Indigenous Australian women’s leadership: stayin’ strong against the post-colonial tide

NEREDA WHITE

In this article, I reflect on my experiences as an Indigenous woman researcher coming to grips with colonialism through a post-colonialism lens. I also discuss a study which examines the leadership journey of a group of Indigenous Australian women. The research, which includes an auto-ethnographic approach, was guided by an Indigenous worldview and Indigenous research methodologies, and aimed to honour cultural dimensions such as Indigenous knowledge systems and ways of being. Indigenous women today are attempting to make better lives for themselves, their families and communities by becoming educated and developing their careers and leadership; however, they are thwarted in their endeavours by barriers such as racism, sexism, socio-economic and educational disadvantage, which are the direct result of colonization. These obstructions continue to shape and control the daily lives and futures of Indigenous people in contemporary Australian society.

This article has two dimensions: the first justifies the use of auto-ethnography to frame the article and position my understanding of post-colonialism. The second section focuses on the specific study with a group of Indigenous women whose career stories highlighted important issues in post-colonial discourse.

Traditional research approaches frown on the personal involvement of the researcher, emphasizing the potential to bias or skew the research. However, more recently, the researcher’s personal experience has received greater acceptance as a legitimate research method and one that enriches rather than limits the research process.

Auto-ethnography, a research method which draws on the author/researcher’s own experience to understand a phenomenon, is particularly pertinent for marginalized groups, such as Indigenous peoples, whose oral-based cultures include storytelling as an important feature of passing on cultural and historical knowledge. It is also relevant for Indigenous researchers who are emerging as ‘speakers’ for their own people and a liberating tool for correcting versions of history which have been distorted by colonialism. For Aboriginal people, Collinwood-Whittick (2000) argues that their
biographies are important ‘vehicles of a forceful oppositional discourse’ which challenge the dominant white view. Furthermore, Collingwood-Whit-tick concludes that:

By exposing the hidden truth of ordinary Aboriginal lives, autoethnographers give the lie to the dehumanizing misrepresentations of their lives that colonialist discourse constructed. (p. 125)

In a similar vein, Wall (2006) writes that auto-ethnography allows:

the questioning of the dominant scientific paradigm, the making of room for other ways of knowing, and the growing emphasis on the power of research to change the world and create a space for the sharing of unique, subjective, and evocative stories of experience that contribute to our understanding of the social world and allow us to reflect on what could be different because of what we learned. (p. 3)

Auto-ethnographers often start ‘with a story about themselves, explaining their personal connections to the project, or by using personal knowledge to help them in the research process’ (Ellis and Bochner 2000: 741). I have adopted this approach.

Like other Indigenous researchers (Herbert 2003, Moreton-Robinson 2000, Phillips 2003), I locate myself within a cultural framework which establishes my relationship to land and kin. I am an Aboriginal woman of the Gooreng Gooreng people of the Bundaberg area of Queensland, the traditional lands of my maternal grandmother, Lena Horton. However, Granny Lena, her brothers and sisters and her mother, Granny Clarke, my great grandmother, spent many years incarcerated on the Cherbourg Aboriginal mission near Murgon, north-east of Brisbane, the capital of Queensland, Australia.

Like other women of my generation, I was brought up to be ‘a strong black woman’ in the example of my maternal ancestors. I began my working life as an 11-year-old child picking tobacco alongside my parents and siblings, spending many weekends and school holidays doing fieldwork to supplement the family income. After I left school, I became a public servant and later, as a mature-age student with young children, trained as an early childhood teacher. Today I am the National Director of the Centre for Indigenous Education and Research, at Australian Catholic University in Brisbane, where I have been supporting Indigenous students on their educational journeys in higher education for over 18 years.

The terms ‘colonialism’, ‘post-colonialism’ and post-colonial theory are fairly new to me due to my recent entry into academic scholarship. This article is as much about my coming to terms with these concepts as it is about the women whose stories were included in my doctoral study. In the mid 1950s, when I was born, Australia did not recognize the citizenship rights of all its peoples. It was not until the 1967 referendum that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were able to claim the freedom of citizenship rights and responsibilities privileged to other Australians. I remember growing up in a country town in a housing commission area designated only for ‘black’ people. Some of my mother’s family lived in the bush across the road in shacks they had constructed out of materials often scrounged from the local dump. We were very poor and relied on handouts and Dad’s ability to get a few days’ work here and there, and on his ‘veggie’ garden, to feed our family of 10.
However, the poverty, though difficult, was not the most insidious element we faced living as we did. Racism was part of our daily lives. We accepted having to stand in line while others were served ahead of us, the name-calling and being ‘knocked back’ from jobs, as if we had no say in matter. It was not until many years later, when I went to university, that I came to realize the power of the historically-constructed forces which were responsible for creating hardship, internalized violence/oppression and despair in the lives of Aboriginal families like mine.

