Employee Retention in Cross-Cultural Workplaces

Exploring the experience of Aboriginal employees in mainstream Australian Organisations.

by

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A dissertation submitted to the School of Psychology of Murdoch University, 2017
in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of MASTERS OF APPLIED PSYCHOLOGY (ORGANISATIONAL)
I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary educational institution.

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Lara Steel
Ngala kaditch Wadjuck Noongar Mort
Kayen Kadack Nidja Boodja.

I acknowledge the First Nations people of this land and in particular the Wadjuck Noongar Nation, on whose land I was born and continue to live. This study was conducted on your country and I pay my respects to you, your Elders, past, present and emerging. I aim to mindfully and respectfully walk alongside you in the spirit of listening, learning, respect and reconciliation.

This dissertation has only been possible with the efforts and support of the participants, to whom I will always be grateful. Thank you for trusting me with your stories.
“Come listen, come sit here, hear me, hear us because we know our stories from community and are you really hearing us or do you just want to say it and tick the box or are you really listening because I don’t want you to waste my time.”

- Interview Participant

“Why is it up to us to close the gap? Well it’s actually up to everyone to do that ... but they don’t even want to be a part of that, [they say] ‘it’s nothing to do with us’.”

- Interview Participant
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Abstract

Employment is linked to a variety of positive wellbeing outcomes and many initiatives have been introduced to support and increase Aboriginal engagement in the workforce. However, employment and retention rates for Aboriginal employees are disproportionately lower than the mainstream Australian population. This qualitative study investigates the lived experiences of 10 Aboriginal participants who have been employed in mainstream Australian workplaces. Through semi-structured interviews, the findings highlight the complexity of the cross-cultural workplace; indicating that mainstream views of work may be fundamentally incompatible with Indigenous worldviews which prioritise family and community wellbeing. Success in the mainstream workplace is also implicated as requiring high levels of cultural agility on the part of the Aboriginal employee, implicating that widespread Aboriginal participation in the mainstream workforce may be unrealistic and ethically questionable. In addition, cultural safety within the workplace is implicated as a factor in both retention and turnover of Aboriginal staff.
Introduction

Employment is linked to a range of improved wellbeing outcomes including mental health, increased social interaction, opportunities for identity consolidation, skill development, confidence building, creation of social capital; Not to mention the benefits of financial stability, fiscal independence and participating in the local economy. Conversely, lack of employment has been linked to negative outcomes including mental health disorders such as depression and anxiety, welfare dependence (Australian Government, 2016) and poverty (Calver, 2015; Deloitte Access Economics, 2014). Yet only 48% of the Indigenous\(^1\) population were employed in 2011-22, compared to 77% of the Non-Indigenous Australian population (SCRGSP). Of those who do gain employment, employee retention rates among Indigenous staff are comparatively low (Gray, Hunter & Lohoar, 2011).

Employee turnover describes the cessation of employment between an individual and the organisation (Knudsen et al., 2003), initiated either voluntarily or involuntarily. Voluntary turnover encapsulates staff attrition that is instigated by the employee while involuntary turnover includes organisation-led cessation of

\(^1\) The terms Indigenous and First Nations are used interchangeably throughout this text as a comprehensive term inclusive of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations across the continent. The term Aboriginal is used to refer only to the many nations on the mainland continent now known as Australia. The vast and rich diversity of First Nations peoples is recognised, incorporating over 200 language groups, diverse histories, cultures and customs and the use of these overarching terms is not intended to be reductive or disrespectful to the unique identity of each of these communities.
employing including redundancies and terminations etc (Des & Shaw, 2001). While turnover is unavoidable to some extent and can have its positives (Woltman et al., 2008), higher levels of turnover can be costly due to loss of valuable organisation knowledge held by the individual, as well as the financial costs of recruiting, selecting, training, on-boarding and retaining new staff to replace the outgoing employees (Pinder & Das, 1979; Shaw, Duffy, Johnson & Lockhart, 2005). Organisations are generally motivated to reduce staff turnover as a cost saving measure but also to retain talent and organisational information.

Turnover has been well investigated within Organizational Psychological literature and several predictors of employee turnover or intention have been identified. Two main inter-related factors include Job Satisfaction and Organisational Commitment. Job Satisfaction has been identified as one of the best predictors of turnover (Griffeth, Hom & Gaertner, 2000) and can be described as the employee’s experience of the roles’ psychological, physiological and environmental circumstances which result in positive emotional responses (Hoppock, 1935; Locke, 1975). There are over 25 interlinked constructs which inform organisational commitment; defined as ‘a strong belief in and acceptance of organisational goals and values; willingness to exert considerable effort on behalf of the organisation and a desire to maintain organisational membership’ (Porter et al., 1974). The literature suggests that improving job satisfaction and organisational commitment is considered to have potential to improve employee turnover rates. Yet few initiatives to improve employment outcomes for Indigenous communities take job satisfaction into account. Rather, policy initiatives to improve employment outcomes have focused mainly on increasing education and training opportunities.
along with increased employment opportunities for Aboriginal, and particularly remote communities (Chirgwin, Farago, d’Antione et al., 2017). Despite these policy priorities being enacted for over forty years, the disparity in outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians continues (Australian Government Commission of Inquiry into Poverty, 1975; Daly, 1993; Gray & Hunter, 2002; Hunter, 1977).

In 2008, the Rudd Government introduced the ‘Closing the Gap’ strategy and this has been continued by successive governments (Australian Government, 2016; Altman et al., 2008), mirroring similar initiatives in Canada and New Zealand (Collins et al., 2014); aiming to ‘close the gap’ on several well-being measures (SCRGSP). However, substantial and sustained increases in Indigenous employment and retention has not only remained elusive, but in fact between 2014-15 the employment rate for Indigenous communities in Australia actually declined from 53.8% down to 48.4% (Commonwealth of Australia, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2017). Interestingly though, the rates of employment are similar between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians who have obtained tertiary level education (Australian Government, 2016).

Previous Studies

There have been only a small number of previous studies exploring the employment disparity and even fewer explore retention and turnover among Indigenous employees. In one of these few, the Public Service Commission audits
(APSC, 2013) found that First Nations employees found their top five factors informing job satisfaction to be:

1. Positive working relationships
2. Flexible work arrangements
3. Remuneration
4. Contributing to society and the Indigenous community
5. Quality of workplace supervisors

Of the factors implicated in turnover, employees cited low job satisfaction and feeling that their contribution to the workplace was not valued. Another recent study by Biddle & Lahn (2016) indicated that the working environment of the Indigenous interviewees was characterised by social distance, with racism and discrimination still a regular occurrence for many. Racism was one of the main factors employees identified as potential motivation to leave a job.

