state and territory health systems on the other (Hill et al. 2001). The Indigenous managers were conscious of operating across two separate domains, their own Indigenous culture, and the Western cultural context of management.

This study found leaders and managers using a variety of different tactical approaches to negotiate this interface. Indigenous managers were conscious of the need for quite different approaches to influencing their fellow community members, compared to those they would employ within government. Unlike in the white bureaucracy, where power relations could be used for the purposes of transmitting intentions, effectiveness depended upon influence. Foley (2010) emphasises the disjunct often found between what Indigenous people want for their communities, and the assumptions made by governments about what is needed. Summarising work embracing communities in the Northern Territory, Queensland, and Western Australia, Hunt and Smith (2007) identified the need to expand the capacity for governance within governments themselves.

Although her work is not framed as a study of leadership, Maddison found a complex political situation for all Indigenous Australians, one characterised by multiple cross-cutting tensions. Maddison stresses that Indigenous Australia is not culturally uniform, and its aspirations and demands reflect considerable diversity (Maddison 2009:xxviii). From the perspective of the current research, therefore, we would expect to find tension and ambiguity both at the institutional and individual levels.

Choices change with circumstances. It is important to recognise that many Indigenous Australians do not live in remote areas, but in regional centres and towns. Although their connection with their culture may be strong and immediate, they live integrated lives. Moreover, the communities present in many towns will often be very heterogeneous, with longstanding conflicts and considerable differences in family backgrounds and values. Is leadership best exercised by staying in one's home community or by forging a bureaucratic career elsewhere? To what extent is it necessary to become like a 'white' person to be recognised as a leader?

In some ways, this dilemma parallels that of Indigenous political leaders. Sanders, for example, has argued that contemporary Indigenous leaders in public life must confront the problems of being simultaneously insiders and outsiders (Sanders 2008b). Emphasising Aboriginal identity (the 'outsider' role) enables injustice to be confronted and confirms credentials, but makes the nitty-gritty of bureaucratic engagement (the 'insider') role difficult to undertake. On the other hand, absorption into the white power structure may undermine efficacy and legitimacy.

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As Indigenous Australians approach the job of developing themselves as leaders, the need for better responses to these cross-cutting tactical and cultural factors is becoming increasingly salient. Health has already been mentioned. Higher educational institutions have implemented Indigenous leadership training programs (Foley 2010). However, specific programs are needed to encourage Indigenous leadership in education and educational governance (Gunstone 2013). Mainstream bureaucracies have programs for recruiting and training Indigenous leaders (see e.g. Briggs 2006; DSS 2015). Nevertheless, the proportion of ATSI people in the APS continues to decline (Australian Public Service Commission (APSC) 2012a).

The urgency of these issues suggested, for us, a real-time, grassroots research design, bringing out the lived response of emerging leaders to the problems identified in the literature. As individuals, Indigenous Australians are facing many choices – how do they define themselves as leaders? What role does their Indigenous culture play in this emerging definition? How do they exercise influence in situations of tension and ambiguity?

Research Approach

We based our analysis on a cohort of Australian Indigenous leaders whom we interviewed in-depth at two junctures, first in 2012 then again in 2014. Our interviewees were not remotely based Indigenous people. Rather they came from (or had moved to) urban environments. In many respects, their situation did not differ markedly from that of white communities in these towns, except that their identification was strongly marked by their Indigenous heritage.

Following Uhl-Bien, our working definition of leadership was 'a two-way influence relationship between a leader and a follower aimed primarily at attaining mutual goals (Uhl-Bien 2006:656). Within this broad domain, the research was framed using an 'emic' approach, whereby the researcher attempts to understand what is occurring from a particular cultural perspective and develops constructs based on what is understood by the participants of that culture (Morris et al. 1999). Thus, the focus of the research was on how Indigenous leaders themselves construed leadership. The advantage of adopting an emic approach with a specific cultural group, such as Indigenous leaders, is that a more contextualised understanding can be achieved of the factors at play that shape leadership practice.

Our research design was fortuitous in that, through previous research contacts, we had the opportunity to develop a project with the Australian Indigenous Leadership Centre (AILC). The AILC is unique, in that it is an accredited training institution that is run by and for Indigenous Australians. A not-for-profit body, it is funded both by government and by the private sector.