When I was going to school in the 1960s and 1970s, we studied ‘imperialism’, and spoke about ‘penal colonies’ and ‘settlers’ to describe the annexation of other countries by empire-building nations such as England. The Australian history books told us that Captain James Cook ‘discovered’ Australia in 1770, and that the First Fleet arrived in 1788 to ‘settle’ the new colony. We heard many stories about the brave pioneers and explorers who fought insurmountable odds, including marauding ‘natives’, to establish a thriving colony, and later the great nation of Australia. This glamorized version of Australian history failed to record the stories of the near genocide of Aboriginal people and the ill-treatment of convicts, Chinese gold-workers and ‘kanakas’.1 The impact of colonization was not discussed except to suggest that the ‘settling’ of Australia was a good thing, bringing wealth and status to a country that had previously been inhabited, though not owned, by primitive bands of Aboriginal tribes who wandered aimlessly across the continent. I remember how embarrassed I was in class, when we talked about Aboriginal people being ‘primitive savages’, especially when my ‘white’ class mates would look at me and giggle.

It has only been in recent years that the history fed to generations of young Australians has been challenged to dispel the myth of a peaceful ‘settling’ of Australia. Yet despite the growing body of evidence, there are still many Australians who cling to the distorted historical version of the engagement between Indigenous people and the early ‘settlers’, and remain uncomfortable with the use of the word ‘invasion’. Similarly, the Australian nation has been divided about the need to say ‘sorry’ to Indigenous Australians2 for their past treatment including the removal of Aboriginal children, an act responsible for creating the ‘Stolen Generations’.3 On February 13, 2008, the newly-elected Prime Minister of Australia, the honourable Kevin Rudd, on behalf of all Australians, made the apology that previous governments had failed to. This act signalled a new era in which Australia’s past could be viewed through a different lens, and laid a real foundation for Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians to move forward together without the denial and resistance which has part of the past 220 years.

Colonialism, post-colonialism and Aboriginal women

According to Loomba, colonialism is the ‘conquest and control of other people’s land and goods’ (2005: 8). But it is more than just the economic expansion by an imperialist power. It is the restructuring of all aspects of life—physical, social, spiritual, cultural and political into a framework
which gives knowledge and power to the colonizers. Porter (2006) saw colonialism as:

the process and material effects of appropriation of territory by a foreign power, and the construction of a racialised hierarchy of difference within and through that appropriation, such that the myriad, locally-constituted relationships between coloniser and colonised become embedded within structures of economy and power, as well as embedded in frames of meaning. (p. 383)

Colonialism, though experienced in diverse forms across the globe, reshaped the lives of Indigenous people, drawing them into complex relationships, restructuring their economies, and leaving them subject to the legacies of oppression from that time to the present (Loomba 2005). Countries such as Australia are perceived as ‘settler colonies’, a description that is heavily refuted by Aboriginal writers such as Moreton-Robinson (2003), who argues that Australia was never settled but rather invaded. The term ‘settler-invader’ is considered by some writers to be a more historically accurate term (Johnston and Lawson 2000).

The term ‘post-colonial’ is one that is difficult for the novice to understand, since there is debate about when ‘post’ started. The ‘post’ implies that it comes after colonialism and that it is ‘matter of the past’ (Brewster 2008: 1). This suggests a ‘passing of an historical period and of colonizing consciousness’ (Brewster 2008: 1). However, in their classic text, *The Empire Writes Back*, Ashcroft *et al.* (2002: 2) use the term post-colonial to refer to ‘all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day’. Using this definition, a number of writers (e.g. Woollacott 2003, Moreton-Robinson 2004, Porter 2006) suggest that there is no post-colonial period or state in the Australian context, but that colonialism continues as an on-going oppression in the lives of Indigenous Australians, who remain dominated and marginalized on land stolen from them by the British.

Since the 1970s, the field of post-colonial studies has allowed us the opportunity to develop new understandings about ‘power relations and hierarchies’ in Australian history (Woollacott 2003) that have worked to subjugate and silence Indigenous women. Furthermore, it seeks to disrupt conceptions of knowledge and power that continue to dominate contemporary society and culture (Hickling-Hudson *et al.* 2004). Australian women’s history that is written without a post-colonial framework is a history which ignores the impact of colonialism on Indigenous women. To understand the latter, Indigenous women must be allowed to speak for themselves, tell their own stories and contribute to a different truth about the relationships between themselves and the ‘white’ colonizers. The role for educational institutions such as universities as agents of post-colonial education is to bring Indigenous research and knowledge into the academy, ‘raising Indigenous voices, narratives and visions as foundational to change’ (Battiste 2004: 9).

