Front-Line Service Roles Engagement and Subjective Wellbeing of Socially-Disadvantaged Employees

INTRODUCTION

Indigenous populations in advanced economies such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the US are severely disadvantaged in comparison to the members of the wider society in terms of most socioeconomic, health and wellbeing indicators (Manning, Ambrey and Fleming, 2016). For example, in Australia when compared to the community at large, Indigenous members of the Australian society are still overrepresented in key social areas such as infant mortality rates, poor school attendance, literacy and numeracy levels, and labor force participation (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017). Moreover, according to 'Australia's Health 2016', a recent report by Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2016), there are large gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians on many health and well-being measures, after adjusting for differences in age structure. However, effective solutions to this ongoing policy concern is further complicated in Australia because of the long history of endemic racism towards the Indigenous community. Racism is known to be intrinsically linked to Indigenous health and subjective wellbeing (e.g. Mellor, 2004; Durey, 2010; Ziersch, et al., 2011) so its presence further exasperates the inequities, injustices and lack of opportunity facing these citizens.

In an effort to help remedy the situation, an accord was signed between the Australian Federal and State governments during 2008 with the aim of taking affirmative action across a broad range of social and economic areas designed to help improve the lives of Indigenous Australians. This initiative, also known as 'closing the gap' indicates some progress in certain areas however the most recent *Closing the Gap Report* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017) still shows there is a long way to go in improving the lives of Indigenous people. In this context, increasing Indigenous participation rates in mainstream sectors of Australian economy is identified as a key objective because high unemployment is a primary factor behind many of the disadvantages these members of society face (Daff and Pearson, 2009). Boosting Indigenous employment rates has become a key policy measure adopted by successive Australian governments in more recent years. This is an important policy setting because being employed is known to have positive benefits across many domains of the lives of Indigenous people (Biddle, 2010; Pearson and Daff, 2010; Daly and Gebremedhin, 2015). However, the theory of social exclusion implies that rejection and ostracism by the majority sections of any society (Wesselmann et al., 2016) have the potential to dampen the positive outcomes associated with workforce participation.

This research addresses this important sociological challenge facing Australian people, businesses and policy-makers by exploring three specific research questions: (1) does racism directed towards Indigenous people still exist within the Australian workplace settings, (2) are some employment types more susceptible to such activity than others, such as front-line service roles, and (3) does employment is specific work settings make Indigenous people more resilient to racism than others? Answers to these questions could provide the clue to policy and industry actions designed to improve Indigenous wellbeing and overall life satisfaction, and in turn help to remedy injustices of the past that are still omnipresent today (Mellor, 2004). Next, we briefly review the relevant literature on Indigenous employment and services management, to develop our conceptual framework with testable propositions and also propose a methodology to test these.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The core proposition that underpins this research is that the healing process for Indigenous people in Australia, and in turn the wider Indigenous community, is not only linked to participation in the workplace but also a function of the specific employment role undertaken. In this regard, meaningful engagements with their Non-Indigenous counterparts in the workplace and other stakeholders such as customers potentially lead to greater self-esteem and self-efficacy for them, as well as reinforcement of a positive self-identity. Specifically, it is postulated herein that service settings involving front-line employees, characterized by interacting with the customer, help foster an environment in which Indigenous people improve their overall wellbeing and life satisfaction.

Job satisfaction is an employee's attitude about the affective/emotional evaluation of job related events in terms of their positive/negative emotional state towards the role (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1977). This is an emotionally laden construct that helps to underpin the pathway between stressful work events and employee outcomes (Kuba and Scheibe, 2017) suggesting interactions in the service arena will help shape, and be shaped by Indigenous employee attitudes and commitment towards their job. Employee commitment acts to bond the employee to the organization (Meyer, et al., 2004) representing the psychological state that signifies the strength of the relationship between the employee and organization (Allen and Meyer, 1997). Indigenous employees committed to their organization have navigated this threshold (i.e. Garvey, 2015) to willingly participate in the service arena. We do however recognize that a much deeper understanding of the interplay among these constructs that impact the decision to engage/disengage in the service arena will offer a clue as to how Indigenous employment within the service sector contributes to (or diminishes) their subjective well-being and life satisfaction.

A persons overall health comprises both physical, mental and subjective well-being but also encompasses spiritual and emotional elements (Mirabito and Berry, 2015). This depiction is also highly congruous with conceptualizing Indigenous health and well-being considering that Indigenous persons are likely not to make the distinction between mental and physical health but rather "health includes the physical, social, emotional, cultural and spiritual well-being….…..not only of the individual but of the whole community" (Anderson, 1996, p. 68). Life satisfaction is an elusive concept and linked to what an individual believes to be the principal axioms they find important (Baker and Intagliata, 1982; Felce and Perry, 1995). On this point, Biddle (2014) argues that Indigenous Australians have a different 'baseline' from which they tend to evaluate their lives compared to non-Indigenous persons. Manning, Ambrey and Fleming (2016) suggest this is largely due to other dimensions pertaining to life satisfaction that are valued by Indigenous persons, and thus not typically prominent within 'mainstream' society.