In a study by the Centre for Social Responsibility in Mining (2007), Indigenous employees at the Argyle Diamond mine cited family commitments as the most common reason for leaving their place of employment. Other aspects of attrition included low levels of cultural awareness among colleagues, people issues in the workplace and lack of further career opportunities.

McRae-Williams and Gerritsen (2010) gained Indigenous perspectives on mainstream work life by local Aboriginal community members in the Northern Territory. This study provided insights into the Aboriginal communities’ view of western work practices as highly inconsistent with the locals’ value systems, suggesting a fundamental cultural clash. The locals observed the ‘9-5 Monday –
Friday’ work ethic of non-Aboriginal inhabitants of a small remote town (the majority of whom had moved to the location for work purposes only) as largely illogical and unnecessary ‘busy-ness’; a strange, foreign practice which conflicted with local values of country and community. The study concludes with the assertion that this fundamental incompatibility is likely to undermine attempts to increase First Nations uptake of employment, perhaps at least in cultural contexts similar to this study in remote Australia.

In interviews with 93 current or past employees in the health sector Chirgwin, Farago, d’Antione et al., (2017) found that relationships among co-workers was the most important factor for the participants. While relationships are important for many workers in society more broadly, the researchers suggested that given the central value of relatedness among many Aboriginal communities, this aspect may be more salient for Aboriginal employees. An unanticipated result of the study was the ‘vision of the organisation’ ranking as the third most important positive factor for Indigenous staff. The vision of the organisation, as a health service in remote Australia, was to improve wellbeing of the local Aboriginal community, which clearly resonated with many of the staff. A public sector survey (APSC, 2010) found similar findings around the vision of the organisation, though these appear to be the only two studies conducted locally which identify the organisational vision as a factor in Indigenous employment. While the researchers found this to be an interesting and relevant finding, they tempered the significance of this point by highlighting the limitations of the study which only included participants who were
or had been employed by this non-profit health service, thus they queried whether this result was due to the lack of representation from other sectors.

In 2011, the Australian Government funded a clearinghouse paper (Issue paper no.3) through the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, and the Australian Institute of Family Studies. In this paper, the authors Matthew Gray, Boyd Hunter and Shaun Lohoar outline what is still not known about how to increase Indigenous employment rates. The authors state that ‘there is only limited understanding of the causes of Indigenous labour market disadvantage.’ Among these gaps in the literature they indicated that little is known about:

- What influences Indigenous people to seek paid employment

- The role played by the employer’s practices and policies

- Why more Indigenous Australians are not moving to areas with better employment opportunities.

- Whether for some Indigenous people, there is tension between cultural practices and maintaining paid employment.

The ‘issue’ of Indigenous employment, as conceived by mainstream Australian public policy, also fails to explore the fundamental compatibility or incompatibility of the notions of employment and career. The inherent capitalist characteristics of the mainstream western economic system remain largely unchecked against Indigenous value systems often characterised by prioritisation of kinship, community, conservation and harmonisation with the land. The push by governments to increase Indigenous employment levels has been initiated, seemingly without mindful regard for whether this is an etiologically compatible
goal. The extent to which cultural incompatibility plays a role in lower employment and retention rates among Indigenous communities remains largely unexplored.

In 2010, Jordon and Mavec also lamented that “there is still inadequate research about Indigenous people’s aspirations and attitudes to paid employment, particularly among those living in urban or regional areas.” What is also noticeably absent from the previous literature is a theoretical explanation for this disparity in employment outcomes. Organisational Psychology has been absent within this discussion to date and considering that employee retention and turnover have been focal research pursuits for the discipline, it is well-placed to bring theoretical psychological perspectives to this discussion. Therefore, this present study contributes towards this gap in the literature by exploring the lived experiences of Aboriginal employees within mainstream Western workplaces in the metropolitan region of Perth, Western Australia.
Research Methods

This study explored the lived experiences of Aboriginal employees in mainstream workplaces using a qualitative and phenomenological methodology. As there is very little research to develop a solid hypothesis it is most appropriate here to propose a broader set of questions; letting the data suggest a theoretical framework.

Grounded theory is a qualitative methodology featuring theoretical sampling while cumulatively developing explanatory theories which remain ‘grounded’ in the data (Liampittong, 2013).

The research design and methods followed in this study include:

1. Data Collection, consisting of Semi-structured interviews.
2. Purposive sampling of interview participants
3. Theoretical sampling in which data is analysed concurrently during the data collection; allowing evolving directions to be explored in further interviews.
4. Data collection was terminated at theoretical saturation after 10 interviews when there failed to be new major themes identified in the data.
5. Analysis commenced using open coding; compiling the data into themes.
6. Axial coding was completed in which these open codes were collapsed into broader thematic codes.
7. The researcher’s decision making process and self-reflections were recorded via memo/diary entries to create a transparent interpretation process.
8. The researcher brought the thematic threads together to construct theoretical explanations which are grounded in the data; allowing the topics and links between the codes to be adequately explained and analysed against existing relevant research.

9. De-identified data was stored in password protected computer and all hard copies destroyed. Data will be kept securely by the School of Psychology, Murdoch University for 5 years before being securely destroyed.

Participants

Ten participants who identified as Aboriginal and who were currently or previously employed in a mainstream (western) workplace, participated in interviews. Interviewees included 5 men and 5 women across the age ranges of 20yrs – 70yrs, with representation across the full age range, with at least one participant in each 10 year age bracket. Two of the participants chose to be interviewed together at the same time. All participants met the following inclusion criteria:

- Identified as Aboriginal.
- Identified as over 18 yrs of age.
- Identified as currently or previously having worked in a non-Aboriginal mainstream Australian organisation/work environment.
- Displayed sufficient cognitive and linguistic capacity to ethically be considered appropriate for inclusion in the study.
Able to speak and understand English; although the interviews were open to non-English speakers where sufficient interpretation services were available. However, none of the candidates required the use of interpreters.

Participants were recruited via local Aboriginal professional networks in Perth, Western Australia and snowball sampling was employed with participants nominating other possible candidates. All participants were current residents of Perth, Western Australia; several of whom identified as being of the Noongar Nation, while others identified with other First Nations across Western Australia and the broader Australian mainland.

These candidates were contacted via email, phone and/or social media directly, or in the case of snowball sampling, they informed that they had been nominated by an associate and were offered the opportunity to receive information on the study. While nearly twenty possible participants were provided information and all of those contacted agreed to participate, time constraints, existing commitments and scheduling precluded some potential candidates, thus ten individuals completed a face-to-face interview.