**Indigenous women in contemporary society**

In respect to Indigenous Australian people’s health and well-being, it is well known that we experience greater disadvantage than any other group in the
Australian population. Statistical evidence confirms our poorer health, lower life expectancy, lower levels of employment, and greater rates of incarceration. Our children do not achieve the same levels of success in education and training and many of our people continue to live in communities that are deprived of adequate housing and sanitation and are plagued by social problems such as family violence, drug and alcohol dependency. The heaviest burden of surviving in such difficult circumstances is often borne by the women, who, despite the daily struggles, have stayed strong. Some have noted how:

Black women’s survival, cultural retention and ownership of their histories in the spite of the humiliations and cruelties which have dogged them down the generations, are ultimately a cause for quiet pride and enduring strength. (Saunders and Evans 1992: 6)

There is evidence that prior to European occupation, Aboriginal women were economically secure and played important roles within traditional Aboriginal society. They were acknowledged as the main food providers because of their gathering skills. They cared for their kin, taught the children, practiced healing and contributed to the spiritual lives of their communities (Gale 1978, Brock 1989, White 1998, Bin-Sallik 2000). There was a division of labour according to gender, but women’s roles were not subordinate (Behrendt 1993) but complementary (Bin-Sallik 2000). As such, they were valued members of their groups. This seemingly healthy and productive lifestyle came to an abrupt end with the destructive forces of colonisation. Dispossession of lands, incarceration, genocide, the removal of children, inhumane treatment and the pressures of assimilation, racism and sexism have consequently robbed Indigenous women of their rightful place as leaders in Australian society.

Aboriginal women’s place in traditional life was not understood or acknowledged by the newcomers, who tried to accommodate Aboriginal women’s status within European patriarchal frames of reference. Accordingly, Aboriginal women’s roles in traditional society were misinterpreted or distorted due to a male bias in early reporting that ‘rendered the Aboriginal woman invisible and subordinate’ (Choo 1993: 82). Norman Tindale, an anthropologist who constructed the well known map of Aboriginal Australia, divided the land into categories according to the practice of male circumcision (Brock 1989, Behrendt 1993). Consequently, Aboriginal women’s significance in traditional society was devalued (Behrendt 1993) and Aboriginal women were considered like European women to be of inferior status. This, together with a belief that Aboriginal women were of low sexual morals, led to a generally negative view of Aboriginal women ( Richardson 1993, White 1998, Moreton-Robinson 2000).

Aboriginal women have been forced to endure a history in the post-contact period that was dominated by abuse, exploitation, hardship, poverty, racism and discrimination (Choo 1993, Moreton-Robinson 2000). Under Protection and later Assimilation policies, Aboriginal women found that their traditional roles evaporated. Since many were removed from their traditional lands and relocated on missions and reserves, they could no longer practise their daily food gathering exercises. Instead, basic rations of
tea, flour and salt were provided on the mission. Aboriginal women’s parenting responsibilities were taken from them, as their children were either placed in children’s dormitories or sent away to institutions and foster homes (Moreton-Robinson 2000). As educators, they were replaced at the mission schools by teachers. They were forbidden to speak their languages and engage in other cultural practices. Consequently, this made it difficult for them to pass on their language, stories, art, dance, customs, marriage arrangements, healing and spiritual practices. On the reserves, Aboriginal women were frequently sexually abused by white male managers and traded for sexual favours with other officials (Behrendt 1993). Aboriginal women and girls sent away to work often returned pregnant by their former masters (Behrendt 2000, Blake 2001).

Despite a history of colonial oppression, a number of studies (Richardson 1993, Gool 1997, White 1998, Bruno 2003) have highlighted the strength and resilience of Aboriginal women. They noted their pride in identity and determination to bring about change for the better for their families and communities (Bin-Sallik 2000, Bruno 2003). That strength is best described as being grounded in cultural and spiritual connections, sharing and family as Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann explains:

We had no money. Nature was our bank. We looked after its capital and drew on its interest. Our social organisation and ties were, and still are, so strong. They underpin our daily lives. Our extended family was the human side of our world. It gave us support. We developed as a people by interacting within that family. Sharing also took place at a deeper level than the food and material products of our skills. Sharing was so strong on the spiritual level. There were also the sensitive and emotional levels of sharing with a language of silence. We were never afraid of silence. (Ungunmerr-Baumann 2000: 167)

However, the cultural identity of Aboriginal women has also ‘suffered a series of crises’ brought about by a history of oppression and perpetuated by racism and negative stereotyping (Gool 1997: 24). Accounts of conditions and treatment of workers found that most Aboriginal workers were ‘treated like dirt’ (Blake 2001: 130) or ‘little better than animals’ (p. 31). The impact of such treatment has had a permanent effect on Aboriginal people, leaving some with a deep sense of ‘shame’ (Gool 1997: 23) and questioning their own ‘worth, identity and sense of belonging’ (Bruno 2003: 63).