Accordingly a conceptual framework is presented (see figure 1) that shows the relationship between pertinent organizational constructs cited in the literature and how that relates to front-line service roles. Thus, keeping in line with existing literature, job satisfaction is proposed to have a positive impact on organizational commitment (P1) and subjective wellbeing (P2); while both organizational commitment (P3) and subjective wellbeing (P4) are expected to positively affect overall life satisfaction. Finally, it is argued that by working in front-line service roles, Indigenous employees would get an opportunity to interact with members of the majority ethnic community, which in turn could positively moderate (enhance) the proposed relationships (P5-P8).

Figure 1: Conceptual Model

P1 +

| Job Satisfaction | | Organizational Commitment |

P5 +

P2 +   **Engagement in Front-Line Service Roles**   P3 +

P6 +   P7 +

P8 +

| Subjective Wellbeing | | Life Satisfaction |

P4 +
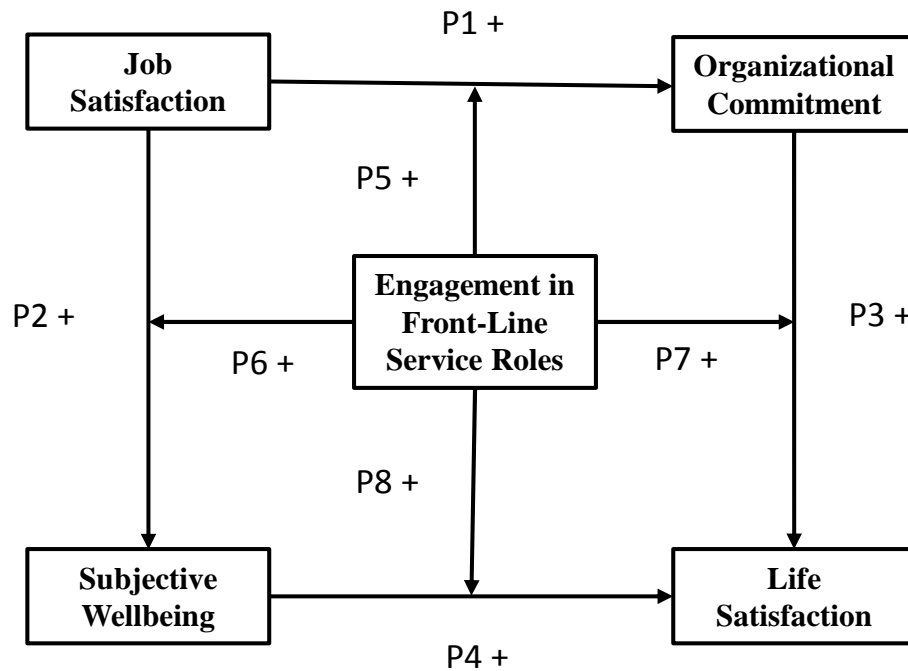
METHODOLOGY

In order to answer the three research questions, and test the proposed model, we plan to use a mixed-method approach, consisting of both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. We would begin with in-depth interviews with both Indigenous and Non-Indigenous employees and their managers in a variety of private, public and third-sector organizations to help answer the first two research questions. The interviews would be used to assess the wide range of views and opinions about the reasons for the existence of relatively poorer levels of subjective well-being and life satisfaction among Indigenous Australians, with a focus on their workplace experience and engagement. We would use 'yarning' (Bessarab and Ng'andu 2010), a semi-structured interview technique used to solicit the views of Indigenous people. We would also use Causal Layered Analysis (CLA) (Inayatullah, 1998) to better understand the Indigenous perspective regarding the interactions within the service arena and to determine if the conceptual and operational definitions of the constructs in the proposed conceptual model (Figure 1) have general face validity. To answer the third research question, we will use a field survey with a structured questionnaire to target Indigenous employees in both front-line service and other employment settings.

CONTRIBUTIONS

Although past research identifies a number of Indigenous-specific determinants of their subjective wellbeing, such as cultural identity (Browne-Yung et al. 2013) other factors such as self-esteem, self-efficacy and a positive sense of self-identity seem to play important roles (Dockery 2010). However, hardly any research examines the direct impact of workplace environment and

engagement with Non-Indigenous Australians, on the self-esteem and self-efficacy of Indigenous Australians and its indirect influence on their self-identity, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment, subjective well-being and overall life satisfaction. This research attempts to address this gap and widen the debate to include specific roles and workplace setting as a potential solution to help improve the lives of Indigenous communities within Australia and elsewhere. In this process, we build upon and integrate knowledge in the Indigenous domain, service marketing and psychology disciplines to help better understand how service organizations can use the workplace as the vehicle to increase the level of intercultural understanding between Indigenous and non-Indigenous persons. We also provide a novel view on how to potentially address aspects related to reconciliation and healing processes with the Indigenous community by understanding it from an economic, social, psychological and cultural perspectives. Hopefully, this research would not only extend our conceptual understanding about the reconciliation of socially-disadvantaged people but also help mainstream service organizations realize how they can play a useful role in this process.

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