All candidates were provided with a verbal explanation and written information regarding the study including the need to consent and the ability to withdraw consent at any time. All participants verbally acknowledged understanding and consent and signed the consent and information forms (Appendix A). All participants consented to their interviews being recorded and notes being taken.
Most interviews were recorded and transcribed. Some interviews were completed without audio recording, or audio quality was insufficient to allow complete transcription. However, data was recorded in this case through notes being taken by the interviewer during and after the interviews. All participants were provided the transcripts and/or notes of their interview with the opportunity to provide feedback and/or correction as to the accuracy of the data collection. Participants were offered a $20 voucher as a token of appreciation for their time and support with the interview process.

Semi-structured interview questions were devised prior to data collection based on themes which emerged in the initial literature review of the study (Appendix B). Mid-way during data collection, a second set of interview questions were created which built on the emerging themes from previous interviews, as per grounded theory methodology protocols (Liamputtong, 2013) (Appendix C).
Study Findings

This study sought to explore the experiences of Aboriginal employees within mainstream workplaces, focused on four aspects:

1) Differences in Aboriginal and Western conceptions of ‘work’ and ‘vocation’ and motivations for employment.

2) The lived experience of being an Aboriginal employee within a mainstream environment.

3) How Aboriginal employees experience and/or manage any cross-cultural complexity.

4) How can mainstream workplaces facilitate and support Aboriginal employment and retention?

Thematic analysis was performed on the participant’s transcripts, initially identifying 16 main themes across the ten interviews. These were then further collapsed into three main thematic threads including:

1. The Organisational Domain

2. The Socio-Cultural Domain

3. The Individual Domain
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<tr>
<th>Socio-Cultural Domain</th>
<th>Individual Domain</th>
<th>Organisational Domain</th>
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<tr>
<td>2. Mainstream role link to cultural role</td>
<td>9. Communication barriers</td>
<td>15. Workplace supports</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Differences in approaches to work &amp; vocation</td>
<td>10. Cross-cultural mediation</td>
<td>16. Practical supports</td>
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<td>4. Barriers to Education</td>
<td>11. Cross cultural connection</td>
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<td>5. Barriers to Employment</td>
<td>12. Healing/Self-actualisation</td>
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<td>6. Colonisation &amp; intergenerational trauma</td>
<td>13. Navigating the cross-cultural environment</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Cultural obligations</td>
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Table 1.0 – Axial and Open Codes used in thematic analysis

In line with grounded theory’s focus on theoretical sampling, the number and frequency of individual’s responses were not used to decide the main themes, rather the content which provided the most salient explanations in answer to the research question were prioritised (Liampittong, 2013).
Theme One: The Socio-Cultural Domain

In exploring their experiences of mainstream workplaces, participants provided detailed comparisons of Aboriginal and Western world views and in particular, comparative views of work. A worldview can be summarised as a belief system about reality, knowledge, values and humanity (Clayton & Myers, 2009; Hedlund-de Witt, 2012). Theorists have posited that there are a few recognised overarching similarities across Indigenous worldviews globally which include the privileging of ‘being’ over the Western focus on ‘doing’ (Hart, 1981) or contrasting the Aboriginal world as ‘interactional’ while the non-Aboriginal ‘Western’ worldview as ‘transactional’ (Christie, 1985). The participants’ responses supported this assertion. One described their interpretation of the way that mainstream society approaches ‘work’: “I think non-Aboriginal people, approach work like they know... it’s not a second thought. It’s in their culture... they all speak the same language, they speak money, they speak technology, they speak statistics, they speak data...”

Traditional views of work life, prior to enforced assimilation, was described as focused on community and country: “It was about looking after the land and looking after each other...” Multiple participants outlined that Aboriginal society also had work roles and vocational opportunities: “People had roles and we worked.” As another outlined: “Before settlement, everyone did play a role...The
men hunted and the women gathered... But they all did have careers... Might be the lawman, might be the hunter, and the gatherers, and the ones who cooked.” Today, paid employment was described as focused on providing for family and supporting the community. The participants indicated that the desire among the community to be in work was strong: “Within the community a lot of the people... want to work ... and set up careers for themselves and their families.” While at face value this appears to be similar to responses one would expect from mainstream workers, delving further into what is meant by ‘working for their families’ highlights a qualitative difference:

“So in this sort of capitalist world... I know it's profit for the individual but for us, if we're in the system, it would be, not profit for us, but profit for the extended...If [a worker is] white that money would be for himself and for the business to grow. Where as, the profit ... and what this business gained was to support my family... Nephews, nieces, and all that. ... it's custom, it's based on the hunter going out and we still hold that.”

While mainstream Australian discourse often talks about working to support the family, for Aboriginal participants this was not referring to immediate dependants, but rather to the extended kinship network which could encompass many dozens of people and is based in traditional Aboriginal lore and customs. Thus, even when the Aboriginal employees were working within the western system of employment and at a surface level appear to be engaging in the western culture to do so, the role and meaning associated with this behaviour appeared to be substantively different within their own specific cultural context.
The importance of culture and community was described as a priority value among all participants and surprisingly all described having found a role within the mainstream which also allowed them to engage in their cultural and/or community roles either within their current or past employment. This is particularly striking since the participants were drawn from a wide variety of sectors (private enterprise, community services, mining, self-employment, government roles). The community appeared to be a constant presence in their work with many conveying that they felt they were accountable to the community for their conduct and role within mainstream organisations.

“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...’”

The participants unanimously acknowledged the idea that the community holds one accountable within their mainstream roles on some level. There was mention of the community expecting an individual who had a mainstream role, to
use that position to further the community in some respect, or at least to represent their interests because: “the community owns us and they’ve grown us, they take care of us.” This then suggests that the function of ‘work’ and ‘vocation’ for these participants, and potentially within Aboriginal society more broadly, continues to echo the traditional focus of ‘looking after each other’ as a core function of work and vocation. While the language of ‘supporting’ and ‘providing for one’s family’ is used seemingly in a similar way to mainstream western discourse, the actual nature of this support appears to be substantively different.

Cultural distance

Cultural distance in the workplace can create misunderstanding, communication gaps, tension and impact on engagement when certain aspects of interacting cultures hold different values. For example, the type and function of power (hierarchical, authoritarian, egalitarian etc) (Hofstede, 2001) and the level of collectivism, individualism etc. will play a role in expectations of colleagues (Daniels, et al., 2004). Employees who come from cultures that are very different in this way, may not find it easy or desirable to invest in the ‘organisational culture’ (eg. From an Asian to a Western country) which is in turn linked to organisational citizenship, employee engagement and levels of retention (Park, 2016). Likewise, an employee moving from one culture to another with many similarities (eg. Between Western countries) will find this move much less difficult. People from cultures high in individualism, such as western cultures tend to place tasks and achievement before relationships (Hofstede, 1991), which is quite different to many collectivist
Indigenous cultures which tend to prioritise their social and kinship relationships.