**Oppression from within our own communities**

Aboriginal women’s self worth has also been impacted by the oppression we experience within our own communities, a situation which occurs when colonized people take on the mindset of the colonizers and begin to oppress each other (Bruno 2003). Aboriginal people oppressing each other, as a direct result of colonization, has taken several forms, one being oppressive forms of leadership and control as exhibited in community management and community organizations. For example, this may occur when individuals or specific families gain control of community resources and use their power for their own personal gain and that of their family members (Pearson 2000, Appo 2003). Pearson (2000) concludes that the manipulation and
corruption of Aboriginal values and relationships has resulted in a system which involves exploitation and manipulation and a flawed system of governance in Aboriginal communities, a feature of which is the ‘concentration of power and resources in certain families and denial of power and resources to other families’ (p. 48). A consequence of nepotism and families feuding is that much energy is wasted in disputes that prevent communities and individuals from moving forward (Pearson 2000).

Another disturbing feature is the oppression perpetuated against Indigenous women by Indigenous men in the form of domestic violence. Family violence has been linked to ‘disempowerment with its roots in colonization’ and dispossession (Aboriginal Women’s Taskforce into Domestic Violence 2000, Cooper and Morris 2005), so that ‘turning the pain inwards’ or towards those closest occurs as a result of having no recourse, grieving or healing processes to deal with oppression (Phillips 2003). Whether because of shame or fear of reprisal, Indigenous women often do not report or discuss family violence and continue to remain silent victims. Consequently, domestic violence undermines women’s ability to reach their potential and participate fully in employment, careers, educational and leadership opportunities.

### Racism, sexism and Indigenous women

Since white contact, Indigenous Australians have experienced extensive and persistent racism from white Australians (Martin 2003). It is still deeply embedded in Australian education, legal, political and social structures (Moreton-Robinson 2003, Hollingsworth 2006) and pervades all aspects of Indigenous people’s lives. Furthermore, the evidence suggests that both racism and sexism continue to be formidable structural barriers to the advancement of Indigenous women.

Gendered racism has been especially manifest in the sexual and physical domination of, in particular, Aboriginal women from the beginning of white settlement (Jebb and Haebich 1992, Pettman 1992, Huggins 1994, Moreton-Robinson 2003). In this tyranny, Aboriginal women did not find support from white women, who were often more brutal bosses than their husbands, inflicting inhumane treatment on Aboriginal women in domestic service (Huggins 1994, Ward 1987). This ‘gendered racial oppression’ which privileged white women and subjugated Indigenous women to the lesser role in Australian society (Moreton-Robinson 2000: 24) has made it difficult for Indigenous women today to have a sisterhood with white women, who are seen as contributing to their historical oppression.

In addition to experiencing sexism in the wider society, Indigenous women must also cope with sexism from within their own communities. Black male chauvinism and the stress of attack from within their own group is a very difficult experience for Indigenous women (Huggins 1994), as Aboriginal magistrate, Pat O’Shane explains:

> It is not easy being a black woman at the top of a white bureaucracy. The hardest part has been dealing with chauvinist males (mostly black) who are threatened by a woman having this much power. (O’Shane in Huggins 1991: 8).
Indigenous women’s leadership

In traditional Aboriginal societies, leadership and governance were embedded in The Dreaming, a spiritual framework which determined complex kinship systems, social, economic and political structures. Authority and decision-making were exercised according to role, age and skill, with particular regard for the wisdom of the Elders. However, this was severely disrupted by the British invasion and annexation of Aboriginal lands. Aboriginal people’s leadership roles were stripped from them and it was not until the 1967 referendum that citizenship rights, including the rights to self-management and self-determination, were returned. Some Indigenous leaders would argue, however, that the hand-over process, particularly on former missions and reserves, did not include training in management and leadership.

Noel Pearson, Indigenous lawyer and Director of the Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership, considers that a major challenge facing Indigenous community recovery is that current models of leadership which have dominated governance in Indigenous communities have ‘arisen from the colonial experience and the experience of institutional life in the reserves’ (Pearson 2000: 49). Consequently, strong Indigenous leadership is critical to the restoration of Indigenous communities, which continue to be troubled by deep-rooted social, health and economic problems.

Moreover, Pearson (2000) argues that ‘central to the recovery and empowerment of Aboriginal society will be the restoration of Aboriginal values and Aboriginal relationships—which have their roots in our traditional society’ (p. 20). Indigenous women’s leadership must be part of that vision.

The study

Two principles were important considerations in the conduct of the research reported here: first, was my commitment to undertaking authentic culturally-based research and, second, how I would conduct myself as an Indigenous researcher.

Indigenous people argue that they are the most researched group in the world (Gower 2004, Rigney 1997, Smith 1999, Fredericks 2008) and that that quantum of research has not provided positive outcomes for themselves and their communities. Much previous research conducted has been intrusive, often based on scientific testing and quantitative analysis, and often undertaken without permission, understanding or awareness of those being researched (Smith 1999, Fredericks 2008). Feedback to Aboriginal communities has not been transparent and benefits to Aboriginal communities questionable.