Students attending AILC courses come from a diverse range of backgrounds and in applying to join the course must show how this opportunity will benefit their communities. Most, if not all, course participants are attempting to find ways of improving the situation of themselves and their communities: in other words, they are located at the interface between Indigenous communities and governance.

Of our 10 in-depth interviewees, nine had grown up in rural areas outside major cities and towns. Although most subsequently left the areas where they grew up, the place where they came from remained important in both psychological and practical terms. Many reported difficult childhood and family situations, although in each of these cases there had been elements of stability and strength. Obtaining education and work had been difficult. Families moved around in search of work.

As adults, our interviewees faced unstable employment situations. As most worked in the public or not-for-profit sectors, they were particularly vulnerable to cuts in public sector expenditures, and to changes in policy. Several volunteers had moved on from their workplaces in the few months following the completion of the leadership course, for these reasons. Others had left their workplaces, but we were unable to trace them.

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In Round Two, we made contact with all but two of the original interviewees. Once again, the vicissitudes of the employment market for Indigenous people had hit hard: some of our interviewees had continued to progress in their careers, whereas others (through no fault of their own) had found the going tough. In these respects, our group's experience is representative of the problems faced by even well-trained and experienced Indigenous people in sustaining their organisational base and leadership practice.

As non-Indigenous researchers, we were honoured to be invited to work with staff and with alumni of the Centre. Although our research methods were (broadly) positivist, we started and continued the work out of a profound sense of admiration for what had been achieved and the difficulties overcome, both individually and collectively.

Method and Data Collection

Our 'case' for the leadership study consisted of a group of students taking part in an accredited course in leadership conducted by the AILC. Our sampling frame was, de facto, that of the AILC itself. As the AILC aims for gender balance and a balance between states and situations of course participants, a reasonable claim could be made that the participant cohort comprised a representative 'case' for the purposes of the study.

Our approach was both qualitative and inductive. These methods search for patterns in the way in which influence is exercised, which link Indigenous people drawn from different backgrounds within the one nation. This type of research is sensitive to the institutional and material, as well as the cultural and values-based elements of Indigeneity. As Indigenous leaders taking part in the course were drawn from all over Australia, we hypothesised that common factors observable across this group would be strongly suggestive of an emergent form of leadership that reflected the demands of working between two worlds, as well as participants' own sense of gaining meaning from their Indigenous identity.

We interviewed, in depth, 10 alumni of a 22-member cohort of Indigenous students who had undertaken a Certificate IV leadership course offered by the Australian Institute of Leadership Studies. All the interviewees volunteered for the study. The interviews were taped and transcribed, and the material analysed using NVivo software.

In addition, we reviewed the applications of all those who successfully applied to join the course. These gave us background data on each participant, including their level of education, their employment, something of their personal history, why they wanted to do the course, and the outcomes they hoped to achieve from their participation. Using this information, we were able to determine that there seemed to be no selection bias in the attributes of the volunteer group, as distinct from the group as a whole.

Follow-up interviews with the same group of leaders were undertaken 18 months after the initial interviews. As with the first phase of interviews, interviews were transcribed and coded into NVivo. For these interviews, our main emphasis was on the experience of our leaders in the time that had elapsed. How had they fared? What had changed in their practice? Had it deepened, or had they taken a different path?

Interviews were semi-structured, and questions were designed to explore the specific situation of each leader. The question of influence was approached (using a direct question or prompt) at several points during each interview.

In addition to asking leaders about their approach to leadership, we also wanted to understand the impact that the AILC course had had on their leadership practice. In many ways, the course followed the same contours as a typical 'white' leadership course (e.g., work to identify individual leadership styles). However, throughout the course, participants were both challenged and supported in ways that would be unusual in a standard leadership course. The facilitators (an experienced trainer and a psychologist) 'drew out' what was as yet undeveloped in each participant. There was also a full day devoted to healing: getting in touch with,

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understanding, and dealing with trauma in self, family, and community.

Analysis

We used NVivo software to record and analyse all interviews. This part of the work was inductive, in that while we grouped the answers in nodes corresponding to answers to questions, some of the themes emerged from classifying and reclassifying the data so as to capture factors that were common to the greatest number of participants (Miles et al. 2014).

The emergent node structure highlighted the importance of the culturally aware leadership training the participants had undergone; the importance of elders and of family in modelling leadership values; the extent to which personal qualities were developed and challenged through leadership; the prevalence of backgrounds of family hardship and difficulty; and the ongoing importance of community in grounding leadership.