This appears to have potential to create profound existential tension for an Indigenous employee within mainstream workplaces and can be a barrier to retaining employment. One way the significance of these constructs becomes evident is in examination of workplace differences between mainstream (individualistic) and Aboriginal (collectivist) workplaces.

Mainstream vs Aboriginal Organisations

Those participants who had either worked in Aboriginal corporations or attended Aboriginal run-organisations described this as a safe and comfortable experience. The contrast between ‘transactional’ western approaches and ‘relational’ Aboriginal approaches to work is captured by one participant as follows:

“We’ll sit around, they’ll yarn but they will yarn about the purpose of why they’re there but it’s not ‘boom, boom, boom, boom’ (fast paced) but it is really, because they know exactly what needs to be done.” Additionally, the interweaving of community and work life is described as integrated and balanced:

“When I worked in an Aboriginal organisation, community were welcome, friendly, … We had a play centre there... we had a yarning circle where the elders would just come and sit... Kids were at the play centre... It was like, ‘You want a damper made for lunch?’ …It was sharing and caring and you still would be task orientated, you still needed to get things done.”
Here we see a glimpse of a workplace in which community, family, clients and children are all welcome and relationships are nurtured, intermixed with task based activity. This exemplifies the focus on “relational’ ways of working described above, while still recognising the need for productivity. This is consistent with other studies conducted in other collectivist cultures around the world (Billing, Bhagat & Babakus et al., 2014). Given that collectivism places the goals of the group above the goals of the individual (Hofstede, 2001), this description shows the interweaving of community and family within an Aboriginal corporation context.

Work/Life Balance

Work/Life Balance describes the degree of ‘reconciliation’ between one’s home and work lives (Pocock, Skinner & Pisanello, 2010). Work/Life Balance tensions appear to be largely the development of industrialisation as society shifted away from home based industry to larger, more formalised work structures which demanded a separation from the family and home life. Work-family conflict has been recognised as a factor in employee turnover intent, albeit most of the research in this area has been conducted in the US within an individualistic and achievement oriented context (Anderson et al., 2002; Cohen, 1997; Good et al., 1996; Maertz, 1999; Shaffer et al., 2001). There are recognised differences between work/life balance phenomena across cultures, particularly in relation to individualistic and collectivist cultures. In collectivist cultures, the dilemma of balancing work and family life is often significantly less. Billing, Bhagat and Babakus et al. (2014) explored work life balance relationships within four different cultural
contexts, mapping the horizontal collectivist-individualist spectrum against the levels of authorititarianism structures from hierarchical – egalitarian. Traditional Aboriginal societies have tended to be primarily egalitarian with a comparatively flat power base. Additionally, the concept of ‘Shame’ has been recognised in Aboriginal societies as a significant social motivator which encourages the individual to avoid standing out and having undue attention drawn, suggesting that many, if not all, Aboriginal societies would be low on the hierarchical spectrum also.

Collectivists are more likely to offset the work/life balance dilemmas by having a larger network of social supports. Family and friends are more likely to pool resources to support work commitments, seeing the longer-term work outcomes as benefiting the whole group. Similarly, family life infringements into the work space are also more likely to be tolerated than in individualistic cultures. The highest level of work life conflict is found in the hierarchical individualist society in which status and achievement is sought, while also preferring less involvement with family and society generally; thus they both seek less and receive less social support. Australia is likely to be considered a hierarchical and individualist society in this regard.

The participants’ responses supported assertions that community and kinship relationships are highly valued within an Aboriginal society, thus being more likely to support work/life balancing. Several interviewees described their experiences of these organisations as providing a natural, unhurried interweaving of work and family. Therefore, while the surface level function of the employment and vocation may be similar and overtly about supporting oneself and one’s family within both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal/Western communities, the dynamic
between employment and the community appears to be qualitatively different to the mainstream.

The collectivist world view highlighted here and the associated prioritising of relational values is consistent with previous research, including 3 of the top 5 factors of job satisfaction within the Public Service Commission audits (APSC, 2013) ie. Positive working relationships, Flexible Working arrangements and contributing to society and the Indigenous community. Relationships were also found to play a vital role in the study conducted by Chirgwin, Farago, d’Antione et al., (2017). Another Public Service study in 2010 (APSC) which asserted the culturally appropriate vision of organisation to improve wellbeing of Indigenous communities also highlights the reliability of these results. The researchers of this study had described concern that their results may be due to their sample being from the health sector, yet this study found similar results with participants across a broad range of sectors. Likewise, this aligns with the study by the Centre for Social Responsibility in Mining (2007), in which family commitments were prioritised by employees and therefore cited as the most common reason for leaving their place of employment.
Theme Two – The Individual Domain

Participant responses described their views that many Aboriginal employees are expected to walk a tightrope of ‘two worlds’ in securing and maintaining mainstream employment. For some, particularly participants of younger generations and those with tertiary qualifications, this was met with relative ease. Three of the younger generation participants had followed a conventional path through school and/or university and found entry level employment in mainstream roles. While all three of these more youthful participants recognised that there were indeed ‘two worlds’ to engage with, two of them did not describe the cross-cultural tension as causing major issues for them personally. For others, the cultural tension of the mainstream workplace was described across a spectrum from moderately tense but able to be navigated, all the way to being seen essentially as a frontier of colonisation, particularly by more senior participants and members of the Stolen Generations, all of whom had experienced a more traditional lifestyle before enforced assimilation. For multiple participants, the pain and loss of history appeared to be ever present and gaining employment was a painful chore which was endured only as a means of survival: “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.”
All participants described times when they had witnessed an Aboriginal person who had ‘acted white’ in a certain context, or they had done so themselves, as a means to alleviate cultural tension: “The language changes, the body language changes, the way we sit ... 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.” Others discussed this idea using the terminology of ‘code-switching’ indicating that this involved a deliberate ‘putting on’ of the mainstream cultural norms and values to avoid being identified as different: “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.” It is significant in this discussion as adhering to another culture’s social norms can place the individual at odds with their own cultural and personal value system, creating psychological stress (Leong & Ward, 2000; Sanchez et al., 2000, Ward & Searle, 1991).

Cross-cultural code switching was a term coined by Andrew Molinsky (2007), adapting the term from socio-linguistics which describes the flexibility of using different languages or dialects across different settings and with different audiences. It is 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.’ Code-switching is a form of cross cultural adaption which is mentioned openly by Indigenous scholars and articulated in various cross-cultural studies in the local context, albeit in a different form. It is often referred to by other
vernacular imagery, such as ‘walking two roads,’ ‘wearing the wadjela (non-Aboriginal) hat, or ‘walking the path of concrete and sand’.