Research on and about Indigenous people has been inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism (Smith 1999, Phillips 2003)—the ‘colonial analogy’ that likens the relationship between the researcher and the researched to that of oppressor and oppressed (Ladner 1987). Colonial history is believed to have played a significant part in constructing dominant
research epistemologies and methodological practices (Rigney 2001). Furthermore, it is argued that ‘racialised research structures’ (Rigney 2001) have contributed to the oppression of colonised people, so that research has been ‘very much a colonial discourse’ (Martin, as cited in Wilson 2003: 164). Ironically, the academy has also raised consciousness of that oppression, in what Rigney (2001) terms the ‘journey of contradiction’ (p. 8). It is evident that there must be a new way to research the experiences of ‘black’ people that takes account of the socio-historical context in which their lives have been constructed. It also must be underpinned by Indigenous world views, Indigenous knowledge systems and ways of gathering and sharing information (Steinhauer 2002, Wilson 2003) to ‘describe the experiences and knowledge systems of peoples outside the dominant paradigm(s)’ (Ladson-Billings 2000: 260).

Some Indigenous researchers have invoked Indigenous knowledge and spirituality frameworks to dialogue with research such as Smith’s (1999) Kaupapa Maori Research, West’s (2000) Japanangka Teaching and Research Paradigm, and Atkinson’s (2000) use of Dadirri, the concept of ‘deep listening’ from the Ngangikurungkurr people of the Daly River area, in the Northern Territory. Although the terminology varies, what is consistent is that Indigenous researchers are preferring to use new approaches to framing Indigenous research which are an alternative to, and separate from the dominant or traditional research paradigms. Fredericks (2008: 113) articulates the concept of Pathway to empower Aboriginal women by the research process when stating:

I have created new ways for others to see Aboriginal women, new ways for Aboriginal women to have voices, share voices and more fully comprehend themselves and each other within a research process that they participated in developing.

Further, Fredericks (2008) speaks of how, as an Indigenous researcher, she has been transformed by the research process:

I know that I have come to understand myself more clearly as an Indigenous woman researcher, and that I have come to view myself in new ways. (p. 113)

This understanding of self as an Indigenous researcher and an Indigenous woman was also important to me.

**The Indigenous researcher insider/outside position**

In order to change the construction of Indigenous knowledge through Western-based research, Indigenous people must be more involved in ‘defining, controlling and owning’ research to ‘construct, re-discover and/or affirm their knowledge and cultures’ (Rigney 1997: 115). Being Indigenous does not automatically mean better representation; however, Indigenous researchers tend to be more aware and respectful of cultural matters and protocols (Rigney 1997). Certainly, a richer relationship occurs if the researcher understands the ‘cultural protocols, values, and beliefs of the Indigenous group with which they are studying’ (Steinhauer 2002: 172), as
it adds to the trust and confidence between the researcher and the research group. This can be useful in establishing rapport with the participants, sharing cultural meanings and understandings when interviewing, interpreting the data and crafting the story.

To tell these women’s stories, I sought advice and permission from my Elders, who assured me that I was the right person to do the research. I also had permission from my mother, a Gooreng Gooreng Elder, to tell my sister Roslyn’s story, and to include references to my mother’s life with my father, and information about my grandparents and great-grandparents.

To respect Indigenous ways of knowing and researching whilst interfacing with western research frameworks, methodologies, and methods, I used a mix of existing methodologies and Indigenous practices (Smith 1999). In particular, cultural aspects in the data collection, analysis and presentation of findings were considered pivotal to the integrity of the project. Ethically, the study was guided by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) research guidelines.

**Framing the study**

The purpose of the study was to explore how university-educated Indigenous women negotiate their career development and make sense of their employment, career, education and leadership experiences.

The participants in this study were 11 Indigenous female graduates from the Australian Catholic University in Brisbane. Nine were of Aboriginal descent and two were of Torres Strait Islander background. Their ages ranged from the early 20s to mid-50s. The women shared their experiences in focus groups and in-depth interviews. Focus groups were used because they are an important tool in feminist research, especially when working with women from marginalized groups and also because they draw on traditional cultural practices, such as women’s social gatherings and support networks. Women have used conversation historically as a way to cope with their oppression (Madriz 2000). Furthermore, focus groups provide participants with a safe environment where they can explore ideas, beliefs and attitudes together with others from the same socioeconomic, cultural and gender backgrounds (Madriz 2000). Consequently, group communication can be a ‘conscious-raising experience’ when women become aware that their individual problems are also structural, and shared by other women (p. 842) and when the topic has ‘social relevance and revolves around existing community and social relationships’ (Litosseliti 2003: 38).

