

# A Bit of Ripping and Tearing: An Interpretative Study of Indigenous Engagement Officers' Perceptions Regarding Their Community and Workplace Roles

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John Mason and Jane Southcott

*Faculty of Education, Monash University, Melbourne, VIC 3800, Australia*

The Australian Government (AG) employs Indigenous Engagement Officers (IEO) in many of the remote Aboriginal communities of the Northern Territory (NT). IEOs are respected community members who apply their deep understanding of local tradition, language and politics in providing expert cultural advice to government. Competing priorities of workplace and cultural obligation make the IEO role stressful and dichotomous in nature. The workplace experiences and perceptions of IEOs remain largely unexplored and there is scant understanding of the significant crosscultural issues associated with the role. IEOs typically confront ongoing workplace stress and are unable to perform at full capacity. This qualitative study explores participant meaning regarding workplace and community roles to inform the AG in development of culturally appropriate training and support for IEOs. The study captures detailed information from six IEOs through an interpretive process sensitive to phenomenological experience. Personal meanings associated with the workplace are assembled through individual interviews and focus group sessions. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis methodology is applied to the resulting idiographic dataset in exposing a range of superordinate themes including desire for recognition and feelings of abandonment. Findings reveal the need to incorporate correct cultural protocols in the workplace and give preference for Aboriginal learning styles in professional development activities. There is urgent need for a range of workplace supports for IEOs in future capacity-building strategies.

■ **Keywords:** Indigenous Engagement Officer, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, Northern Territory Emergency Response, Stronger Futures for the Northern Territory, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employee network

This small-scale interpretative study explores the experience of Indigenous Engagement Officers (IEO) through examination of individual and group understandings relating to personal meanings concerning family, culture, education and workplace. Rationale for the study lies in need to reveal the intrinsic tensions operating at the interface between the IEOs' sociocultural identity and their employment within the Australian Public Service (APS). IEOs contribute their extensive cultural knowledge to Australian Government (AG) activities in remote Northern Territory (NT) communities and their role has become

pivotal in fostering positive change in the lives of Aboriginal people (AG, 2010a). As officers of the AG's Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PMC), IEOs function as trusted conduits between community and all levels of government.

The PMC recently embarked on a process to up-skill IEOs and expand their role to encompass increased

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ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: John Mason, Faculty of Education, Monash University, Melbourne, VIC 3800, Australia. Email: [john.mason@monash.edu](mailto:john.mason@monash.edu)

administrative and reporting tasks. IEOs live in a cultural reality far removed from that of most Australian mainstream learners and require unique approaches in workplace learning and development. Consideration of the IEOs' story in their own voice is paramount in efforts to effectively address their needs as APS employees and adult learners. In capturing the IEOs' story, we were able to examine their perceptions regarding workplace and professional development in context with their lived reality in both community and workplace.

The rationale for this study is deeply embedded within a broader national context relating to education as an advancement tool for Indigenous Australians. The effectiveness of previous PMC professional development activities was gauged through the lens of participant meaning. Contextualised and detailed accounts of participant lifeworlds highlighted a range of long-standing issues relating to the provision of culturally appropriate education programmes for adult Indigenous learners.

Through this study, we aim to generate information useful for creation of professional development strategies for IEOs. All study participants are IEOs employed by PMC and working in the NT's Barkly region (the Barkly) and nearby Central Australia region. The Barkly covers a significant part of the NT and contains a plethora of traditional cultures and language groups. The IEO cohort who participated in this study consisted of a group of remote area Aboriginal people originating from a variety of demographic and social contexts with unique characteristics dissimilar to those of mainstream learners. Study participants are tradition-orientated Aboriginal people embedded within a workplace steeped in conventions of the APS. Recognising this, fine detail of the tensions operating at the interface of the IEO's cultural identities and their role as APS employees was captured.

## Background

In August 2007, the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) was implemented and the role of Government Business Manager (GBM) created to support carriage of AG measures at community level. GBMs lived on-community in over 60 remote sites and performed a range of implementation, reporting and administrative tasks (AG, 2007). In June 2008, the AG commenced employing local community members as IEOs to work in partnership with the GBMs in providing expert cultural interpretation and guidance. The NTER concluded July, 2012 (AG, 2012) and transitioned into the Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory initiative (SFNT). Government Engagement Coordinators (GECs) were introduced to replace the GBMs and build on the achievements of the NTER. To this day, IEOs continue to work in partnership with GECs to assist all levels of government with effective and respectful navigation through the complex cultural landscape of the NT's remote Aboriginal commu-

nities. The IEO role is challenging as government policy and reform is often considered controversial and actively resisted by community members.

In December 2008, 65 GBMs were living on-community throughout remote NT (AG, 2009) with only 12 being supported by an IEO. In November 2016, only 26 GECs remain deployed on-community in remote NT. This dramatic reduction in GEC numbers is balanced by the 35 IEOs currently employed. PMC's Central Australia Region North (CARN) encompasses the Barkly region and at the time of our study, had two GECs and four IEOs deployed on-community. The significant reduction of GEC numbers with paralleled increases in IEOs is a well-established trend (ABC, 2013) and IEOs now need to acquire the skills and confidence required to meet the increasing administrative, reporting and networking responsibilities generated by reduced GEC presence. All study participants are IEOs deployed within CARN or nearby Central Australia region and represent a purposively sampled cohort of Aboriginal people employed in the APS.