Code-switching is a largely unexplored construct in the context of Aboriginal employment, despite there being articulation of several standard professional behaviours which are known to vary considerably across cultures but also feature in the mainstream Australian workplace. These include approaches to seeking feedback (Sully de Luque & Sommer, 2000; Walsh, Wang & Xin, 1999), providing feedback (Earley, Gibson & Chen, 1999), providing constructive criticism (Osland, 1995; Takeuchi, Imahori & Matsumoto, 2001), contributing to a business meeting (Hall & Hall, 1989), attending a job interview (Steiner & Gilliland, 1996), the art of negotiation (Adler, Brahm & Graham, 1992; Brett & Okumura, 1998; Francis, 1991; Tinsley, 2001), conflict resolution skills (Black & Mendenhall, 1993; Morris et al., 1998) and attending a business networking ‘social’ event (Earley, 1997).

A majority of participants outlined that to engage with mainstream employment they had to overcome the conundrum of seemingly moving away from their cultural identity. They described being required to ‘put on’ elements of western culture to successfully engage with mainstream employment: “...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.” Interestingly, a study by Fredericks (2009) found that Aboriginal workers in a health service who more closely align themselves to social norms of Whiteness appeared more employable and more likely to gain employment. This expectation to adhere to western cultural norms was presented as being a source of potential identity conflict and ethical dilemmas for the participants. Many who had successfully made this move continued to describe a
constant negotiation between themselves, their employment and their community identity

The Lose/Lose proposition of mainstream employment

Many participants outlined that it was common for community members who did gain position and prestige within mainstream society, to be perceived as having to lose an aspect of their cultural identity to do so. For some this was a crossroads they had experienced themselves and it was described as a very real barrier to maintaining employment.

“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-indigenous culture, that they’ve got to leave their own behind and put on that white cap.”

For some participants, the cultural incompatibility was too great and the source of considerable disillusion:

“[Mainstream organisations say:] ‘We want to get 10% of Aboriginal people into the work force, raddy raddy rah and it’s because ... they wanna look good, they want to get you in and they don’t know what to do with us. We don’t know what to do with us and they don’t know what to do with us so
they send the white fella out to help us to know what to do with us. They send the black fellas out to help us know what to do with us and nobody knows what to do and I don't know what the solution is.”

“A lot of our people go into government positions and big positions within organizations ... mainstream ones, and just don't feel comfortable in the delivery of services, especially if it's to our people, and the way it's delivered...they're not culturally appropriate. They don't feel at ease being a part of something that is not right for their people and they can see it, and they don't want to be no part of it ...”

Yet despite presenting the community as being somewhat cynical and used to being disappointed by mainstream workplaces, several of the participants had a more positive view of the potential to successfully navigate the cross-cultural dynamic.

Cross-cultural agility

While one’s own cultural identity is a central mechanism for organising behaviour, values and priorities, it is possible for individuals to work within multiple cultures effectively and identify with multiple social groups (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). The phenomenon of cultural agility may provide some insight into this space. According to Professor Paula Caliguiri (2012), cultural agility is comprised of a set of psychological and behavioural competencies which allow individuals to engage effectively within cross-cultural situations. The 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). The culturally agile individual can move effectively between these three behavioural sets depending on the context, choosing the most appropriate for the situation.

In 2016, Caligiuri and Tarique conducted a study examining these three constructs of cultural difference (cultural adaptation, minimisation and integration). They were aiming to identify whether these situation-specific responses were responsible for additional variance, after controlling for personality and cross-cultural competence factors. They surveyed 98 employees from two large US multinational companies, cross referencing responses with supervisor ratings of performance. Overall, the model was successful, showing that 17% of the total variance was accounted for through cultural adaptation, cultural minimisation and cultural integration specifically. This study indicates that cross cultural success is a complex scenario impacted by stable personality traits, a culturally agile global, as well as very specific situational factors. The employees who are most likely to succeed in a cross cultural assignment (as indicated by their supervisor) rated higher in all three areas.

Of these three constructs, cross-cultural adaptation is the behaviour which requires individuals to be most outside of their comfort zone, as minimisation and integration both involve keeping hold of one’s own cultural reference. Cross cultural adaptation on the other hand, requires the individual to delve into, and attempt to conform to, another’s cultural reference. Arguably, cross-cultural adaptation is the most confronting of the three, and likely to be the most difficult
to aspire to. Yet most mainstream workplaces will be expecting Indigenous employees to adapt to the western norms of the workplace in order to be considered ‘professional’ and competent in their role, thus this warrants further investigation in relation to Indigenous employment in mainstream settings.

Cross cultural adaptation is bi-dimensional involving socio-cultural adaptation (every day functioning) and psychological adaptation, which not only recognises the ability of the individual to adapt to the inherent stress of a new environment, but also the level of wellness achieved within these conditions (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001; Ward & Kennedy, 1999). The process of engaging with a culture that is not one’s own is an event which requires the individual to make adjustments both behaviourally and psychologically (Ward et al., 2001). The cultural learning involves both explicit and implicit norms, of which the latter can only be gained through quality interactions with the new culture (Bierwiczonek & Waldzus, 2016). In addition, it has been assumed that universally among people, the two principle processes involved include socio-cultural learning and stress/coping (Ward et al., 2001). Coping with the inherent stress of cross cultural transition requires the same coping equation as any other stressful scenario, in that it holds to a ‘demands (stressors) vs. coping (resources)’ exchange (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Ward et al., 2001). Since stress coping is cumulative, individuals who are already fielding stressors in other life domain areas while also attempting to manage stress encountered within a cross-cultural environment are at higher risk of encountering stress levels above their capacity to cope. This may also impact some Indigenous employees as levels of disadvantage and poorer health and wellbeing outcomes are known to be experienced at higher levels: ““Homelessness
is a problem too… I’ve recruited a couple of people that were homeless. But they hide it...”. In light of this, it may be significant that employers who provided support to address stressors and overcoming disadvantage, improved employee engagement and retention for some of the participants. Several participants who had been with their employer for several years, and some as long as twenty years, indicated that the organisation had invested in them to provide personal support: “I had a lot of support from there... They helped me get into housing... I felt very supported there...” For some this involved the organisation paying for their university tuition and providing study leave, support with housing and living situations etc. Thus, the interviewees experiences support the implication that the stress of encountering a cross-cultural situation may be compounded by the experience of stressors in other life domains.