From 1989 to 2005, there have been 75 Indigenous female graduates from Australian Catholic University McAuley. A letter of invitation detailing the research project was sent to each of these graduates inviting them to participate in a focus group. In the focus groups, women were encouraged to reflect on personal experiences and background factors, such as education, cultural factors, gender issues, barriers and supports, management of family and work commitments, and the influence of racism and sexism on their work, career, education and leadership experiences.
From the three focus groups that were conducted, five women were selected to provide an in-depth story of their lives and work. Their career narratives were constructed by maintaining the cultural tradition of oral stories that is central to both Aboriginal culture and Torres Strait Islander culture. As Fredericks (2008) noted:

The telling of stories is one way for Aboriginal women to explore the way in which Aboriginal women think about their history and to identify the effects of the events on their lives. (p. 21)

As each of the women’s stories unfolded, it allowed them to make meaning of their journeys and the challenges that they had overcome. This provided the women with an opportunity to speak about their struggles and achievements. Through their stories, the participants were able to name and express many of the emotions that were part of the journey:

- anger at the racism and stereotyping in education and work;
- humiliation from cruel remarks made by teachers;
- frustration and stress with coping with work, family and study;
- lack of confidence in their own abilities;
- pride in getting a university degree;
- love for family; and
- respect and admiration for other Indigenous women.

The richness of the data was enhanced by the words of the women themselves, as the quote below shows:

I want to make a difference. I want to do something to make a change. I want to get the kids out of the circle. I want my children to grow up happy in what they do and very proud of their Aboriginal heritage.

The women’s stories revealed an incredible inner strength which, through their spirit, allowed them to rise above many obstacles, both past and present.

**Indigenous women as workers**

The women talked about their difficulties in securing quality employment due to their lack of education and lack of opportunities available, the latter being closely linked to racist attitudes by potential employers. One woman, Maxine, recalled her mother commenting that “white” people who got lower marks’ than she did at school, won jobs in banks and other places, but ‘if you were black, you had to go out into the fields or do domestic duties’. Race appeared to be a determining factor in securing a job and the type of employment. Consequently, the women’s early experiences in the workforce were limited to unskilled or lay professional work. Although most of the women agreed that there are better employment opportunities available to Indigenous people today, there was concern that racism still existed in the workforce, particularly in the attitudes and behaviours of non-Indigenous ‘colleagues’.
Being in the workforce, the women faced many challenges in balancing their family, community and other responsibilities. The multiplicity of their roles often resulted in enormous stress. A major problem identified was the lack of appropriate childcare, especially finding an Indigenous childcare provider or a provider that had culturally affirming care. The inflexibility of employment was another barrier for women with young children, with few options for part-time jobs, job-sharing or being able to work at home. Consequently, many of the women chose jobs that fitted in with their families and available childcare, rather than ones that matched their skills and interest; thus confirming Alderton and Muller’s (2000) belief that women have a strong tendency to put their needs below those of others.

When I asked the women what motivated them to work, they talked about the desire to improve their lives, to have more money available and to improve their standing in the community. There was also a strong desire to help their communities by being an advocate for Indigenous issues. However, in taking on the latter role the women spoke about the enormous pressure they felt from their white colleagues to be the Indigenous expert and from the Indigenous community to be the Indigenous advocate/saviour. One said:

Being Indigenous in my work has placed a lot of emphasis on me being the Indigenous expert, especially in my teaching ... at that time, I was the only qualified Aboriginal teacher at (name withheld), and a lot of people would come and talk to me about perspectives and expect that I would have an answer. Often, with protocols, they would ask me about who they should be approaching in the community and other information, which I didn’t mind doing, because it showed respect ... but it was extra work.

As workers, the women found that even though it was not a requirement of their job, they expended a lot of energy trying to change racist attitudes in the work environment. They all agreed that cultural awareness is the key to combating racism and that sharing the history and cultures of Indigenous people fosters better relationships between groups. One of the women said:

With cultural awareness, racism stems from the fact that non-Indigenous Australians don’t know the true history. Once they learn how important our culture is to us, it breaks down the stereotypical things that non-Indigenous people believe about Indigenous people.

One woman recognized her own role as an agent of change in that process:

... to change the face of what is happening throughout the nation, we have to be part of that process ourselves. It’s about changing the attitudes, but it is also more. A lot of non-Indigenous people aren’t really aware of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture ... so it’s sharing and showing them what we are really about.

However, this woman firmly believed that racism is still prevalent and strongly embedded in Australian society suggesting that it is more subtle to avoid the anti-discrimination penalties. She said:

Every Indigenous person experiences racism in some form or another. But it is different today than what we experienced when we were younger ... it is more hidden, more guarded. Racism
was so out there when we were growing up, but they have learnt how to throw a blanket over it, or disguise it.