## Education for Adult Indigenous Learners

Contemporary adult vocational training delivery for Indigenous learners is typically an adaptation of existing accredited training programmes designed for use with non-Indigenous learners. Historically, this training achieved limited success in equipping remote area Indigenous learners for any significant engagement with the mainstream job market (NCVER, 2005). Spiers (2010) points out that:

From the statistical evidence it would appear that the issues confronting Indigenous students appear to relate to not only their access to courses or their motivation to access courses, but to their effective involvement and successful completion of these courses ... issues such as inappropriate staff expectations, cultural mismatch in course content and responses to racism on campus have continued to appear as areas of concern for students. (pp. 24–25)

Alternative learning paradigms are required when designing training programmes for remote area Indigenous learners. Training programme development for Aboriginal communities has been flawed 'because both the intended outcomes (the objectives) and the teaching methods have been based on false assumptions' (Byrnes, 1993, p. 157). Conceptions regarding formal learning from one culture should not be imposed onto another (Boulton-Lewis, Lewis, Marton, & Wilss, 1999) and Eady, Herrington and Jones report the 'need for better understanding of the complexities of the Indigenous learner from both a language and personal perspective' (2010, p. 4). Byrnes compared Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal adult education principles and practices. Her study developed criteria useful in assessing education programmes designed for Aboriginal learners and she argued that 'programmes should be supportive and reflective of the

culture and values of Aboriginal learners; learning should be conducted as far as possible within the parameters of the learner's "world view" (1993, p. 165). Alternative epistemological paradigms for Aboriginal adult education are a well-established concept and promoted by visionaries such as Mandawuy Yunupingu, Michael Christie and Stephen Harris since the 1980s (Christie, 2006; Harris, 1984; Yunupingu, 1989). The paucity of recent research and discussion is alarming.

The Australian education system, having grown from colonial practices remains grounded in Anglo-centric aspirations and intentions that can be referred to as a value system based on 'whiteness' (Randolph, 2011). Educational success for Indigenous learners is currently influenced by their capacity to assimilate and exhibit certain ways of knowing and learning that are considered normal and acceptable. Willis (2012) contends that 'whiteness' as a subjective, nonnormative and racialised category is generally invisible to those that occupy this space of power; in other words, it is invisible to white people themselves. Thompson (2009) tags this value system as 'whiteness theory' and views this dynamic as a social construct. Vocational training efforts directed towards remote area adult Aboriginal learners continue to be based on positivist traditions and use predominantly non-Indigenous cultural values. Traditional Aboriginal cultural information and belief is largely ignored and intended training outcomes and teaching methods are often based on incorrect assumptions regarding the learners.

In 1994, the National Centre for Vocation Education Research (NCVER) conducted a major review of progress against the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy. Their findings raised a clear distinction between measuring Indigenous peoples' access, participation and outcomes in training, with actually understanding whether the training resulted in quality experiences and outcomes that Indigenous people had identified themselves. The review evidenced that perceptions of learners and community members should be included in assessment of learning programmes. Vocational training for Indigenous people is more effective when degrees of learner/community acknowledgment and ownership exist (Christie, 2006; Yunupingu, 1989). More recently, the NCVER reviewed research relating to those aspects of training that met Indigenous Australians' aspirations and states that 'There is unequivocal evidence that the single most important factor in achieving positive outcomes is in Indigenous community ownership and involvement in the training from start to finish' and that such training should "reaffirm students' own identities, cultures, and histories to provide the appropriate space in which people can acquire skills for employment, community development and self-determination' (NCVER, 2005, p. 8). A major blockage for community controlled adult education is that training providers have to work within mainstream systems where administrative and funding arrangements

still operate with scant regard for two decades of research and policy debate (Broughton & Durnan, 1997).

A pedagogical paradigm shift is required to develop effective education and training programmes intended for Indigenous learners. Direction for this change is best sought through the insights of the local experts regarding the lived reality of remote area learners, that is to say from community-based Aboriginal people themselves (Boulton-Lewis et al., 1999; Byrnes, 1993; Eady et al., 2010; Hills, 1999; NCVER, 2005). Before colonisation, Aboriginal people were masters of their world and lived harmoniously on their lands for countless generations (McIsaac, 2000). Learning was deeply imbedded in ceremony, art and language and interwoven into the very fabric of kinship ties and interpersonal relationships (Davis, 1998). Indigenous knowledge systems were (and remain) strongly contextualised to the local countryside and plural in nature. With the colonisation of traditional lands by members of Western society, knowledge plurality mutated into knowledge hierarchy and the horizontal ordering of diverse but equally valid systems was converted into a vertical ordering of unequal systems (Shiva, 1989). The epistemological foundations of Western knowledge were imposed on non-Western knowledge systems and invalidated the latter. Formidable tensions now exist between Aboriginal ways of knowing and western education practice in Australia (Byrnes, 1993; Christie, 2006; Harris, 1984; Yunupingu, 1989). The reconciliation of mainstream vocational education with Indigenous pedagogies must commence with a process of acknowledgment and validation in which traditional practices and ideas of education must first be universally regarded as a valuable asset (McClay, 1988).