Not all these factors were exclusively Indigenous of course. But the ensemble of factors was, in the sense that in developing as leaders, those we interviewed drew on 'who they were' (i.e. their collective cultural identity). It was, simply, the way they saw themselves. Our participants were proud to refer to themselves as Aboriginal: it was special, important, and empowering. We have included quotes to highlight some of the responses corresponding to each theme – the themes themselves emerged from dozens of similar observations.

Conception of the Leader and the Way Leadership Operates

We asked our interviewees a number of questions relating to the way they exercised influence as leaders. Each leader was different (in terms of their work situation, their priorities, and their personalities), but there were some factors in common in the way they worked. It was striking that all our interviewees referred to all of these factors. We have included quotes that give a sense of the speaking voices of our interviewees. The key factors were as follows:

- Being patient and letting people have time to get to know you

[D]on't come in with a bulldozer; know who to speak to; don't just say we are doing this, enter into their lives to try and help.

- Leading by example

Being a role model and being able to get the message across without trying to drive the message. There's a way of doing it, the way you speak, the voices, the light voice not about control, its about empathy, being on their side, not if they are doing the wrong thing, but showing you do care, about people.

- Helping people

Some of the respondents viewed leadership responsibility as being about helping people, or addressing things that are wrong (in relation to the way people were being treated). The motivation was helping people in one's family, and by extension, people in one's community. As expressed by one respondent, once you had seen members of your own family die from alcohol, you wanted to help people in other black communities.

The younger generation now were drinking spirits, not just beer. You can't stop them, but there were the same issues as twenty years ago. 'It's so hard to switch off when it's family . . . 'I believe in empowering Aboriginal people, especially women, girls and community.

- Listening, not going in too strongly

The biggest thing is about listening and being non-judgemental . . . [showing] people that you are there to support them, and help them to make decisions without being forceful, and caring and sharing, and helping them through the hard times.

- Communicating in a straightforward but appropriate manner

[P]lease come along! This is who I am. This is what I want to do . . . I made the connection. I asked: do you want to come along with me?

These factors were equally common among male and female interviewees. They speak of

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a strong community orientation in relation to acceptable leadership styles among Indigenous Australians working with Indigenous communities or individuals.

- Acknowledging who you are

Indigenous communities were unimpressed by official position. Acceptance as a leader was based on knowledge of who you were, and who your people were. The community validated, but also questioned the leader.

Where Indigenous leaders were liaising with remote communities, their ability to exercise influence was dependent upon proceeding appropriately and obtaining endorsement from the leadership group or groups in the communities they were involved with. One woman Indigenous leader had to proceed carefully in addressing groups containing men, who in many remote communities remained in positions of authority. Flexibility was available, but could not be assumed.

They knew my surname, but they didn't know me. People need to know who you are. Who's your family? That's how they place you.

The Leadership Task

This theme covers how the objectives of leadership were conceptualised. Responses here varied according to the situation in which our leaders worked. Some had organisational positions that required them specifically to liaise between Indigenous communities or clients and government bureaucracies. These interviewees spoke of being a 'conduit' between two worlds; of having to analyse situations and to communicate in ways which were acceptable in the white bureaucracy, while also undertaking the same task (but in quite different ways) in Indigenous communities

The community wants a leader who can operate effectively in the mainstream and in an Aboriginal context – be a bridge between the two. It's about being true to an organisation's objectives, but also to the cultural heritage of Aboriginal people.

Being true to one's identity was central.

[I was] educated in the white man's way and education, but still retaining my Aboriginal, combining the two different areas, of the two cultures.

I was able to stand up and talk not only as a government employee but also as a concerned Aboriginal.

Communicating *about* culture could also be a key part of this work. As one interviewee put it:

I find out from them [the community] information about Aboriginal culture, stories, languages, and things like that. At the moment that is what I am talking about in the schools - trying to put Aboriginal language into schools around here.

Efficacy in the leadership task was not generally related to formal outputs or outcomes (although these might figure in reporting arrangement). Interviewees spoke of 'sowing a seed' of change.

You're not going to change everything overnight. If I've made a difference to one or two people, it'll have an effect on others. It'll grow. With any program it might take a generation or two. If we can lay the foundation now, it'll grow.

Gaining trust and establishing 'buy-in' was difficult, when communities were weary of constant 'interventions' and Indigenous liaison workers (sometimes from the same community, but often not) could nevertheless identify with the feelings around them:

I get frustrated with things. They don't give us time, they don't ask us what we want. They [whitefellas] just come and say you have to do this program, you have to do it.