**Indigenous women’s careers**

From their discussion, it appeared that the women had a good understanding about the concept of career and how that differed from merely having a job. The career journey was described as a pathway to fulfilment of goals and dreams and to reaching their potential. The difficulties faced by Indigenous women in making this journey were regarded as being vastly different from the experiences of non-Indigenous women. This was a similar finding to the Johnson-Bailey and Tisdell (1998) study that found that ‘women of colour’ faced other structural inequalities than ‘those considered the norm’ (p. 88). The women in the current study believed that non-Indigenous women were able to better negotiate the system because of their longer career histories as a group. One said:

Some non-Indigenous families have generations of careers. Aboriginal people have generations of career unemployment.

The women felt that their career development was also impacted by the demands of work/life balance, which often meant that career decisions and choices were influenced by family, community and cultural factors. In addition, social issues such as domestic violence were acknowledged as keeping Indigenous women in subordinate roles, affecting their daily lives and desires for the future. One related how:

What we haven’t considered is the level of abuse that Indigenous women are suffering, which makes it difficult for them to develop their skills and abilities while this is going on … and even when you have women in careers, in the background there is still this stuff going on … because of history and how men have been allowed to behave. When Indigenous women get qualifications, those things may not change for them … and that would really impact on their ability to move into positions of leadership within community and organisations.

Racism, sexism and sabotage from other Indigenous people were difficult issues for the participants. Being Indigenous and being women created a double bind for them. They reported that they were often overlooked in favour of Indigenous men who might be less qualified for the position. More distressing for them was what the women had to say about the sabotage they experienced by other Indigenous people, including other Indigenous females. During the interviews, when talking about some of the incidents, a couple of women became visibly upset, confirming the deep hurt that they had felt in coming under attack from their own people. They also felt let down by organizations that were reluctant to address issues between ‘black’ co-workers. One said:

There is a distinct reluctance of systems to address poor performance and accountability of Indigenous workers—they just move them somewhere else. Therefore, the problems never get addressed. It is like they are afraid to address ‘black business’ because it is perceived to be racist, or else they see it as normal for black people to be bickering or fighting.
When situations remained unresolved and workers felt unsupported, some believed that they had no option than to walk away from their jobs: the stress of coping with these circumstances just became too much to bear. To enable them to develop careers, the women recognized that they require greater support, mentoring and networking. This needed to come from family, employers and other resource areas such as childcare.

**Indigenous women and university study**

When asked about their educational experiences prior to going to university, the women’s reflections were mostly quite negative. Several shared that they disliked school due to the environment, the curriculum and the negative attitudes and racism of teachers and other students. These experiences contributed to the women having a poor self concept and lack of confidence, confirming the literature and research (Crump 2001, Nelson 2002, Herbert 2003). Later, when they plucked up the courage to attend university, they said they had to work hard to overcome the mental barriers that had impacted on them since childhood. One woman commented on how difficult it is to overcome these negative feelings which are so deeply embedded in your psyche:

I think in my head I’ve had sentences that said … you can’t do that, you are really not that smart. This comes from school. I did remedial maths all the way through. It was like this thing … you were dumb.

However, once they began their education journey, they discovered things about themselves that gave them greater self-belief and encouragement, as expressed below:

Before I was educated … I always felt that I was always below everyone. These were the same feelings when I was going to school, when that teacher said I’d only be good for cleaning and craft things … I always had this low opinion of myself. However, with being educated and being able to work in this role, it gives me an identity of who I really am … so I am not that person I perceived myself to be … I’m not that person that teacher said I was.

Through this journey of self-discovery, the women found that they were able to grow intellectually, culturally and spiritually to the point that they could not always believe the changes they had made, or how far they had come. This affirms that a university qualification for Indigenous people is as much about personal growth, as it is about getting a degree, and a university education must reflect this.

The women’s stories revealed that they faced many barriers in adjusting to academic life, managing with their studies and juggling their multiple roles and family commitments. Families did not always understand the demands of university study and the women felt that universities should work with communities to help them understand the importance of and the demands of study, involving them in partnerships to support female students through to graduation.

The women spoke of a great need for their lecturers to receive cultural awareness training to foster greater understanding. Although the women
said they did not face overt racism, they sometimes felt the negative attitudes of other students and lecturers who believed they were being given unnecessary advantages because of their Indigeneity. Some commented that:

I found that a lot of questions were thrown on me. People were angry because of things they heard, myths about Aboriginal people … they took it out on me and also thought I was an Aboriginal expert.

And then there were people who thought that I just used my Aboriginality to take me further … and some people thought that I just brought it up as needed.

Despite these experiences, the participants agreed unanimously that receiving a university education was beneficial for personal growth, gaining employment and developing careers.

**Indigenous women and leadership**

My research revealed that all these women strongly believed in the importance of promoting Indigenous women’s leadership. There was concern that the current leadership operating in Indigenous communities and community organizations are dominated by Indigenous males and that this situation impeded Indigenous women’s leadership. Although there was agreement that contemporary life is very different from the traditional life of pre-colonial times, the women suggested that we could learn valuable lessons from the past by looking at the role of Indigenous women’s leadership in traditional society. The discussion also highlighted the potential leadership strength of Indigenous women, which has been under-utilized in contemporary society.