Learning is social in nature and comes largely from experience and participation in daily life (Smith, 1999). Personal identity is the intersection between practice and discourse that connects individual's consciousness to a sense of self as a socially constructed subject of discourse (Hall & Du Gay, 1996). Identity situates the person within a context of mutual constitution between individuals and groups (Giddens, 1991). According to Rigney, 'education that welcomes Indigenous identities reinforces Indigenous cultural views of the world' (2002, p. 9). Self-identification can be considered as a construct unfolding continually within existing social networks. It is likely that the unfamiliar social networks and Communities of Practice embedded within the PMC workplace often impact negatively on the self-identity of IEOs.

## Methodology

Rigorous and systematic analysis of experiential data was considered fundamental to the success of this study and a platform of naturalist enquiry was founded on an interpretivist position. Strong inductive elements served to complement the incorporation of Interpretative

Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) wherein 'Analysis relies on the process of people making sense of their world and their experiences, firstly for the participant, and secondly for the analyst' (Flowers, Larkin, & Reid, 2005, p. 20) and phenomena are intimately tied to the times and the contexts in which they occur (Guba, 1981). Avoidance of the positivist traditions intrinsic in many western paradigms is a feature of this study and supported by Flowers et al. (2005) with their claim that the search for meaning surpasses any objective truth or reality. According to Bryman (2008), social phenomena and their meanings are continually accomplished by social actors and this notion framed the inductive approach employed in the study. The study commenced without preconceived hypotheses and involved two researchers. All field work and data collection was undertaken by researcher Mason, while researcher Southcott provided expert advice on methodology and thematic development.

An interpretivist approach framed the generation of data reflective of the participants' cultural reality and complemented use of IPA. Our use of a case study approach aligns with Fade's claim (2004) that idiographic case study methodology is generally suitable for small groups of participants and allowed themes to emerge that we identified as common across a number of cases. All four Barkly IEOs volunteered to participate in the study with a further two participants coming from nearby Central Australia region. Our six case studies focussed on participant life-worlds while accommodating individual perceptions and beliefs. This study is specific to IEOs working in the Barkly and Central Australia, so replicability issues attributed to the interpersonal and highly contextualised nature of the design was not regarded significant (Krefting, 1991).

Phenomenological research seeks 'to construct a possible interpretation of the nature of certain human experience' (Van Manen, 1990, p. 41). During data collection, our past personal and theoretical knowledge was suspended to best ability as we pieced together participant meaning (Giorgi, 2008). Intersubjective interconnectedness between participants and researchers is a valued characteristic of this study and meaning was co-constructed through continual discourse between the IEOs and us (Findlay, 2009).

IPA seeks to 'capture and explore the meanings participants assign to their experience' (Flowers et al., 2005, p. 20) and is concerned with lived experience and the individual's personal perception or account of an event or state (Smith, 2004). While attempting to get close to the participant's personal world, IPA practitioners also concede that one cannot do this completely and remain dependent on their own conceptions. IPA is an idiographic approach concerned with highly detailed and contextualised analysis of the case. The iterative and inductive processes of IPA also complemented the search for participant meaning considered pivotal in this study (Flowers et al., 2005; Giorgi, 2008; Smith, 2008). Phenomenological focus on

participant perceptions was increased with the practice of suspending or 'bracketing' the question of a reality separate from lived experience (Smith, 2008) and assisted us in approaching each IEO's story with open minds while simultaneously capturing and analysing participant perceptions with academic rigor.

We sought to generate a wealth of deep and richly textured data specific to the perceptions of individual participants (Geertz, 1973) and our primary role as researchers was to work in concert with participants in the co-construction of meaning through a series of participant and researcher interactions.

Interviews of approximately 1-hour duration were conducted with each participant and recorded using an unobtrusive digital voice encoder with verbatim transcriptions prepared shortly thereafter. We made use of semistructured interview schedules to provide flexibility and permit the participant to take some control of topics for discussion (Flowers et al., 2005). Member-checking for all transcribed data was conducted in follow-up conversations with each participant (Guba, 1981). This process ensured the accuracy of transcripts and perceived meanings through direct endorsement from study participants.

Guba's (1981) constructs of trustworthiness in determining levels of academic rigor in qualitative research encompass credibility, triangulation, transferability, dependability and conformability. These constructs are conceptually well-developed and have been used by qualitative researchers for some time (Krefting, 1991). Researcher Mason's prolonged engagement at the research site prior to the study established the familiarity and trust conducive to effective qualitative research. Triangulation was achieved through comparison of data captured from interviews, focus group sessions, life histories and researcher observation with aforementioned member-checking sessions complementing the process (Krefting, 1991).