But progress could be made, through leadership that inspired responsibility:

Instead I say [to the communities], What do you reckon? . . . They like that. They say You're talking to our elders, our TOs [traditional owners], you want our input. That's the thing with leadership. It puts the ball in their court. It gives them responsibility.

Despite their achievements, our leaders sometimes found it difficult to have their special skills and expertise recognised. There was

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reluctance by some senior managers to trust programs to Indigenous leaders.

> *There's a system in place, but if you believe in two-way learning, it has to change at the top level. There's a . . . mistrust – are they ready to let go, and let an Aboriginal person lead?*

There was a need for 'white' bureaucracies to change.

Sources of Personal Strength

Spirituality

Spirituality came into a number of the conversations. One source of spiritual belonging was links to country, of drawing strength from country, even when it was far away.

> *[M]y spirituality, going home to my country every year, camping, fishing, sitting and just soaking up that country. Knowing the birth areas of my totem and kin is very important to me. It is something I try to instil in my daughter and nieces.*

Another aspect of spirituality was a lived sense of being in communion with family members who had died.

Support of Family, Mentors, and Peers

All our interviewees spoke of the importance of family, particularly of family members who had believed in them and inspired them. These were often (although not exclusively) women, who were able to combat significant family dysfunction through hard work and caring. Mentors were less frequently mentioned, but were important in workplace situations, and in providing reference points as networks developed. Mentoring was also a strong feature of the operations of the AILC.

> *My Dad was a labourer most of his life, in school holidays we'd go out and watch Dad cutting props from the ironbark trees. We weren't a rich family but we never went hungry. Mum insisted that we went on to university. Education was a real driving force.*

Knowledge and Confidence

One of the key events in the development of our leaders was the AILC course itself. Participation in the course showed them that they were not alone, and several of our interviewees found that friendships forged through the course had an enduring influence both on their personal development and leadership practice. Through peer networks that grew out of the course, they were able to continue to draw upon each other's experiences and support.

Participation in the course enabled many of our interviewees to see their own potential for the first time. We were repeatedly told how important the course had been in engendering confidence in them. Indeed, some of our interviewees were able to question their own situations and to use the course as a springboard to find more fulfilling employment.

> *The main thing was working with people with like-minded goals and ambitions, most of whom had had to deal with adversity; hearing their stories, and those of others, was inspirational.*

The AILC course was described as 'like a light bulb going off in one's head'. The experience 'gives you a certain amount of strength and confidence to take up leadership roles; validates links to self-awareness to foster self-confidence'.

For Indigenous leaders working in a range of different situations, the support of peers is particularly important, both during and after training:

> *The leadership course, they take you away from family, [over] the long hours, you form a bond with people who are initially strangers, you realise that you are not alone, it gives you confidence. It shows that you can pick your family! It's the network right across Australia, not just your own back yard.*

Findings: Culture As Leadership Resource

The particular sense of Indigenous leadership enacted by our leaders showed a number of salient characteristics. Leadership was seen as emerging from a sense of connectedness in that, at a deep level, one's self identity was defined in relation to a collective Aboriginal identity. Importantly, the leader was not someone 'out there' – their acceptance as a leader was community related (cf. Maddison 2009:97). The

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relational presence of leadership was developed by listening to the story of individuals in the community, being patient as interactions with others unfolded, and by being able to enter into the lives of people in the community. Connectedness was important for gaining the personal strength to carry on in the face of setbacks and adversity (Felicity 1999; Guerin and Guerin 2012).

Particularly important was connectedness with family and networks of friends, as well as a sense of spiritual connectedness (for those whose families had been able to maintain these links) with country. For this group of Aboriginal leaders, spiritual connectedness can be understood as a sense of understanding oneself as a whole person integrated in a wider social and ecological fabric, and as a result of that connectedness, being accepted as a human entity who is respected and valued (Crossman 2011; Grieves 2009).

The work of the leader varied according to context. The leaders interviewed saw their work as being a conduit between two worlds. In working with Indigenous communities, they saw their task as encouraging and inspiring others to carry on, and when speaking of young Aborigines, even hoped that they could have a transformative impact on others. They expressed a more instrumental orientation in relation to their leadership relationships with mainstream agencies and officials (Berger 2005).

