

Power: The influencing role of Wontok; a Papua New Guinean Context

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Exercising power shapes how individual actors, and collectives of actors, develop and attempt to attain their goals and objectives within a particular context. Context shapes leadership practice. Leadership practice typically results in change, in turn a recursive force influencing context. However, the strength and impact of intersecting forces inside the context setting; leadership practice, and change outcomes are moderated by how actors exercise power, which in turn is swayed by individual and collective values, attitudes, assumptions, beliefs and expectations (VAABEs), mindsets and 'cultural' DNA.

Extant literature is awash with studies of power, change, leadership, and more recently, infused with an expanding interest in Leadership-as-practice (L-A-P). Power is essential for the exercise of leadership (Braude, 2010). Drawing from the L-A-P's proposition of understanding gained through unfolding events in the day-to-day; our understanding of power is enhanced as Raelin (2017) argues by examining [power] as it unfolds through day-to-day experience. Extending, Raelin's (2017) leadership argument to power, it can be reasoned that people who are affecting [power] at any given time, are very much embedded within the [power] context and 'we must look to the practice within which it [power] is occurring' (p.215). This in turn 'depicts immanent collective action emerging from mutual, discursive, sometimes recurring and sometimes evolving patterns in the moment and over time among those engaged in the practice'(p.215). Studies of the unfolding exercise of power and its practice, in less developed countries, and Papua New Guinea (PNG) in particular, has not attracted the attention of leadership researchers with the same level of enthusiasm as in developed countries.

This paper explores the exercise of power through the lens of Wontok in the developing nation of PNG. Deeply entrenched in PNG culture, the wontok 'system' is described as a 'friendly society, welfare system, and life-assurance all in one' Swatridge (1985 p: 4). Wontok also means friend, relative, 'who you know', or someone who speaks the same language (one talk). MacDonald (1984 p, 4) argues that wontok is a 'bond of people with a basic, kinship community, speaking the same tongue, living in the same place, and sharing values'. The wontok system is often responsible for the abuse of patronage in organisations and government, misallocation of resources, and for allegiances formed during disputes. Prideaux (2006) reported the continuing practice of 'traditional' leadership values, thinking and culture in the workplace; the custom of Chieftan, Inheritance, Bigman, and Wantok are significant leadership barriers, suggesting that the use of power is filtered through the lens of 'wontokism', which is both a collective and an individual exercise of power, which can result in ineffectual outcomes.

The independent nation of PNG comprises in excess of 600 islands occupying the eastern portion of the Island of New Guinea, Australia's closest neighbour. A nation of seven and half million people, PNG is a nation of several thousand tribal societies largely organised on the basis of kinship (Tivinarlik & Wanat, 2006). 'Kinship is a system prescribing how people living together should interact with one another' (Whiteman, 1995 p:103). McLaughlin (1997 p:4) assesses that there are over 1000 tribes living in 'almost total isolation', often divided by language, custom, and tradition. Essential to tribal societies, language and culture influence people to behave in quite distinct ways, peculiar to each individual tribe or group. Communities see themselves as 'central with other peripheral communities, and in turn central to their own perspective'(Busse, 2005 p:445). Divisions created by language, custom, and tradition have repeatedly resulted in on-going low scale tribal warfare with neighbouring communities, as Melanesian men, particularly leaders, suffer an inability to trust neighbours (Herdt, 2003).

Contribution of this study. While the extant literature has examined power in many contexts, particularly in developed nation settings, there is a dearth of research on the use and significance of power exercised through the lens of wontok in PNG. Leadership models and practices are inspired by

the need to more accurately depict the reality Olalere A, (2015). Olalere argues that traditional approaches used to understand complex dynamics are 'becoming increasingly inadequate. New understandings and models are needed' (p.180). The study aims to shine a light on real-world PNG power practices to gain some insight how the exercise of power is influenced by 'wontokism', the impact on the actors within, and removed from the immediate context, and the potential wider implications of wontok influenced exercise of power. The nuanced rationale of this study, and where its value lies, is in asking: how is power influenced by 'wontokism' in a culturally diverse developing nation?

Specific theoretical contributions are: (1) to explore the effect of wontokism on the exercise of power in PNG, and (2) investigate how the findings can be used to extend the perspectives of power through a 'worldly leadership' context.

The study draws on the researcher's lived day-to-day experiences whilst living and researching in PNG, with a strong emphasis on observations and conversations, whilst situated in the 'recurring and sometimes evolving patterns in the moment, and over time among those engaged in the practice' (Raelin 2017 p.215) and the unfolding day-to-day events.

The findings suggest that the exercise of power is influenced by the wontok system in PNG. While the PNG context is particularly complex, more so than 'developed nations', the relationship does contribute to our understanding of the exercise of power, particularly leadership power. The findings raise a fundamental question: is Wontok power, as practiced in PNG really any different to the practice of power in developed nations?

Key words: Power; Wontok; Leadership; Issues; Practice; Worldly Leadership; Papua New Guinea