Textual data were inserted onto a template with blank columns used for inclusion of initial notes, exploratory comments and the development of provisional emergent themes. A range of exploratory comments relating to experiential claims were then developed through careful reflection (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Credibility was enhanced through analysis of the transcript by each researcher in isolation before mutual discussion regarding the plausibility of emergent themes.

Analysis of the transcript content occurred at descriptive, linguistic and conceptual levels. Descriptive comments were developed directly from participant recounts of experience and the key matters of concern for each individual. Only one participant regards English as a first language and the functional aspects of language such as repetition, tone, fluency and use of metaphor required careful consideration during analysis. The third level of annotation was conceptual in nature and took interrogative form.

The analytical process created an additional quantum of data based on our notes, observations, reflections and exploratory comments. This idiographic data set became extensive and formed the basis for development of emergent themes. Careful management of data changes was required to detect the complex relationships, connections and patterns lying dormant within the massive idiographic data set.

During thematic interpretation, we strived to maintain the notion of a hermeneutic circle (Van Manen, 2014). In doing so, small pieces of experiential data were interpreted relative to the tone of the entire interview. In this manner, the open and contingent nature of initial notes transitioned gradually to a range of emergent themes leading to our more detailed understandings of the IEOs' life-world. It is important to reiterate that the identification of emergent and subsequent superordinate themes in this study was achieved through collaborative effort between the participants and us. Our regular member-checking activities also ensured that the contextual elements of themes were addressed proactively.

## Findings

Study findings illuminate the complex and dynamic life-world of the IEOs in direct context with their lived reality as both community members and AG officers. The findings are grouped under the emergent themes identified during IPA analysis and are broadcast in the voice of the participants through verbatim quotes using pseudonyms. We present interpretations of participant meaning and comment on the resulting implications for both IEOs and PMC.

### Self-Identity

'I want to be close to my country like all other Aboriginal people'. (Jack)

All participants identified strongly as Aboriginal people and members of a geographically specific traditional culture. Boundaries in cultural authority were identified by participants as pivotal to maintaining respectful relationships on-community. Margaret cited a recent situation where she was unable to provide comment at a public meeting in Alice Springs because she was 'outside the boundary to bring our issues'. She then went on to state emphatically: 'If you had it [the public meeting] in my land, my country, Warramangu, Jingili Mutt-Mutt people. You see the difference then; it's my duty to speak up on behalf of my family, my clan'.

Due to powerful connections with their traditional lands, all participants stated that workplace induction and professional development activities should take place in the IEO's home community. Charles explained gently:

I reckon [training] should be out on community, you got time there. You can say then '*this is one of the places you got to come, you got to come to the school*' like that and then you can

sit back and listen to him asking questions. Asking the school principal important questions, and then later on you explain [*sic*] the way you do it.

Participants evidenced strong connections with their home community and placed great value on their own unique language, ceremony and social history while also sharing a deep respect for the culture of other clans and tribes. Margaret stated with conviction: 'Respect? Yes, yes, I can give respect to culture and be a good IEO! Yes, I believe so. I'm trying and managing and I know the boundaries . . . but it is tricky; tricky'.

### Dichotomy of the IEO Role

'We are working and walking in two worlds, finding balance'. (Richard)

Every participant expressed the wish to function effectively in the IEO role and work for PMC to promote culturally appropriate progress in their home communities. Participants repeatedly commented on the complexity and confusion generated by working at the interface of the Australian mainstream and traditional culture.

The demands of family and traditional culture are of paramount importance for participants and ability to balance cultural obligations with workplace requirements appeared problematic. Margaret commented with sadness regarding cultural paradoxes she experiences in the PMC workplace:

I get confused because of the decisions they [PMC] make. For example, I organised for family to look after my granddaughter because my daughter had to have a caesarean. But I was required to go to Alice Springs and I couldn't afford to miss that workshop. Oh, I found it so hard! It was so hard and heart breaking that I had to meet the government requirement.

Richard pensively described his feelings regarding the tensions between his traditional culture and the workplace:

I don't know, a bit of ripping and tearing I suppose both sides. I suppose we all got different journeys, different upbringings and it's all about how we grew up and how we see things. Depends on what's around us.

Participants frequently mentioned the importance of finding a degree of balance between their cultural obligations and the demands of the IEO role. Significantly, no participants felt they had achieved this balance and most claimed that they continually struggle to achieve some degree of equilibrium between the social, cultural, familial and workplace elements in their lives.

### Previous Education and Training Experiences

We all got taken with Welfare and we had our schooling from there. In town, in Alice Springs. But one thing good, we went back for school holidays. Well two ways, it's sort of confusing but good for me to get an education. (Jack)

Perceptions regarding mainstream education experiences were often tinged with sadness and regret. Some participants did not wish to discuss school at all. Margaret had unpleasant recollections regarding her school days: 'Yeah, I was running away from school, I don't know John; it's so hurtful, going back and reflecting on my past. I've come a long way and even though [pensive], I don't want to look back; yeah'. Jack expressed his deep regret that mainstream schooling cut short his cultural education: 'Yeah trade, trade off. Yeah, but not good for me today! Because I missed out on all my grandfather's teachings. So I follow with all my brothers now, to make it good'. As a member of the stolen generations, Jack also associates mainstream education with the forced separation from his mother:

Back in my time, I was a half-caste kid. Welfare came and grabbed me off my mother. They put me in school here in Alice in the children's villages. We all lived there under welfare. Big mobs there! Yeah, but when I think about. Why did they take me away in the first place? Why didn't they just leave me there?