Interviewees had significant experience working between these two worlds and they had all been able to operate successfully in mainstream organisations or businesses. However, they recounted instances where they experienced frustration with a lack of understanding of Indigenous people displayed by officials and policy makers. A number of the leaders were working on ways for making the areas in the mainstream organisations in which they were working, or the direct interface they had with a government agency, more receptive to the needs of the local Indigenous community.

Did the issue of race figure in this concept of leadership? Ospina and Foldy (2009) have emphasised issues of race and ethnicity as a way of surfacing concepts of context and power in leadership analysis. Interestingly, our interviewees did not themselves reference their struggle in this way. They were not 'political' leaders in this sense. Nor were they trying to confront or contest 'white' notions of leadership. Although from an analytical perspective, it would be possible to construct their situation as one that was race-based, their own agency was far more one of culture (Avolio et al. 2009; Javidan et al. 2006). It is important to note, however, that our interviewees were not high-public-profile leaders. Aboriginal leaders who aspire to national leadership in Australia must work politically in a complex, turbulent, and contested policy environment (Maddison 2009; Sutton 2001).

One of the surprises (for us) to emerge from our research was the extent to which Australian Indigenous leaders were developing and using their Indigenous culture as a resource for leadership. We would argue that Indigenous leadership is always a product of self-definition and of emergence. Maori leadership, for example, has emphasised Maori philosophical concepts and attributes as a mechanism for developing holistic leadership forms (Spiller et al. 2010). Maori leadership scholars can invoke a 'Maori world', which in turn supports a 'culturally grounded knowledge framework' (*kaupapa* Maori; Ruwhiu and Cone 2013:27).

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experience of leadership involved a more contingent sense of Indigenous leadership culture. The culture of the Aboriginal Australians in our group of interviewees was not that of traditional Aboriginal Australia, although it retained some elements of this. Rather, it seems to have evolved into a form of individualised, networked cultural identification – a 'two ways' world, in which practitioners operate both in standard, western contexts and also in their own.

From a normative perspective, Indigenous culture imparts a respect for legitimacy based on who, rather than what, you are, and for the profound importance of leadership as a vehicle for mutual respect and listening, rather than domination. These leaders gained influence by being there, waiting patiently in the background, and demonstrating their deeper interest in both the material and spiritual welfare

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of the community. Leadership for these indigenous leaders was a relational process that was co-constructed slowly over time (Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien 2012).

Difference from 'Managerialist' Leadership Models

Our interviewees were developing a leadership practice that, considered in terms of its dominant values, differed in key respects from models which situate leadership within a North American management context (Sanchez-Runde et al. 2011). These models of leadership rest on assumptions relating to human motivation that emphasise individualism and competition (Blunt and Jones 1997). These cultural assumptions shape the practices that are perceived as effective leadership.

The emergent leadership practice described in the study cannot be easily categorised by applying conventional leadership models. The absence of bureaucratic power and authority and the lack of a clear instrumental purpose distinguished the Indigenous leader from the transactional leadership found in organisational settings. Although some of the leaders stated their vision of how they could contribute to a better future, they did not articulate this vision as a means for influencing others. Importantly, leadership in the Indigenous context was part of a collective action rather than the work of a single powerful leader.

Exercising influence drew upon some traditional aspects of Aboriginal society (such as kin-groups), and also from the idea of leadership drawing on experience and respect. Overall, the Australian Indigenous orientation to leadership is distinctly different in important ways from the 'strategic' leadership model so prominent in management texts, in which legitimacy is derived from organisational power and authority or the personality of the leader (Conger 1999).

There are related contrasts with leadership models employed in Australian public services. For example, the Senior Executive Capability Framework employed since 1999 for selection into the Senior Executive Service of the Australian Public Service, stresses competence across five key areas: (i) achieves results; (ii) communicates with influence; (iii) cultivates productive working relationships; (iv) exemplifies personal drive and integrity; and (v) shapes strategic thinking (APSC 2012b). Each of these capabilities is linked, through the Integrated Leadership System, with related attributes and performance criteria at each level. While Indigenous leaders may well develop these capabilities, there is a strong cultural component in the way these competencies are defined and expressed. The context of leadership, to be achieved through the leadership pathway, is very much that of achieving individual and collective performance objectives relating to the strategic direction of the agency or department. It may be difficult for Indigenous leaders, working in the ways we have identified, to be seen to be effective in these contexts.