Socio-cultural adaption fits a ‘learning curve’ (Wilson et al., 2013) such that it starts at a low range and increases over time with little fluctuation (Ward et al., 2001). Many assumptions have been made regarding this learning curve, as being in some way linked to ‘amount of time spent’ in the dominant culture however this has been critiqued quite stringently. Many studies show that migrant and minority populations around the globe continue to experience what socio-cultural adaption researchers would call, less than functional levels of adaption. This is exemplified by the myriad of studies showing immigrant populations being less likely to use local health services and cultural/communication barriers continuing to impede social efficacy and participation in civil society (Jayaweera, 2014; Jayaweera & Quigley, 2010; Liu, Meeuwesen, van Wesel, & Ingleby, 2015; Lindert et al., 2008). This same
phenomenon is found in local Indigenous communities in which mainstream services are often underutilised and/or avoided.

Within the Australian context, it may be that the ‘sharing’ of space and public resources between mainstream and Aboriginal communities is wrongly assumed as sufficient ‘time spent’ to allow socio-cultural adaptation to take place. It may be that actual quality interaction is minimal, except when Aboriginal people immerse themselves within the mainstream culture via education and/or work contexts. This may explain why the employment rates for degree qualified individuals are similar among both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians (Australian Government, 2016). In addition to academic skill, the immersion into western education systems offers an individual (particularly those who happen to also have a pre-disposition for cultural agility) an opportunity to build their socio-cultural adaptive learning curve. This explanation is also consistent with research articulating the difficulties that many Indigenous students experience with the school system, resulting in high attrition rates and lower education outcomes for many. If cross-cultural adaptive ability is indeed a factor, then this again is linked to genetic predisposition and temperament and while it can be improved and honed to some extent, the disposition has to be there initially. The individual’s temperament will also decide the level of cultural agility which can be obtained before hitting a ‘ceiling.’ A relatively small number of people in any population have the capacity for high levels of cultural agility. Again, this appears to be consistent with the smaller number of Indigenous students who maintain successful engagement with mainstream education systems to obtain higher education.
Socialisation refers to the process of becoming initiated into a new group or organisation by learning the norms and culture required to function successfully within. Within cross cultural settings this process is referred to as acculturation. Arguably the need for cultural agility or adaption on the part of Indigenous individuals living in urban areas has not be widely articulated, particularly in metropolitan centres where a common language and shared cities creates familiarity and the illusion of a shared space. Therefore, if cultural adaption does play a role in successful employment and retention of Indigenous individuals, mainstream Australia is seemingly unaware of the complexity and effort required by First Nations employees to successfully engage with mainstream organisational settings.

In contrast, for the non-Indigenous majority of Australian, engaging with the mainstream is comparatively comfortable and requires relatively fewer personal resources. This dynamic may go some way to explain why the ‘just get a job’ mantra of public policy and welfare restriction strategies for the long term unemployed have been largely unsuccessful in many Indigenous communities. It may also contribute to explaining why some First Nations people are able to thrive in a cross cultural environment while others continue to struggle. Potentially, herein lies a missing link which has not been identified in discussions of Indigenous employee recruitment and retention.

Support for this assertion is also bolstered by the high level of cultural agility suspected among the participants of this study. While measuring cultural agility was outside the scope of this study, there are indications which support such a hypothesis may warrant further future study, ie. The majority of the study
participants described having held the role of ‘cultural mediator/interpreter’ within workplace situations. This suggests a high level of cross cultural skill, evidenced not only by their success in securing and maintaining a mainstream role despite the cultural complexities but also by the way in which they are either formally or informally recognised as mediators by the mainstream and Aboriginal community members.

Cross-cultural organisational literature shows that one of the main ways in which organisations try to increase their global capacity and cultural agility of their staff is through international placements abroad. However, most of these placements show only moderate or poor outcomes, which is seen to be the result of the ‘ceiling’ for cultural agility and recognises the relative few individuals who actually thrive in a foreign environment for extended periods. The complexity of the cross-cultural environment cannot be underestimated and ignorance of this context among Indigenous employment strategies may be playing a role in the poor outcomes seen to date. The cultural distance in the western and Indigenous worldviews again resonates with McRae-Williams and Gerritsen’s study in 2010 which described the Aboriginal communities’ view of western work practices as highly inconsistent with the locals’ value systems.
Theme Three –
The Organisational Domain

At the broader societal level, the cultural factors involved in the cross-cultural workplace are beyond the control of individuals on either side of a cross-cultural dynamic. The individual, however, has the ability to impact on their own behaviour and the organisation to improve outcomes. As indicated above, Aboriginal employees are expected by mainstream society to adjust themselves using cross cultural agility. Likewise, non-Aboriginal run organisations can impact their own processes through the following mechanisms, as identified by the participants which cumulatively amount to cultural safety.

A culturally unsafe workplace was described by participants as being one which makes a First Nations employee feel ‘out of place.’ The term ‘safe space’ has been used across disciplines in recent years to denote a designated time, place or way of working which creates comfort and safety for a group which is experiencing disenfranchisement from the dominant culture (Collins, 1999; Tatum, 2003). It is theorised that the unsafe element of dominant society which is removed within the safe space is the ‘gaze’, influence and judgement of the ruling culture (Collins, 1999; Tatum, 2003). Dominant cultures present themselves as ‘normative’ thus, the dominant space is one of eternal comparison and critique of deviations from the dominant culture’s social norms (Deo, 2013). Simply put, a safe place is one without judgement and an unsafe place is one in which the individual or group comes under the scrutiny of judgement against another’s standards or norms. Several
interviewees described their experience of coming under the ‘gaze’ of the mainstream. One participant described dread within unsafe spaces having learned to expect judgment from the mainstream:

“‘So every time...I’ve] 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’m being judged by the way I dress, by the way I look, my colour and that’s been my life all along...I rather run the other way...our mob are always under review ... and its always us changing and its always us being judged, we are always wrong, we're negative, we're not workers, we're lazy.”

Another noted:

“Just you walk into some of these big businesses and I'll walk into it, everyone there standing around with suits, and ties, ... you look a bit out of place...mainstream our people feel awkward and just out of place, always out of place in mainstream.”

In contrast, a safe space is without implied judgement from the mainstream and was described as safe and comfortable, most often found by the participants within Aboriginal run organisations: “...We don’t have no communication barriers. When they walk in the door ... We understand each other and we don't have to say much to understand, we just know.”
Relationship Building

There were several examples of constructive initiatives that participants had experienced or suggested to improve employment outcomes for Aboriginal employees, ultimately by increasing safety. It was suggested that all mainstream employees would benefit from having the opportunity get to know more of Aboriginal culture, to raise awareness and empathy for the differences in cultural world views: “... the only thing that I think will really benefit is for them to be exposed to culture as part of their training...coming to your own level of understanding through your experiences...”