Findings indicate that mainstream education venues are often perceived as sites of confusion and challenge for participants that involve notions of regret and separation.

### Recent Professional Development Activities

'I just got told "Charlie, read this"; they didn't even ask me if I know how to read and write and stuff! It's scary, the first week. Where am I? What world is this? This is different world!' (Charles)

Participants were vocal regarding their disappointment with PMC training. Frustration with the IEO workplace induction process was palpable.

When asked about his induction, Jack responded indignantly with:

Well it wasn't an induction; it was like '*read this*' and they leave a big white folder with you! People give it to you who are busy doing their job and they say '*here, read that*' and when my supervisor had a little bit of time he comes and sits next to me and says '*we'll read the first chapter*' but he gets up and he's gone again! Nobody got time!

He settled himself and then continued in a quiet voice:

It's about being confident I suppose, but you'd rather you had someone sitting beside you can feed off. Yeah, I think one of the biggest things that's lacking in the IEOs is that for the first three months there is no basic training.

Charles reflected on his first weeks in the IEO role:

Yeah, I've really had no preparation, made mistakes here and there, bit of a struggle. It's a hard road once it gets out into the open war-zone, and then gets the confidence. At the early stage, I just wanted to walk out. Elders asked me to stay, I just want do something for the community. That sort of kept me going. Yeah, but I still struggle.

Richard frankly observed 'I really can't remember if there was actually a focussed induction to tell you the truth'. Margaret was emphatic that 'Everyone was busy. Everything was happening at different times. Yeah, everyone was busy and I was just sitting there bored watching the time'.

As a result of these negative experiences, participants declared universally that induction and workplace training could be best delivered by a more experienced IEO and in direct context with the new-start IEO's home community. Jack made a frank comparison with:

Like when I listen to another Indigenous person, sort of helps me. This mob here [Alice Springs regional office staff], non-Indigenous; they trying to tell me what to do and they speak too much. Their way, the way they speak every day. You know what I mean?

Strong feelings of abandonment and neglect were prevalent among all participants in terms of recent professional development activities. In the main, participants described their sense of abandonment in terms of lack of action from PMC at an organisational level. When asked if the high turnover of IEOs was related to lack of support from PMC, Richard confidently remarked 'Yep! Guaranteed, that's my thought of it!'

Significantly, three study participants resigned during final months of the interview phase of our research.

### Adherence to Cultural Practice

They have their law! Highly respected things, so if you choose you can go outside, then comeback have a look and like that, it's hard to just get your swag and get out of there. No you can't, especially being an IEO, how can we engage to them if we disrespecting their law? Breaking their law! How we do it? (William)

Adherence to correct cultural practice and protocol was an important issue for all participants. Margaret was adamant that 'They are the three – sorry [ritual grieving], funeral and ceremony. No matter even if you are related or not, you have to do it. That's culture; that shows respect!'

Charles trembled with emotion as he declared 'John, you got to understand that hard to do this job culture way because of skin poison [familial exclusion relationship]. We sometimes can't go through [engage with] our mother-in-laws, like culture way'. Findings clearly evidence that the IEOs strive on a daily basis to maintain their cultural credibility while simultaneously attempting to satisfy the requirements of their job.

Richard readily identified the worth of mainstream training while maintaining traditional cultural values as key elements in solving this dilemma:

Now it's all about education. It's the new era I suppose. It's about getting skills for work while holding our culture strong and learning Western style to make it in the real world. I suppose in that sense, because you got customary law and you got Western law. How do we balance it? And the values

are different too. Whitefella values are all about money and property. Aboriginal values are about family and caring and sharing.

Participant comment brings sharp focus to the profound challenges faced by IEOs operating in two very different cultural realities. IEOs are employed as cultural experts in a workplace devoid of a full understanding regarding the practical demands of maintaining cultural credibility. The IEOs' cultural expertise is not of an academic or ethereal nature, nor does the IEOs' cultural knowledge and credibility operate in any form of temporal or geographic isolation.

### Fear of Losing Community Respect

We have to be aware at all times; we have to carry our identity at all times. Cultural, sometimes confusing; but confusing you know that meeting when someone spoke up and got started you know. It's hard! You want to ask so many questions but you got boundaries, you know. When you do have the opportunity and it just slips out of your mouth, you get in trouble! (Margaret)

Findings indicate clearly that adherence to correct cultural protocol will usually override the IEO's personal choices and preferences. Patricia explained excitedly:

Yes, yes! We want to ask questions, but there are boundaries. Sometimes I want to say something, or you know the one that brought that thing. You hardly hear it and then all of sudden it starts out a question and then turns out a disagreement.

Richard was adamant that:

It's about holding on to that trust from community and about that respect about who you are in that community, and that's a big one! You can't just let that go. If you let that go, well; you may as well not be an IEO!

