

The Impact of Engagement in Front-Line Service Roles on the Subjective Wellbeing of Indigenous Employees

Extended Abstract

Indigenous (Aboriginal) populations in advanced economies such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the US are severely disadvantaged in comparison to wider society across most socioeconomic, health and wellbeing indicators (Manning, Ambrey and Fleming, 2016). For example, in Australia when compared to the community at large, Aboriginal 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 Aboriginal health and subjective wellbeing (e.g. Mellor, 2004; Dury, 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, during 2008, an accord was signed between the Australian Federal and State governments with the aim of taking affirmative action across a broad range of social and economic areas designed to help improve the lives of Aboriginal 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 Aboriginals.

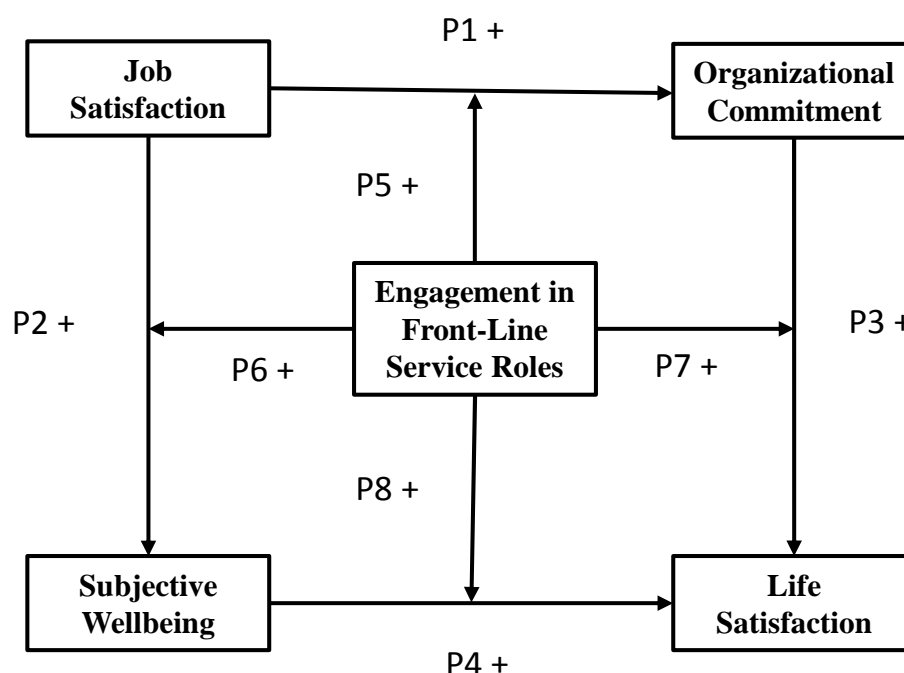
One area that still needs to be addressed is increasing Aboriginal work participation rates because high unemployment is identified as a primary factor underpinning many of the disadvantages these members of society face (Daff and Pearson, 2009). Boosting Aboriginal employment rates has become a key 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 Aboriginals (Biddle, 2010; Pearson and Daff, 2010; Daly and Gebremedhin, 2015). However the theory of social exclusion, largely underpinned by rejection and ostracism (Wesselmann et al., 2016), implies that if the level of racism in Australian society still exists this has the potential to dampen the positive outcomes associated with workforce participation. In the context of this research, three questions are examined, namely: (1) does racism directed towards Aboriginals exist with the Australian work setting, (2) are some employment types more susceptible to such activity than others, and (3) does employment in specific work settings make Aboriginals more resilient to racism than others? Answers to these questions could provide the clue to policy and industry actions designed to improve Aboriginal wellbeing and overall life satisfaction, and in turn help to remedy injustices of the past that are still omnipresent today (Mellor, 2004).

The core proposition that underpins this research is that the healing process for Aboriginal persons, 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 persons improve their overall wellbeing.

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 hypothesized to have a positive impact on organizational commitment (H1) and subjective wellbeing (H2); and similarly, organizational commitment positively impacts subjective wellbeing (H3). When Indigenous employees work in the service industry in front-line service roles then this is also hypothesized to have a positive impact on their subjective wellbeing (H4). However, front-line service roles are hypothesized to positively moderate the relationship between job satisfaction and organizational commitment (H5). 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.

Figure 1: Impact of Engagement in Front-Line Service Roles on Subjective Wellbeing of Indigenous Employees



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 assess the wide range of views and opinions about the reasons for the existence of relatively poorer levels of subjective well-being among Indigenous Australians, with a focus on their workplace experience and engagement. To test the model, and in doing so answer the third research question, a structured questionnaire will be used to target Indigenous employees in both front-line service and other employment settings.

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 as well subjective well-being. 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.

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