The need for personal experiences and familiarity with Aboriginal culture was also described in terms of relationship building. Getting to know people on a personal level and building genuine cross-cultural connections was described as a supportive factor for creating welcoming mainstream workplaces: “It will close all the barriers.” The expressed desire for cultural safety is consistent with Biddle & Lahn’s 2016 study which characterised mainstream workplaces as exhibiting cultural distance, racism and discrimination, with the latter two being implicated as motivators to cease employment. There are also indications that lack of cultural safety is likely to give rise to negative emotional and psychological experiences which are linked to job satisfaction; which is then in turn linked to turnover rates (Griffeth, Hom & Gaertner, 2000); thus this finding is consistent with previous theoretical approaches to job satisfaction and turnover.
Aboriginal representation

The presence of other Aboriginal staff in the workplace was also seen as critical to creating a welcoming environment for new recruits: “...[We need] more black faces.” The natural tendency for people to connect with culturally similar people and for this to increase their comfort level in the workplace was highlighted, with one participant stating: “Sometimes you segregate yourself... If there's another black face there, that's where we would point ourselves and we go that way.” Increasing the percentage of Aboriginal employees within a workplace appeared to increase the perception of cultural safety within the organisation and seemed more likely to encourage further Aboriginal candidates.

Cross-Cultural Terms of Reference

The idea of creating a mutually negotiated agreement between Aboriginal employees and the organisation was championed as having great potential to improve engagement and retention by Aboriginal employees: ‘What I want is a ‘Terms of Reference ... [and] applying that in the workplace... it would recognize some of the aspects of communicating, ways of doing and interacting...’ One participant had very clear conceptions that a ‘terms of reference’ could be used to negotiate what the culturally appropriate methods and context of communication and interaction would be. Although none of the participants had actually come across a ‘terms of reference’ being used within the workplace, there was broad
support for the idea and examples were provided of what this may look like should the negotiation occur.

“We're saying all right this is the way, we're coming to work, but we'll come into work with all painted up in gear and stuff. Because it's reflecting some of the cultural aspects that we still carry that we must carry everywhere we go, it doesn't matter work or what.”

Being able to work in traditional attire and paint was one example, while others included specific local protocols for communication such as the location being preferably outdoors rather than in an office, accommodating cultural protocols such as law time, men/women’s business, funeral leave and ways of addressing individuals and introducing yourself and making first contact when coming into a new area. In addition, within the organisational setting, ideas included an agreement by the organisation that performance issues and disciplinary action would be undertaken by an Indigenous person to allow the employee to feel safe and have the issue dealt with on a personal level rather than through the authoritarian mainstream structures of the organisation.

Ultimately this study supports the need for culturally safe spaces within mainstream organisations to support Aboriginal employees. This appears to occur organically in Aboriginal run organisations which allow employees to be ‘free of the gaze’ and judgement of the mainstream majority, but the various other initiatives raised by participants including increased cultural understanding, encouraging genuine relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal employees, formally
negotiating a Terms of Reference to outline the rules of engagement between the organisation and the employee, all serve to create cultural safety.

Additionally, given the recognition of increased prevalence of disadvantage seen within some Aboriginal communities and the links therein to colonisation, racism and intergenerational trauma, there may be need to recognise the level of personal resources required for some individuals to attempt mainstream employment. Given that all of the participants would be classified as having been successful in their pursuit of employment, and thus on some level have been able to overcome these barriers to some extent, yet even many of these ‘successful’ and culturally agile participants had overtly described having to overcome barriers in their own life. Many described undergoing a type of healing process or working through the legacy of history in their own way. We have also seen in discussions above that cross-cultural environments naturally provoke stress for those outside of their comfort zone and that cultural agility is linked to temperament, thus some individuals will struggle with this more than others by no fault of their own. So, then if mainstream workplaces are inherently stressful due to the cross-cultural environment, then only some people will have the personal capacity and cultural agility to navigate these and maintain employment in the long term. Additionally, if an increased percentage of Aboriginal applicants are likely to have experienced disadvantage and/or overcome significant stressors in their own lives, adding the stress of a culturally unsafe environment may exceed some individuals’ threshold for stress. This adds weight to the push for culturally competent mainstream workplaces and for recognition of the depth of achievement for those who have successfully gained and retained employment. It may also provide some structure
with which to support those who wish to pursue mainstream occupational experience.
Conclusion

This study provides qualitative insight into Aboriginal experiences of mainstream work which supports some conclusions in response to the research questions and contextualises previous research in this area.

1) Differences in Aboriginal and Western conceptions of ‘work’ and ‘vocation’ and motivations for employment.

The data has highlighted that even when the surface level roles and work actions appeared to be similar among the participants, to what one would expect to see among non-Aboriginal employees in mainstream workplaces, the meaning and cultural implications of work were described as substantially different. This suggests that the motivations for gaining and maintaining employment are different in some respects and sustained by different cultural values. Mainstream individualism is understood by participants to be based in capitalist values, prioritising the wellbeing of the individual and their immediate family and based in the ultimate pursuit of profit, as well as mainstream perspectives of career achievements often being linked to one’s own identity. This study suggests that for the participants, employment was more likely to be seen within the broader values which prioritise connection to community and relatedness; the benefits of employment were enjoyed by the individual and their immediate families while also recognising cultural obligations towards extended kinship networks. Participants appeared to gravitate towards employment in which the ‘greater good’ of the community was
an explicit or implicit goal and in which they were able to be in close connection to community members and goals.

2) The lived experience of being an Aboriginal employee within a mainstream environment

For several participants, the ethnocentrism of the mainstream arena had the potential to leave them feeling like foreigners in a land which they and their ancestors had inhabited for around 60,000 years. Participants painted a picture of mainstream work environments which are built around the needs and priorities of western, individualistic, capitalist society. In being so, the needs and priorities of the participant’s world views were often unacknowledged, marginalised or unknowingly violated. Western workplaces and practices were described as not only unaware of the cultural dilemmas which they placed the participants into, but also most participants interpreted mainstream workplaces to also be largely disinterested in sincerely engaging with cultural safety in the workplace on more than a surface level. Institutional racism was indicated to be alive and well in Australia, although not in all mainstream workplaces. Smaller, family-size businesses were indicated to be more personable, flexible and adaptive, while the larger government and private multi-national companies were presented as big machines which had little interest in accommodating cultural safety on much more than a superficial, ‘compliance/tick box’ level.

3) How do Aboriginal employees experience and/or manage any cross-cultural complexity?
Participants displayed high levels of cultural insight and described having developed very adept strategies for navigating cross-cultural situations. Many had found ways to meet cultural obligations while also meeting work requirements, however this appeared to be an ongoing challenge which at times threatened employment and attracted the scrutiny of the community if obligations were not adhered to. Many participants cited examples of having left places of employment due to cultural obligations, displaying a preference for community and culture over employment. This may be quite a significant finding in relation to understanding low employment and rates among First Nations communities.