The participants' fear of losing the respect and support of community appears to have two dimensions. First, participants are concerned that loss of respect from community will prevent them operating effectively in their IEO role. Charles neatly defined the vital importance of maintaining community respect with:

It's really hard, miss out [on following correct protocol] and then maybe a couple weeks or months you got to, you know, tell them at a community meeting, they'll sort of block their ears, you know. Because you missed out on funeral, pretty hard to send the government message.

Second, some participants (particularly the female IEOs) voiced concern regarding the possible repercussions from community for perceived breaches in following correct cultural protocols. According to Margaret, 'I need to put my daughter first if anything happened to my daughter, I'd get punished for it, tribal way; tribal way. I'd get punished because I should put my daughter first!'

### Importance of Respectful Relationships

'We cannot separate ourselves, get our little swag and move it out in another spot. We have to respect the land and the people'. (Margaret)

Directly associated with importance of following correct cultural protocols are notions of showing respect to maintain cultural credibility. Both female and male participants made frequent mention of the importance of respectful relationships. Margaret was adamant that 'I need to respect their [ways]; like Aboriginal people are related to everyone, that everyone is connected. And the way you show respect, you attend sorry and you attend cultural initiations'. Both Margaret and Patricia mentioned the gender-specific requirements of maintaining respectful relationships. Margaret sagely reflected on the hierarchical nature of Aboriginal society with 'Ceremony? Well you have to act on it. They're the boss. People get identified as the senior lady. So you got to listen'.

Interestingly, community elders exert strong influence in the IEO selection process. Jack and William stated confidently that they were essentially following the directions of elders in applying for the IEO role. Margaret, Pat, Charles and Richard claimed the support of their respective community elders was pivotal in their decision to become IEOs. Adherence to cultural practice in terms of respectful relationships can translate to significant influence from elders in the IEO recruitment process. The elders choose appropriate IEO candidates by processes which are outside the official recruitment rounds and often beyond the notice of the AG. Clearly, IEOs need to carefully assess all social situations for fear of acting in a culturally inappropriate manner and causing offense. Much of the workplace tension experienced by IEOs may be generated by their need to observe strict cultural protocols while performing in the IEO role.

### Improved Understanding of Aboriginal People

When a [non-Indigenous] woman come up to us, sit really close and all that sort of thing. We feel shame. Yeah, makes us feel uncomfortable. When they stand close, and I don't like that. They just being friendly and I know that, but still makes me feel uncomfortable. (Jack)

Participants claim that PMC has limited understanding of Aboriginal people living in the remote communities of the NT. This is a surprising outcome given the time and effort allocated by the AG for the purpose of resetting the relationship with remote area Aboriginal people post-NTER (AG, 2009). Jack angrily recalled a difficult situation as new-start IEO:

Some people like non-indigenous; they don't understand it! Just like a couple of weeks back when I first started. I got two, like mother-in-law working at the school. I told certain people like here in Alice 'I can't go near that school! Not just yet, not until I send my partner over to the school'. They sort

of shaken [*sic*] their head, think it's ridiculous. They don't understand how serious it is! There's ways around it, you just got to wait for the right time.

Jack commented that this lack of understanding was a major issue for him and caused him to question his decision to become an IEO. Patricia shared that she was 'shy and scared' during her first days as an IEO due to lack of adherence to correct cultural protocol by her non-Indigenous male supervisor. William wearily described his constant efforts to provide others with information regarding culture with:

Yep, that's like every job I worked in, like the clinic. I was explaining it to the CEO of the clinic and then I moved to the shop. Just the same, with every job, I've asked my CEO to sit down and have a yarn and I explain it like through culture; so that they can know.

Participants also commented lack of understanding regarding correct cultural protocol may sometimes lead to their avoidance of workplace-based social networks. According to Wenger (1998), workplace skills and knowledge are developed principally through engagement in social networks within the workplace or 'Communities of Practice'. Typically, IEOs remain highly reliant on the powerful and familiar social networks operating in their home communities. The Communities of Practice already established within the PMC workplace are often confusing and threatening places for IEOs. Richard pleaded stridently for more sincere acknowledgment and acceptance of his culture with

And I was going to say not just understand; but accept! Well, you could put it right near acknowledge, I suppose. Generally accept! Not talk about it to an IEO and then walk away and talk different to their own group. It's all bullshit! It's an excuse! That's how it is.

Significantly, Biddle and Lahn (2016) also identified lack of cultural awareness within the APS as a reason for Indigenous employees leaving government.

### Traditional Teaching and Learning

We watch them, that's the way it's meant; to follow them if you're brother or cousin. Go hunting and they show you, just watch them. I used to look at porcupine track and I thought they was walking backwards [laughter] ... walking funny and they showed me and I learnt. (Jack)

William joyously recounted childhood hunting experiences with his uncles: 'They show you and tell you which way to go through, like to cut a meat, like kangaroo'. Charles commented that traditional teaching and learning also enforces the gender-specific elements of community life: 'No women go over to that area over there. You can go yourself, but can't take family or take woman'. William reinforced this with 'When I first started off, I was following my grandfather. He told me like; I had to take all the woman and kids this way. This way is all right'.

