

## **All for One and One for All: Aboriginal Leaders' Well-Being and Self-Determination**

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### **Abstract**

The question central to this paper is whether self-determination theory is congruent with the values of Aboriginal leaders and how this may interact with their own self-determination and well-being. Positive psychology principles, and in particular self-determination theory, have proven useful in the pursuit of well-being. Scholars suggest a better understanding of well-being can lead to increased life expectancy, greater positive emotions, enhanced resiliency and better psychological health of leaders (Csikszentmihalyi 2009; Ryan & Deci 2000). However, the implications of positive psychology in different cultural contexts is scarce (Csikszentmihalyi 2009). In Australia, this is particularly important because Aboriginal people experience sustained disadvantage across virtually all areas of health and well-being (Vos et al. 2009) and despite ongoing national efforts, little progress has been made to improve the situation (Newton et al. 2015). The aim of this paper is to shed new insight that may help to address this problem. If similarities exist between the values of Aboriginal leaders and self-determination theory, then stimulating improved outcomes for the latter would help Aboriginal leaders support both their own, and their community's well-being.

Within positive psychology, self-determination theory seeks to explain individual well-being in terms of three innate psychological needs - competence, autonomy and relatedness (Ryan & Deci 2000). A study conducted by Ann Roche, Haar and Brougham (2018) found that the psychological well-being of Maori leaders also included competence, autonomy and relatedness. However, in addition to these three needs, autonomy development and competence building extended beyond oneself to others, and was key to improving the well-being of Maori leaders. Like Maori leaders, the responsibility Aboriginal leaders have in Australia is challenging as they seek to develop communities that are socially, psychologically and economically disadvantaged. Given Aboriginal Peoples in Australia experience similar disadvantages to Maori Peoples, the principles of positive psychology, particularly the principles of self-determination theory, may also be applicable in the Aboriginal Australian context. Although the view of self-determination extending beyond oneself to others appears to be in line with Aboriginal self-determination and well-being, little is known how self-determination theory might apply in the Aboriginal Australian context, and whether it could provide an understanding of,

and support to, Aboriginal Australian leaders' well-being (Ann Roche, Haar & Brougham 2018). This study, therefore, aims to determine whether the well-being needs of Aboriginal leaders and well-being needs identified in self-determination theory (competence, autonomy and relatedness) are similar. Findings could help to develop a cross-cultural framework of self-determination theory which could be applied a broad range of Indigenous contexts (*i.e.*, beyond Maori and Aboriginal people in New Zealand and Australia).

### **Method**

To investigate Aboriginal leader values, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal leaders and employees of a government funded project were interviewed. The project was created to help Aboriginal Australians with energy hardship and to increase Aboriginal participation in the energy sector. One of the desired outcomes for the project was to decrease householder stress associated with energy hardship through the provision of educational tools. The program was designed for Aboriginal people and was managed by a collaboration of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal organisations. Therefore, the leaders of the project selected for interview already had leading positions in the community and their respective Aboriginal organisations. Employees could give a 'follower's' perspective on their leaders' values, and the non-Aboriginal participants provided an opportunity to contrast responses between Western and Indigenous perspectives. Twenty-two interviews were conducted with project partners and employees which were 'yarn-based' and semi-structured.

### **Results**

As the participants' responses were analysed, it became apparent that self-determination was strongly related to how one can help, or contribute to helping, one's communities. For example, responses revealed that participants' well-being was enhanced if they felt they could contribute to their communities. By working with community and by helping support community outcomes that the community want to achieve gave the participant a feeling and reward. As self-determination was an opportunity to allow their people to grow and develop and did not solely refer to the self-determination of an individual, it can therefore be concluded that self-determination for Aboriginal leaders involves both a combination of individual and community self-determination. For example, one Aboriginal leader articulated:

*"I could see the advantages that [the project] was going to bring, not only us as an organisation but the community on a state-wide level [...] and that's what interested me. I'm of the opinion if we can get a program that I think is going to benefit the community and we get to employ actual Aboriginal people in those roles...I'm all ears." (Dennis #1)*

Therefore, for the participants, it appeared that a component of self-determination was relatedness as participants' well-being improved as they helped others and interacted with not only others, as established in the Western view of relatedness, but also their community. Thus, this supports one component of self-determination.

Secondly, it became apparent that a component of self-determination was about determining their place in the community and *'their piece in the puzzle'*. For many participants, this was working with and for their community. Once a community member found a role within the community, they could show leadership by guiding other community members towards finding their role in community. This was articulated by one Aboriginal leader in the quote below:

*"It's just helping other people. It's appreciating the little things you do for people, you know? Information sharing and things like that. Helping them become more aware of their rights. [...] We've all got a purpose on this earth, no matter how small or minute it is." (Richard #1)*

This suggests that a component of self-determination is autonomy development, which is congruent with the Western view. Thus, supporting the second component of self-determination. However, developing autonomy also involved guiding others towards autonomy development, suggesting autonomy development is the development of self, and one's community.

Thirdly, participants reported that being able to employ Aboriginal people and support Aboriginal people to receive training in specific roles was important, not only to themselves, but also to the community as a whole. As one Aboriginal leader articulated:

*"I got staff trained that hadn't been trained. So, [...] they've got a really thorough knowledge of what they're supposed to do. There's been a lot of staff employed, Aboriginal staff, so it's opened up employment opportunities. So, we have [...] the community educating [themselves] [and] we've got [...] quite a number of staff that have been employed so that's really good for our mob." (Elizabeth #1)*

Therefore, Aboriginal leaders felt that competence building was an important component to helping their community. Thus supporting the third component of self-determination. Interestingly, it became apparent that advocacy was an important component of competence building for both the leaders' well-being and the well-being of others. An example of how this was articulated is provided in the quote below:

*"It's empowering knowing your rights and it's empowering others to know their rights. Yes, we advocate for them, but they're sitting right next to me learning how to do it themselves and that's really good." (Denise #1)*

### **Discussion/Conclusion**

The data revealed that the pillars of self-determination - competence, autonomy and relatedness – identified in Western research are in line with Aboriginal leaders' well-being. Moreover, these findings are in line with Ann Roche, Haar and Brougham (2018), revealing that the psychological well-being of Aboriginal leaders' includes relatedness and the autonomy development and competence building of self, as well as the autonomy development and competence building of others. However, it appeared that advocacy was an important component of competency building and self-determination in the Aboriginal context. This finding is supported by scholars in other fields of research such as Ramírez Stege, Brockberg and Hoyt (2017). This study enhances the current understanding of Aboriginal leaders' well-being from a self-determination perspective, which, in turn, may improve social outcomes for Aboriginal Australians.

## References

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