4) How can mainstream workplaces facilitate and support Aboriginal employment and retention?

The participants were keen to share suggestions on ways in which mainstream organisations could support and promote cultural safety in the mainstream workplace. All of these linked into the creation of safety through increased cultural agility on the part of the mainstream workforce and reduced ethnocentrism in organisational processes and procedures. The suggestions included:

1. Building relationships to humanise the individual and make interpersonal connections across cultures

2. Increasing staff understanding of and familiarity with First Nations cultures,
3. Providing cultural mentors who are comfortable in ‘both worlds’ to assist new staff to navigate the cross-cultural tensions

4. Formal negotiations in the form of a terms of reference to articulate and navigate specific cultural protocols and obligations which impact the individual at work.

**Implications**

This study implies that the disparity in employment and retention rates between mainstream and Indigenous communities may be informed by a cultural clash between worldviews and value priorities. Indigenous individuals living within a collectivist worldview which prioritises community and land over individual financial gains and career status are unlikely to be enticed by ethnocentric, culturally unsafe mainstream workplaces. This may go some way to suggesting a response to the government’s Clearinghouse question outlined earlier as to ‘Why more Indigenous Australians are not moving to areas with better employment opportunities.’ This study would seem to suggest that community and country are a higher priority within some Indigenous worldviews, such that work is unlikely to take precedence. This is especially salient, considering several participants disclosed having terminated their own employment to prioritise family and community commitments. The exception to this appears to be where the organisation’s goals and the job role overlaps with those of the individual’s goal to promote Indigenous interests and contribute to the wellbeing of the extended community, along with sufficient cultural safety in the workplace. There are also possible implications for
the disparity in educational outcomes if similar cross cultural clashes are relevant in this way.

Another significant implication is the level of cultural agility required to navigate the cross-cultural tension. Participants demonstrated their ability to mediate across ‘both worlds’ indicating their propensity to cross cultural adaption. However, there are limits on each individual’s ability to develop these skills as they are impacted by temperament and personality and therefore genetic predisposition plays a role. Therefore, expecting a large percentage of the Aboriginal community to be able to attain this is unrealistic and frankly unethical since they are inhabiting their ancestral homelands and are being asked to acclimatise on a large scale to a foreign cultural setting. Additionally, it is unlikely that a large percentage of the Australian mainstream community will have the ability for high cultural agility. A middle road would appear to be in found in promoting Aboriginal run organisations, increasing the number of mainstream organisations which provide cultural safety, and promoting those which have organisational goals compatible with First Nations communalist world views. There are already moves in this direction and this study appears to support this as a viable future direction.

Limitations

This study provides rich qualitative insight into the experience of 10 individuals and although the data was surprisingly consistent and compatible across all participants, the extent to which this insight can be generalised is unknown. The aim of qualitative research is not to be able to generalise to a broader audience, although the insights can provide a backdrop against which to improve
interpretations of quantitative, generalisable studies. The insights gained here do appear to be highly consistent with the previous studies outlined above, many of which included large scale quantitative surveys; Thus, this adds to the reliability of the data here. However, the small sample size is a limitation, as is the limited representation from the diverse First Nations communities across the continent. All participants were based in urban metropolitan centres, although several had been born and/or raised in remote areas.

**Directions for Future Research**

Replication of these findings across a broader sample and using quantitative methodology would be a useful direction for further study to ascertain the generalizability of these findings across diverse communities and experiences. Additionally, the data here is not verified by third parties and is highly subjective, as is the researcher’s interpretation - thus studying a combination of mainstream perspectives of cultural safety and Aboriginal employee’s experiences would provide further insight into the cross-cultural space.

The applicability of cultural agility and cross cultural adaptation would be another useful direction for further research to uncover the role and extent that cross cultural skills play in employee recruitment and retention of Aboriginal employees, and of the mainstream employees in the workplaces in which they are employed.
Appendix B

**Semi-Structured Interview Questions:**

What country are you from?

How connected do you feel to your culture, community and country?

What is your idea of an occupation? Do you have an ideal work/occupation scenario?

Tell me what was your motivation to look for work?

When deciding what jobs to apply for, what were your considerations?

What do you think of this Western White man way of working?

Describe how you see the difference between mainstream/white man’s idea of work and Aboriginal concepts of work?
What is your role within your community now? Is that what it traditionally would have been? What would you like it to be? How does this contrast with your paid work? Is it compatible?

Tell me about your experiences of working in a mainstream organisation (or Aboriginal corporation)?

What are some of the barriers that make working there hard? Easy?

What would you change if you could?

Do you feel like you could use more support? From outside the organisation? From internally? How could your family/friends/manager and/or team support you more? How would that help?

Some people have described needing to put their ‘Wadjela*/white man’ hat on when they go into work. What has your experience been of interacting within two cultures? What helps to ‘transition’ or change gears?

What would it look life if you did not ‘put your ‘Wadjela*’ hat on’? Why do you feel you need to do this if you do?

What is your family/friends reaction to your work? Occupation? Employer?

How does their support or lack thereof impact on your job?
How you ever received positive or negative feedback from an employer? Can you tell me about that experience? What was helpful? What was not?

Are you still with this employer? How did you leave? (If going well) – What are the factors which make you comfortable to stay there? (If not going well) – What are the factors which make it unlikely you will stay?
Appendix C

Further Interview Questions:

1. Many participants so far have indicated that their mainstream roles appear to allow them to support and work within their community at the same time eg. Aboriginal liaison officer, Housing Worker who is employed by a government department but who is able to assist their community in their role. What would you say about the importance of a mainstream role being compatible with cultural roles also?

2. Also, tell me more about the role that the community plays in holding people accountable when they work in mainstream or senior government positions. It does appear that the community can be quite vocal and critical of senior Indigenous individuals who hold power in mainstream professional roles if they are not seen to be using it to further community empowerment or issues. What are your thoughts on this?

3. Some participants, both elder and young, have talked about an internal process of getting comfortable with who they are and finding internal empowerment that has helped them and a way to heal themselves. That this has helped them to feel more able to move more easily between two worlds. Do you have any comments about this?
4. What do you feel are the barriers to the Aboriginal community gaining education and training opportunities? In addition to discrimination and racism, *what are your thoughts about how culturally appropriate the process of getting education and employed are?*

5. What about the processes of actually getting a job in a mainstream organisation... most large organisations will have a recruitment process which involves referees, resumes and an interview. Then if you are offered the position there will be induction, on-boarding, training and professional development plans. *What has your experience been with these and how culturally appropriate have you found them?*