Jack happily recounted his stepfather teaching him to fence:

Sometime that old man get cranky! [laughter]. Yelling and swearing at you, like I'm talking about my old stepfather. He start swearing and yelling at you. I'm talking about, like not traditional stuff. I'm talking about different, like I'm working straining wire or something. I remember when I was boy he was teaching me these things, important things.

All participants talked freely about their traditional learning experiences. Traditional teaching and learning activities occurred in direct context with community life and are regarded by participants as pleasant social events.

### Discussion

Findings reaffirm that IEOs are products of dynamic traditional cultures and their world view is framed largely by custom and sociocultural obligation and need. IEOs tend to self-identify in context with their home community and are highly cognisant of correct protocols and the boundaries of their cultural agency. The literature shows that traditional Indigenous culture meets with the Australian mainstream at a complex and challenging site (Byrnes, 1993; Christie, 2006; Harris, 1984; Yunupingu, 1989) and IEOs operate at this fraught interface constantly in both community and workplace.

Extensive investments in time and effort by the IEOs are required to maintain their cultural agency and study findings provide strong support for Richard's claim that 'IEOs are walking in two worlds, finding balance'. The IEO role has a dichotomous nature due to workplace demands competing and sometimes clashing with participants' sociocultural obligations and needs. This dichotomy often generates feelings of tension and confusion for IEOs.

Findings also indicate PMC has limited appreciation of the relevance and currency of the sociocultural demands and geographic limits in cultural agency affecting IEOs. This lack of understanding is a source of frustration and angst for IEOs and may impact strongly on their productivity and ability to progress within the APS. New-start IEOs are not provided with workplace inductions sufficient in preparing them to effectively address the cross-cultural, technical and administrative aspects of their role. Lack of appropriate capacity development and support measures by PMC generated perceptions of abandonment and frustration among study participants.

IEOs are unique within the APS and their personal priorities and developmental needs are different from the mainstream. The PMC workplace is often unfamiliar, confusing and culturally challenging for IEOs. As a result, the Communities of Practice already established within PMC are either avoided or underutilised by IEOs. IEOs have a preference for training that is of a practical nature, aligned to Aboriginal learning styles and contextualised directly with their on-community



workplace role. Findings indicate IEOs are orientated towards on-the-job training with strong idiographic elements and incorporating mentoring activities with a trainer they feel comfortable working with. Participants universally agree that their capacity-development needs will be most effectively addressed with visits to their home community by an experienced IEO providing informal workplace training. Findings also show that future on-community workplace training for IEOs should incorporate modelling, mentoring and coaching as significant elements.

## Recommendations

A range of focussed support and development strategies for IEOs is urgently required in the PMC workplace. The success of these strategies is dependent on attitudinal and operational change within PMC at both organisation and regional level. Transition to new organisational thinking and approaches should be guided by the comments and advice of IEOs through representations to senior management by PMC's Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander Employee Network (ATSIEN). ATSIEN is responsible for the development of cultural capability within PMC and provides guidance, peer support and mentoring opportunities for Indigenous employees. It is a two-way communication mechanism between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees and other PMC staff. This line of communication will assist IEOs build improved relationships within PMC and collectively influence organisation thinking.

The recommended process of organisational transition and IEO representation through ATSIEN constitutes an effective long-term approach. In terms of immediate action, PMC can provide much needed support for IEOs with appropriate training. Findings provide unequivocal evidence that such training should manifest on-community, incorporate Aboriginal learning styles and contextualise directly with the IEO's workplace. Training should be delivered informally by a senior IEO while 'on the job' in the trainee IEO's home community and contain many of the elements found in a traditional apprenticeship. Collins, Brown and Holum describe 'Cognitive Apprenticeship' as a model of instruction that goes back to apprenticeship but incorporates elements of schooling and works to make thinking visible (1991, p. 1). Collins, Brown, and Holum (1991) propose that Cognitive Apprenticeships exploit the social characteristics of learning environments through use of situated learning, Communities of Practice, intrinsic motivation and student cooperation. In our view, these characteristics resonate strongly with the learning styles exposed in study findings and can be used with great benefit in developing on-community training strategies for IEOs. Jack gives voice to this idea with 'We watch them; that's the way it's

meant to be, to follow them if you're brother or cousin. Go hunting and they show you, just watch them.' (p. 27)

In remote Barkly and Central Australia, informal apprenticeship remains the natural way for young community members to become expert in hunting game or gathering bush-tucker. Apprenticeship is an inherently social method of learning where the novice is assisted by an expert practitioner. According to Dennen, there are many commonalities between the traditional and Cognitive Apprenticeship:

A cognitive apprenticeship is much like a trade apprenticeship, with learning that occurs as experts and novices interact socially while focused on completing tasks; the focus as implied in the name, is in developing cognitive skills through participating in authentic learning experiences. (2004, p. 814)

Although mainstream education practice is effective in organising and conveying large amounts of factual and conceptual knowledge, 'standard pedagogical practices render key aspects of expertise invisible to students' (Collins et al., 1991, p. 1). Generally, Australian mainstream education practice is driven by rigid curricula and focused on empirical processes designed to solve hypothetical problems. As such, this type of schooling often ignores the strategies and reasoning used by experts to acquire knowledge and apply their skills in completing real-life tasks. This divide between the hypothetical and situational in the workplace is bridged historically by organic emergence of Communities of Practice and informal use of Cognitive Apprenticeships.