These women also agreed that there are too few Indigenous women leaders and those that are brave enough to ‘step up’ did not get the support they needed. In fact, many felt clearly obstructed by those who were unwilling to share power. The women recognized that there is an enormous untapped well of Indigenous women and those Indigenous women themselves needed to be encouraged to see themselves more as leaders.

The participants offered some excellent suggestions on ways to restore Indigenous women’s leadership, including networking and mentoring. Indeed, they saw the focus groups not only as a data-gathering instrument, but more as an opportunity to socialize and support one another.

**Conclusion to the study**

Indigenous people’s lives have changed dramatically since colonization, and continue to undergo significant changes as a consequence of government policies and practices, societal changes and the ebb and flow of their own life journeys.

Through my research, I found that Indigenous women are attempting to negotiate their careers for themselves against a backdrop of societal barriers that impact on them as Indigenous people and women. A number of contex-
tual factors combine to impede their progress in their careers. A primary concern for the women involved in my study was how to get an education, gain employment and develop their careers, while maintaining the balance in their lives as mothers, partners and community members. Most of the women felt the pressure of cultural expectations and obligations, which strongly influenced why, when, where, and how they worked. My research suggests that there is much more we need to know about Indigenous women’s lives in order to support them on their life’s journey.

From their stories, it was clear that Indigenous women face incredible pressure in the workplace or education setting, merely because of who they are. Indigenous people are expected to be Indigenous experts and advocates for Indigenous issues, to defend rights to native title and to justify the funding provided to Indigenous people. As a consequence, most of the participants found that they were informally delivering cultural awareness on a regular basis. Some felt this as a very strong obligation.

Although my study revealed that the women were concerned with racism and sexism, their greater concerns were with the ‘horizontal violence’ experienced by most of the women which came from other Indigenous people, both male and female. Indigenous women continue to believe in the power of education to bring about change. The benefits of education were clearly articulated as pathways to better jobs and careers, but also for the growth of the individual. Despite an original lack of confidence and poor education, many of the participants had progressed to postgraduate study and managerial positions. The study provided them with the opportunity to reflect on that journey and, in doing so, allowed them to appreciate the growth they had achieved and to contemplate their futures. Thus, consideration should be given to providing Indigenous women regular opportunities to reflect and speak about their journeys, to heal from past hurts, and to enable them to go forward. These times to gather and network are a renewal of traditional women’s business still practiced in some communities, but not so often in cities. Such women’s networks embrace those traditional aspects of culture that Indigenous women need to maintain their identity in contemporary life.

All the participants were interested in developing their leadership skills and supporting other women leaders. They understood and valued many of the aspects of women’s leadership in traditional Indigenous society. Although they acknowledged that being colonized had disrupted traditional forms of leadership and that it was not possible ‘to turn back time’, the women believed that we could learn much from ‘the old ways’. Indigenous women’s ways of leading may have beneficial consequences for rebuilding communities.

My study helped me to understand more clearly how colonialism continues to play a significant role in the lives of Indigenous Australian women. Like many other Indigenous people, I believe that strong Indigenous leadership is critical to the restoration of Indigenous communities which continue to be troubled by deep-rooted social, health and economic problems. Indigenous Australian women are unquestionably the back-bone of Indigenous communities, but their potential for leadership remains largely untouched. Through the research process, I learnt more about myself as an Indigenous woman. It reminded me of who I am and my position as a storyteller. I loved hearing
the women’s stories and their stories of triumph, their strength and their sorrows. I struggled with some of the comments about internalized oppression, especially when my youngest sister was killed tragically, a victim of domestic violence, during the final stages of this project. At this difficult time, it was the women’s encouragement that helped me to complete the research.

When you write about people’s lives, you become part of the story. I am blessed to be endowed by these women to share their stories in the hope that it will help others understand and support Indigenous women in their life and career journeys.

**Notes**

1. Kanakas—term used to describe Pacific Islanders who were ‘blackbirded’ or kidnapped to work as slaves on Queensland cane farms.

2. When used in the Australian context, ‘Indigenous’ refers to a person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent, who identifies as an Australian Aboriginal person or Torres Strait Islander, and is accepted as such by the community in which s/he lives. Throughout the article, there are sections which refer exclusively to Aboriginal women whose experiences may be different to Torres Strait Islander women. Therefore, where the term ‘Aboriginal’ is used, this refers specifically to Indigenous Australians of Aboriginal descent, identification and acceptance.

3. It is estimated that between 1910 and 1970, thousands of Aboriginal children were removed from their families and placed in institutions or fostered/adopted by non-Indigenous families, many never to return to their Aboriginal families again. These children are known as the ‘Stolen Generations’, their stories are the subject of the Bringing Home Report (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1997).

**References**