The APSC's Indigenous pathways program (APSC 2015) enculturates young graduates, and many will go on to have successful careers in departments, essentially by assuming the leadership behaviours favoured by the organisation. It would seem unfortunate, though, that those choosing a path more clearly related to Indigenous issues may face a capability/performance nexus that does not favour them.

Emerging Conclusion: The Nature of Leadership 'between Two Worlds'

Our study involved a small group of Indigenous Australians, engaging with each other in a setting that encouraged the emergence of something 'different'. We cannot claim, therefore, that the experiences our interviewees reported are universal. Clearly, an Indigenous person could exercise leadership in a completely 'white' way, if they so wished.

Nevertheless, we would argue that two strong factors contribute to the result we found.

(1) continuing strength of Aboriginal cultures and identities; and

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(2) need to exercise leadership between two worlds.

Aboriginal leaders in the current study were evolving an integrated approach to leadership that was founded on a sense of collective identity and that also acknowledged a lack of formal power in many of the interactions in which they found themselves. The sense of collective identity was influenced by relationships with family, mentors, and peers, and these key people also helped to shape the personal development of the individual leader.

Where you come from is the basis of acceptance among other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and this sense of identity is not a limiting factor, but in the hands of those who have been able to overcome initial disadvantage and set themselves on a path of personal growth, an important source of strength.

Collective identity was enhanced and expressed through peer networking. The loneliness of leadership, and the need for leaders to network with each other, has been increasingly recognised by practitioners, and is an emerging theme in the broader leadership literature (Hoppe and Reinelt 2010). Where leadership is removed from hierarchy, as (e.g.) in community settings, adaptive and social forms of leadership must be deployed, based on networking and collaboration (Keast et al. 2004).

The resources and confidence for engaging in this task emanate from a strong sense of collective identity. However, the skill sets for dealing effectively with mainstream organisations are learnt through education, training, and experience working in public and private organisations. These developmental experiences are not straightforward and often involve confronting experiences reconciling the expectations and values of community members with the constraints, responsibilities, and demands of public policy and bureaucratic regulations.

The leaders studied recognised the need to be competent in different management practices and the requirement to follow policy and rules. However, they saw cooperation with the rules as the outcome of a patient and engaged style of leadership rather than the outcome of the exercise of legitimate authority or pressure from a forceful leadership style. The practice of preferred leadership style did not always proceed smoothly. In some cases, the mainstream employer expected the Aboriginal leader to be an agent of the organisation and simply enact organisational dictates within the community rather than work in an adaptive leadership role.

There is evidence that conventional models of bureaucratic action based on the exercise of control, often relate poorly to the on-the-ground realities of Indigenous communities, whether in remote, regional, or even urban contexts (Jarvie and Stewart 2011). But alternative ways of working, often promoted by Indigenous managers, may not measure up in relation to performance-mandated outputs and outcomes. Recognition and understanding could be lacking from Indigenous communities, too. Leaders employed in mainstream organisations faced tensions in their dealings with the Indigenous community when there were expectations for the leader to act as a lobbyist for the community: that is, their responsibilities as an employee were not acknowledged. These experiences indicate the difficulties working as a leader between two worlds.

The emerging Australian Indigenous model reveals a specific kind of orientation in which the leader works to connect influence across the Indigenous community with that of the administrative mechanisms of mainstream society. However, this sense of leadership did not mean that the leader pursued one style with the Indigenous community and a different style in the mainstream organisation. Instead, there was a preference for enacting a connected style of leadership across all groups and situations.

Although we did not examine leadership in specific organisational contexts, it is apparent that the model of leadership encouraged in the Australian public sector may be problematic for many Indigenous leaders in terms of their career advancement. The behaviours most rewarded may not sit well with those that link the individual to community. For Indigenous leaders occupying ‘in-between’ roles, cross-cultural dilemmas require adroit tactical recognition. Success may be difficult to demonstrate in competitive situations where other managers

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may be able to point to accepted performance indicators. Remaining in liaison and other roles that are more relevant to community may endanger promotional prospects. Further research is clearly needed into the impact of these factors on the recruitment and retention of Indigenous managers.

The findings in the study reveal the complexity of the leadership being practised by Indigenous leaders working between the instrumental demands of mainstream organisations and the expectations of Indigenous peoples. There is a clear implication for mainstream organisations to put into practice a much broader and more diverse understanding of leadership practice and the purpose of leadership, when interacting with Indigenous communities.

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