Cognitive Apprenticeship is a significant move towards the synthesis of schooling and apprenticeship. Features in traditional apprenticeship such as situated learning, scaffolding, mentoring and coaching are shared with Cognitive Apprenticeship. Collins et al. pose three important differences between traditional apprenticeship and Cognitive Apprenticeship. In summary, these are as follows:

1. In traditional apprenticeship, the process to complete a task is observable. It is easy for a novice to watch expert hunters stalk, kill and butcher prey. In Cognitive Apprenticeship, the expert's thinking needs to be made visible to the novice and the novice's thinking must be made visible to the expert.
2. In traditional apprenticeship, learning is situated mainly in the workplace and the novice has powerful reasons for engaging in process to complete a task. The novice is motivated to work and learn because of constant exposure to the skill of the expert and value of the finished product. But in workplace training, experts are usually working with curricula content quite different from what most workers confront in their lived reality. The challenge in Cognitive Apprenticeship is to situate the abstract tasks of the curriculum in a context that makes sense to the novice.

3. It is unlikely for novices in traditional apprenticeship to encounter situations where significant transfer of skills is necessary. Put simply, the novice carpenter does not need to know anything about plumbing or concreting. However, modern organisations typically require employees to transfer learnt skills over to a variety of workplace contexts. This requirement is recognised in Cognitive Apprenticeship with the expert presenting specific skills to the novice while also increasingly varying the contexts where these skills are useful. Cognitive Apprenticeship helps novices generalise their skills and learn how to apply their knowledge in a variety of workplace situations.

According to Lave and Wenger (1991), the concepts of 'situatedness' and 'legitimate peripheral participation' are core to effective Cognitive Apprenticeship. Situated learning occurs as a natural outcome when the novice actively participates in a task in an authentic setting. In the case of IEOs, an authentic setting constitutes performing routine IEO duties in the context of their own individual on-community workplace. The Cognitive Apprenticeship expert can be a senior IEO who visits regularly to assist with capacity development by making learning visible to the novice.

Dennen and Burner (2007) describe legitimate peripheral participation as essentially a label validating observation as a learning activity. The notion of observation as valid educational experience is a common feature in traditional Aboriginal teaching and learning. Out bush, there is absolutely no pressure to contribute in learning activities and the novice is completely comfortable gaining initial experience of a process or action by watching silently from the periphery.

Cognitive Apprenticeship aligns with both Aboriginal learning styles and the use of Communities of Practice as a social learning instrument. The strong elements of mentoring, modelling and fading resident in Cognisant Apprenticeship have powerful synergies with traditional ways of learning on-community. We recommend that a pilot training programme based on the notion of Cognitive Apprenticeship is implemented for all Barkly IEOs at earliest convenience. This trial can take the form of an 'IEO cadetship' and be used as means to develop capacity and equip IEOs to train the next wave of their new-start colleagues.

## Conclusion

This study developed insight regarding the lived reality of IEOs and produced outcomes useful in creating strategies to enhance their professional development. The scope of the study was limited to six participant IEOs working in regions representing only a small portion of the wealth of traditional cultures existent in remote NT. IEOs suffer duress due to PMC's limited understanding of the cultural dimensions of on-community lived reality. The

unfamiliarity of the PMC workplace environment is also source of concern for IEOs. The tension experienced by IEOs has constrained their ability to progress within the APS and has limited their contribution to the AG's developmental measures in remote NT. Previous professional development activities for IEOs have been largely misguided and ineffective.

Creation of an IEO reference group incorporated within the ATSIEN organisational structure should be viewed as priority action by PMC. This group will be ideally placed to advocate IEO interests and guide PMC in future IEO development activities. Although this study received PMC's full support and served to expose workplace issues from an IEO perspective, constraints involving time and resources led to a narrow focus in the research effort. High-quality education research is now required to gain fuller understanding of professional development requirements for IEOs. Future research effort should make sufficient allowances for time and be adequately resourced. Most importantly, all future educational research relating to IEOs should be conducted in partnership with an IEO reference group and with the support and guidance of ATSIEN.

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### About the Authors

**John Mason** is student researcher working under supervision with the Faculty of Education, Monash University. John has contributed to social development in remote NT communities for the past 20 years as both an educator and programme manager. His research interest embraces exploration of Indigenous learning styles using qualitative approaches.

**Jane Southcott** is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education, Monash University. Her research foci are twofold. She explores community music, culture, ageing and engagement in the arts employing both a qualitative, phenomenological approach and quantitative strategies. Her other research field is historical, particularly concerning the development of the music curriculum in Australia, America and Europe. She is a narrative historian and much of her research is biographical.